

Sekandar Immortal

The Search for Wisdom and the Triumph Over Death^{*}

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The concept of universal kingship has long been understood to have a strong and enduring tradition in the history and literature of the Iranian plateau; Marshall Hodgson, for example, calls absolutism “a basic pillar of the social order of the Sâsânian Empire” and traces its heritage in the many Muslim dynasties that would later come to rule in its place.¹ He describes the essential components of this ideal as the following:

First, the monarchy must be universal . . . for only with such universality could peace be assured among the various cites and peoples. Second, the monarch must be personally unassailable, exempt from anyone’s admonition or criticism (lèse majesté); . . . The ideal Sâsânian monarch was seen in the figure of Nûshîrvân, who personally embodied both justice and a graciousness toward the humble which marked off all the more his exalted status.²

^{*}My method of transliteration varies on the basis of the word’s context. For proper names used in the *Shahnamah*, I use the Anglicized versions suggested by Dick Davis in his translation of the text. For proper historical names and titles, such as the book and its author, I use the ALA-LC system, but avoid macrons and other diacritics. When transliterating quotes from the text, I use the same ALA-LC system with full diacritics. The bulk of my in-paragraph translations are quoted directly from Dick Davis’s version, sometimes with the original Persian included in brackets. Whenever I do my own translations, I cite the Persian edition of Khaliqi-Mutlaq as my referent. When the poetry appears in a block quote, I provide the Persian on one side and my translation on the other. Many thanks to Theo Beers for helping me with my translations; از زحمت شما سپاس گزارم.

1. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, vol. 1: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 282.

2. Ibid.

Hodgson goes on to say that the *Shahnamah* of Abu 'l-Qasim Firdawsi, completed in the year 1010 CE, played a central role in recasting this ideal into the context of the new Islamic order that was gradually taking shape.³ The monarchy is certainly the keystone of the work. Time begins with the establishment of regal power over the world, and history is measured through the cyclical rise and fall of kings throughout time, each one taking his turn upon the stage before bowing out to the next. Concepts such as the *farr*, the radiant light that shines from or around the face of the monarch as a mark of divine approval, and proper comportment, the delicate balance of strength, courage, piety, and munificence that demonstrates one's effective leadership, are essential elements at work in the monarchy, and thus in history; the loss of either one is usually a sign that the king has failed his sacred trust and the cue for his imminent departure from the story, EXIT STAGE LEFT. Since the overall narrative arc of the *Shahnamah* is the gradual decline of Iran's fortunes, from its glorious age under the ancient kings to its ignominious defeat at the hands of the Arabs, it is clear that within these broad currents of time, the petty wars and pretty treasures that define the life of a king are as meaningless as dust and ephemeral as the wind. Time and time again, the poem refrains into sad meditations on the fleeting nature of the world, such as in the following couplet:

<i>O world, smoke and mirrors from end to end</i>	جهانا سراسر فسوسی و باد
<i>No man of wisdom finds joy in you</i> ⁴	به تو نیست مرد خردمند شاد

In a world of universal monarchy in which all things must inevitably pass away, the Kayanid monarch is the lynchpin around which everything—and paradoxically nothing—revolves. His reign is the unit that defines the passage of time, the quality of his rule is the mirror upon which the fortunes of *Iranzamin* are reflected, and yet there is a certain futility to everything he does, for whatever he accomplishes on earth is ultimately meaningless, swallowed up by the inexorable passage of time. His life and career is bound up with fate, nothing more than a revolution on the wheel, a turn at the stage, a glimmer of light from the fickle heavens above, here and then gone with the speed of a shooting star. With the inevitable decline in fortunes approaching, the wise king will realize that he is doomed to fall, and most likely in an ugly way; either his successes will cause him to grow vain and foolish, ultimately robbing him of divine support, or a treacherous rival will lead him to his death in ambush or deceit. In either

3. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, vol. 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 157.

4. Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmāh*, ed. Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq, 8 vols. (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987–2008), *Manuchibr*, l. 1068.

case, the moment will eventually come in which the king will fail to exercise the prudence, vigilance, and fortitude necessary to manage his kingdom, and so loses it, along with his life. The end of a reign is simultaneously presented as the personal failure of the king and the inevitable turning of the stars against him, but which gives rise to which is difficult to tell.

The inherent tension that hums inside this troublesome question of personal agency renders Firdawsi's kings essentially tragic figures. Although they are capable of wondrous deeds and legendary magnanimity, as epitomized by Hodgson's description of Nushirvan, they live their lives as intermediaries and ambassadors of what the stars will above. Their sense of self is strikingly ambivalent; on the one hand, they are the only real actors on Firdawsi's stage, yet on the other, they have no more impact on the course of history than a pebble does when dropped into a river. Firdawsi calls the monarchy "As necessary to the earth as rain" (*jahān rā chū bārān bih bāyistagī*),⁵ yet these great works and deeds offer no avail in the end; as Manuchehr says, "I rid the earth of misery, founded cities and fortresses. But now it is as if I had never seen or known the world."⁶ The necessary failure of the king may be a microcosm for the necessary decline of Iran, for both are as certain and inevitable as death itself—indeed, we may conclude that the only way for a reign to truly be successful is for the monarch to be ageless and blameless, a shadow of God, or God himself, on earth.

Firdawsi's kings, however, are no such paragons, and even the greatest of them may be brought down by their own hubris. Although their reigns are the building-blocks of history, they themselves are in fact really unlucky people, for they are born to fight a war they cannot win against their own meaninglessness. The truly honorable and selfless among them, like Iraj and Siyavash, are quickly lost as martyrs to the guile and back-stabbing that are the bread and butter of sovereign life. Some kings manage to die relatively gracefully, such as Manuchehr or Kavus, but only after they have gained great wisdom through their many trials. Most kings eventually fall from grace, blinded by their own light, and there are a few who, in spite of their wisdom, never accept their destiny and struggle against it to the end of their days. This latter character is best embodied by Sekandar, Firdawsi's Alexander the Great, whose desperate wish to understand the wherefores and whys of his life before he is overtaken by death rages as fiercely inside his soul as the fever that eventually consumes him. In many ways, his story is an unsuccessful revolt against the patterns set in place by Jamshid and his folly long ago, a cycle repeated as well in the stories of Kay Kavus and Kay Khosrow.

5. Dick Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings by Abolqasem Ferdowsi*, Translated by Dick Davis, with a foreword by Azar Nafisi (New York: Viking, 2006), 16; Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmah, Zāḥḥāk*, l. 112.

6. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 110.

Jamshid

*The heart of anyone thankless unto God
Will be assailed by fear from every side
Thus the day grew dark over Jamshid
And that world-illuminating aura waned*⁷

به یزدان هر آنکس که شد ناسپاس
به دلش اندر آید ز هر سو هراس
به جمشید بر تیره گون گشت روز
همی کاست آن فر گیتی فروز

Things weren't always this bad for Jamshid, perhaps the greatest king of all during the primordial first age of Firdawsī's world history. Although it is his great-grandfather Kayumars (literally *Gayū*, Gaea, and *mart*, man/mortal, "man of earth") who establishes royal sovereignty over the land, his lifestyle is quite rudimentary and primitive in comparison to successive generations; his royal mantle is a leopard skin, his palace is a mountain top, and his subjects are the animals, wild and tame (*dad o dām*).⁸ His grandson Hushang brings fire, metallurgy, and agriculture to man, and his great-grandson Tahmures introduces spinning, weaving, and, through the divs, writing; yet all these accomplishments pale in comparison to Jamshid's, who is the true champion of the finer things of civilization. It is he who elevates human endeavor to its apogee of subtlety and skill: accoutrements of war, exquisite brocades, precious metals and gemstones, sweet perfumes, splendid architecture, and healing medicine are all brought to light through his artifice. He also divides the world of men into four castes, creating a social fabric that is founded on the just principles of reciprocity and harmony, "so that each man was aware of his appropriate duties and know his own worth and rank."⁹ He builds a mighty ship that takes him to see all his lands, and the divs lift his palace into the sky, so that the realms of air and water are not beyond his grasp. Nothing remains hidden from Jamshid's gaze, as is symbolized by his famous cup of later legend.

*He made the secrets of the world clear
Never did such a seeker come to the world*¹⁰

همین رازها کرد نیز آشکار
جهان را نیامد چنو خواستار

It is truly the Golden Age. Jamshid's knowledge is so vast, he banishes all sorrow and

7. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jamshīd*, ll. 73–74.

8. *Ibid.*, *Gayūmart*, ll. 5–11.

9. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 6.

10. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jamshīd*, l. 44.

evil from the world—even death itself is seen no more (*nadīdand marg andar ān rūzigār*).¹¹ This is the only moment in the *Shabnamah* that the idea of an eternal kingdom of justice, administered by an ageless monarch, is on the verge of realization; with death's secrets in his command, Jamshid's reign endures for seven hundred years. Yet, there is one piece of wisdom that eludes the world ruler: all of this power, glory, and lore at his command are not of his making. Forgetting this, he grows arrogant and boasts to his court:

<i>Your food, rest, and comfort are from me</i>	خور و خواب و آرامتان از من ست
<i>Just as your clothing and prosperity are from me</i>	همان پوشش و کامتان از من ست
<i>Greatness and the kingly crown are mine</i>	بزرگی و دیهیم شاهی مراست
<i>Who would say that there's a king other than me?</i> ¹²	کی گوید که جز من کسی پادشاست

At these words, the faces of Jamshid's advisors grow dark and worried, mutterings of dissent fill the air (*jabān shud pur az guft o gūy*),¹³ and the *farr* fades from Jamshid's face. It is not long thereafter that Zahhak, the hot-tempered and ambitious prince of Arabia, enters an alliance with Iblis to murder his peaceful father and usurp the throne of *Iranzamin*. Abandoned by his followers, Jamshid is chased into the wilderness, where he is finally discovered and gruesomely executed by Zahhak's henchmen.

<i>Thus that royal throne and order passed away</i>	شد آن تخت شاهی و آن دستگاه
<i>Cast aside by time like a piece of amber straw</i>	زمانه ربودش چو بیجاده کاه
<i>Who was greater upon the throne than him</i>	ازو بیش بر تخت شاهی که بود
<i>Yet in such toil and pain, what good came to him?</i>	بدان رنج بردن چه آمدش سود
<i>Seven hundred years passed him by</i>	گذشته برو سالیان هفتصد
<i>The revealer of all things, both good and bad</i>	پدید آوریده همه نیک و بد
<i>But what good is a long life</i>	چه باید همی زندگانی دراز
<i>When the universe will never show her secrets to you.</i> ¹⁴	جو گیتی نخواهد گشادنت راز

11. Firdawsī, *Shābnāmāh*, *Jamshīd*, l. 56.

12. *Ibid.*, *Jamshīd*, ll. 67–68.

13. *Ibid.*, *Jamshīd*, ll. 70.

14. *Ibid.*, *Mirdās*, ll. 187–190.

With these words, Firdawsi introduces two of the great themes of the *Shahnamah*: the inexorable flow of time that reduces all things to dust, and the seductive allure of knowledge and wisdom. It is here that the real drama of history begins; for a while, it seemed inevitable that the kings would eventually discover all the world's secrets, attain perfect wisdom, and establish righteousness upon the land, effectively bringing about the end of time. Like Jamshid himself, we are led into a sense of complacency by Firdawsi's honeyed words of praise, repeating over and over how nothing could escape his notice, how all creation was his to command. Then comes Jamshid's fall, crashing down upon both the story and its audience like a hammer. The world is plunged into a thousand years of Zakhak's tyranny, the harmonious order of the previous age is shattered, death returns to the land, and the institution of universal kingship is forever compromised. The wisdom of Jamshid, so exalted and boundless just moments ago, is now mocked as so much woolgathering, his impressive defiance of death a mere trick. Never again will we believe that a king has the power to ward away death, and we recognize the truly wise as those who live out their lives cognizant of their mortal boundaries. The problem of wisdom, however, will remain an unsolvable riddle for the ruler, for in order to perform his duty and maintain his *farr*, he must attempt to rule with perfect wisdom, yet the sheer futility of such a task will inevitably prove his undoing. Whatever path the king may walk, all roads lead to this unhappy end.

Kay Kavus and Kay Khosrow

Even the best of the Kayanid kings are known to make occasional lapses of reason. Feraydun's decision to split his kingdom into three, even if made in the spirit of fairness, is of questionable foresight, for it sows the seeds of rancor between his children and leads to the murder of the unfortunate Iraj. In the face of his brothers' open hostility, Iraj's idealistic insistence upon non-violence could be called somewhat naïve, if not downright foolish. Esfandiyar might yet have lived to become king if his stubborn sense of honor had permitted him to rebel against the insane orders of his jealous father to wage war against Rostam, his personal friend and the mightiest prop to the Kayanid throne. But if there is one king who is truly blinded by the light of his own *farr*, it is Kay Kavus, who shows himself time and again a headstrong and vainglorious figure whose pride is easily manipulated by those around him, to the pain and detriment of all his realm, especially those closest to him—his generals, Rostam, and his ill-fated son, Siyavash. Upon ascending the throne, he flatters himself to believe that he is greater than all the kings of old and says, "I should be greater than them in my accomplishments as well; a king should be ambitious to conquer the world."¹⁵ He decides to invade the demon-

15. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 144.

kingdom of Mazanderan, where his army is promptly captured and, in a rich moment of poetic justice, he is taken prisoner and blinded by the White Div. After he is rescued and restored to the throne through the heroic efforts of Rostam, Kavus stumbles into another mess, this time by falling in love with Sudabeh, the daughter of the King of Hamaveran, and demanding her hand in marriage. Her affronted father lays a trap for his new son-in-law and throws him back in prison, while in the east, Afrasiyab of Turan routs the Persian army. It once again takes Rostam's intervention to free the king and repel Afrasiyab. Finally, Kavus is led astray by the blandishments of a div, disguised as a handsome young man:

<i>He said, "With this beautiful farr of yours,</i>	چنین گفت کین فر زیبای تو
<i>The arch of the heavens could be yours,</i>	همی چرخ گردان سزد جای تو
<i>How could the sun keep its secrets from you,</i>	چه دارد آفتاب از تو راز؟
<i>As it spins and turns in its ups and downs?</i>	که چون گردد اندر نشیب و فراز؟
<i>How do they work, the moon, the night, and the day?</i>	چگونه ست ماه و شب و روز چیست؟
<i>Who is the master of this turning sphere?"¹⁶</i>	برین گردش چرخ سالار کیست؟

The proud king is most troubled by this affront to his influence, and, just like Jamshid, takes it upon himself to devise a way to fly to the sun. In comparison with his predecessor, however, whose palace is lifted into the air on the shoulders of divs, Kavus's attempt is a farce, an almost comical reenactment of Jamshid's moment of triumph. He binds four great eagles to his throne and, encouraging them by a piece of meat speared on the tip of a lance, is lifted into the sky. Naturally, the eagles eventually tire and plummet back to earth, taking Kavus with them. His soldiers are furious:

<i>Gudarz said to him, "A hospital</i>	بدو گفت گودرز : بیمارستان
<i>Is better for you than a throne</i>	ترا جای زیباتر از شارسنستان
<i>You always reveal your place to enemies</i>	به دشمن دهی هر زمان جای خویش
<i>And you don't tell any of us your useless plans"¹⁷</i>	نگویی به کس بیهده رای خویش

The reign of Kay Kavus is an illustrative moment in the history of the universal monarchy, and it does beg the question what kind of joke has the institution become. Although his court

16. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Jang-i Hamāvarān*, ll. 367, 370–71.

17. *Ibid.*, *Jang-i Hamāvarān*, ll. 404–5.

is embellished with all the material trappings of a great ruler, he has no internal strength to call upon, no self-sufficiency; he must always call upon the rough-and-tumble Rostam to bail him out, yet when the time comes for him to remember the services rendered unto him and reward his knight with a salve that will save his dying son, he coldly turns his back on his obligations and lets Sohrab die in his father's arms. While Jamshid ruled by virtue of his might, wisdom, and justice, Kavus rules by virtue of his title alone. If Hodgson's Nushirvan had to be "personally unassailable" to command respect, the way Kavus's soldiers publicly scold him like a little child is indicative of the utter contempt they afford him. In spite of it all, Kavus has no idea how badly he has failed. He never learns the lesson of humility, and he continues to believe that the throne he occupies makes him personally the shadow of God on Earth. However, it must be said that because everyone knows that he hasn't a shred of wisdom to his name, he is the easiest king to contain. Far more dangerous, we shall see, is a wise king who learns the wrong lessons from history.

When Kay Khosrow takes the throne, the memory of Jamshid's pride and Kavus's vanity seem to weigh heavily on his mind, for from the beginning, his reign is distinguished by prudence, moderation, and self-control. Iran has not seen such a monarch since the long-ago days of Manuchehr; under his steady leadership, justice is restored and the generations-long war between Iran and Turan is brought to a victorious end. Yet, as his fortunes are at their summit, Khosrow cannot seem to shake himself free from a sense of impending disaster. It is as much a part of him as his genealogy: on one side, he is descended from Jamshid and Kavus, on the other, Zahhak and Afrasiyab, all who have been humbled by the currents of time. He says to himself:

*One day, I will grow ungrateful towards God
I'm going to bring fear into my radiant soul
The divine farr will break off from me
I will turn towards crookedness and the way of evil*

به یزدان شوم یک زمان ناسپاس
به روشن روان اندرآرم هراس
ز من بگلسد فره ایزدی
گراییم به کژی و راه بدی

*My gratitude is to God, that he gave glory
In this turning of the stars and the powers that be
It is now best that I set out on the road
I'll leave for God, full of dignity¹⁸*

سپاسم ز یزدان که او داد فر
بدین گردش اختر و پای و پر
کنون آن به آید که من راه جوی
شوم پیش یزدان پر از آب روی

18. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykbusraw*, ll. 2448–49, 2460–61.

The parallelism between this passage and the fall of Jamshid cannot be mistaken. Just as Kavus in his vanity reenacts the final scene of the great king's splendor, so does Khosrow in his fear now relive his ancestor's ignoble fall from power. With these thoughts, he abandons his court and secludes himself in his room, beseeching God to keep desire from controlling his heart (*nagīrad havā bar ravānam sitam*).¹⁹ This prayer is unprecedented in the *Shahnamah*—not only is Khosrow remarkably cognizant of the seductive danger of his power and wisdom, he draws from the lessons of the past to actively avoid the fate that befell his forefathers. Strangely, it is in this very moment of turning towards God that problems start to occur for him. Like Oedipus, his very attempt to avoid his fate will be the action that sets it into motion. After a week of isolation, the heroes of his court begin to grow uneasy. They are convinced that Khosrow is angry with them, that some disaster has happened, and they beg him to unburden his heart and allow them to rectify his problems. Khosrow responds with surprising candor:

<i>I have a desire that I keep hidden</i>	یکی آرزو دارم اندر نهران
<i>And I'm seeking it from the World-Creator</i>	همی خواهم از کردگار جهان
<i>I'll say it openly when he responds</i>	بگویم گشاده چو پاسخ دهد
<i>The response will grant me a joyous day</i> ²⁰	به پاسخ مرا روز فرخ نهد

This news is in no way reassuring to the court. Khosrow has been honest, yet he refuses to share his desire with his men, whose only wish is to please him. Furthermore, this talk of conversing with God is not something a king should be involved with; ironically, the nobles suspect that Khosrow has fallen into the very delusions of grandeur that he so desperately hopes to avoid (*bi-tarsīm kū hamchū Kāvūs shāh / shavad kazh u dīvash bipīchad zi rāh*).²¹ Finally, the nobles of Iran summon Zal, always the wisest of advisors, to make the king see reason. While Zal is en route, Khosrow experiences an epiphany; the angel Soroush, who was last seen advising Feraydun, appears to Khosrow in a dream with the good news that his prayers have been answered (*ān-chi justī hamah yāftī*).²² If he wishes to depart this earth, he is instructed to distribute his wealth to his people judiciously, choose an acceptable successor to the throne, and say his farewells.

When Zal arrives to confront the king, it is interesting that, despite the fact that he has

19. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykhusraw*, l. 2468.

20. *Ibid.*, *Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykhusraw*, ll. 2515–16.

21. *Ibid.*, *Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykhusraw*, l. 2542.

22. *Ibid.*, *Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykhusraw*, l. 2593.

seen the rise and fall of many kings and heroes, he nevertheless strongly objects to Khosrow's behavior; even though Khosrow reassures him that he is only seeking absolution from sin, he leaves the assembly saying of the king, "This is not right, wisdom has no place in his mind [*kbirad rā bih maghz-andarash jāy nīst*]."²³ I have never seen a king who talked in this way, and since he has spoken his mind so must we. When he says such things we are under no obligation to agree with him."²⁴ He returns to Khosrow and challenges his decision, delivering an astonishing invective against his family, damning Afrasiyab for his "black magic" and Kavus whose "dissembling face hid a heart filled with trickery and cunning."²⁵ He concludes that Khosrow, like his forefathers, has abandoned the ways of God and is now following the devils, to which the whole company assents.

Khosrow responds to Zal's accusations with an inner confidence he might have lacked had Soroush not assured him of his divine favor. He now defends his lineage with the prideful force of the first-person "I" (*man*), saying that Kavus was a "wise, fortunate, and well-loved monarch" (*dil-afrūz bā dānish o nīk-pay*)²⁶ and there is no shame in being descended from Afrasiyab, from whom "Iran's lion-like warriors fled to the sea."²⁷ He once again expresses his fear of reenacting Jamshid's fall from power, growing as corrupt as Zahhak and Tur, and explains that he has turned to God for support, ending his defence with:

<i>You, Zal, old and wise</i>	تو ای پیر بیدار دستان سام
<i>Say that I have fallen into a demon's trap</i>	مرا دیو گوی که بنهاد دام
<i>But I cannot see how with the God-given aura</i>	ندانم که بادافره ایزدی
<i>Where do you find such evil days?</i> ²⁸	کجا یابی و روزگار بدی

Zal is once again astonished at Khosrow's words, and this time he is convinced of their validity: "Till now I've never seen a monarch pray / For heaven's holy guidance in this way."²⁹ The king and his nobles are reconciled, and the preparations for Khosrow's retirement are made. Following his instructions, Khosrow dispenses his treasury to the nobles and heroes of Iran who supported his rule, as well as to the orphans, widows, the poor, and the elderly

23. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykbusraw*, l. 3678.

24. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 354.

25. *Ibid.*, 355.

26. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykbusraw*, l. 3736.

27. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 356.

28. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykbusraw*, ll. 2757, 2759.

29. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 357.

who suffered the most from the royal wars. Yet this gesture is not greeted with joy, but with confusion: “One said: this king is mad, wisdom and his heart are utter strangers to one another.”³⁰ The nobles demand to know what will happen to their lands and fiefdoms. In a manner reminiscent of Feraydun, Khosrow divides the provinces among Rostam, Gudarz, and Tus, leaving the throne of Iran for a relative nobody, Lohrasp. The court is outraged, most vocally Zal, and it is only through their loyalty to Khosrow that they swallow this additional pill.

Khosrow has acted with integrity, deliberation, humility, piety, and wisdom. He has been visited by the angel Soroush, and secured the blessing of Zal. Yet, despite all these outward indications that he is walking the path of God, the foundations of his kingdom are starting to crack. The court is fragmented and in disorder, and already there are murmurs of dissent against the new king. When Khosrow summons his women to bid them goodbye, they rend their garments and tear out their hair. The houses of the common folk are filled with groans and lamentation. As Khosrow leaves his court and heads for the mountains, he is stopped by a hundred thousand of his subjects, who beg him not to leave. Khosrow is nonplussed; he asks, “All of this is a blessing—why should one weep over blessings?” (*az īdar hamah nīkūst / abar nīkūihā chih bāyad girīst*).³¹ What he hasn’t realized is this: the king’s departure is no blessing except for the king. As he prepares to enter occultation, Khosrow bids his followers farewell and tells them to return to Iran at the first light of day, for a great storm shall arise and consume them if they tarry. Only three of his soldiers, Zal, Rostam, and Gudarz, are loyal enough—or wise enough—to obey these orders. The rest, Tus, Fariborz, Giv, Bizhan, and Gastahom, are buried in the snow. Rarely has a disaster of this magnitude struck Iran; not only is her king vanished, but all but three of her heroes have perished in his wake. Gudarz is especially aggrieved—father of seventy-eight sons, all but a handful are left to him in the destructive wake of Kavus’ folly and Khosrow’s wisdom.

The occultation of Khosrow is one of the more troubling stories of the Shahnamah. After witnessing the example of Jamshid and Kavus, we are once again led to believe that Khosrow may have discovered a wise course of action—having seen how absolute power corrupts absolutely, what could be advisable in staying in such a position? Firdawsi, in his subtle way, says nothing to contradict this. He has always been quick to point out when kings are overtaken by folly and turn away from God, yet he makes no such statement in the case of Khosrow. There are no days turning dark, no *farr* is seen to dim. The court may doubt that Soroush appeared to the king, yet Firdawsi assures us that it really happened. Zal, always the prince of good counsel, came to dissuade the king from this course of action, and found himself apologizing

30. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 358.

31. Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmāh, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykbusraw*, l. 3026.

for his own rash words. Yet Khosrow, in his own peculiar form of hubris, has fooled them all, even himself, into believing that he can cheat his fate. Terrified by the knowledge of his own forthcoming doom, he twists his wisdom to justify a sudden and excessive fit of piety that effectively masks his self-serving motives. By attempting to duck out of his story before it was fully over, he has repeated the cycle of ambition of folly that brought down Kavus, Jamshid, and Zahhak, and in doing so once again cast Iran into darkness. We may well pity the man who, in his fear of going to Hell, abandons his kingdom and disappears with his finest men into a sudden and violent snowstorm, for in Zoroastrian cosmology, Hell isn't fire—it is ice.

In the story of Khosrow, we learn a valuable lesson about Firdawsi's system of kingship. Exceeding ambition is never proper in a king, no matter whether he wants to become a god or a saint. The best kings, those who manage to quit the world gracefully without leaving disasters in their trail, seem to be those who know that they are kings, no more and no less, until the day they die. They know that they cannot shape their destiny, yet as kings their duty is to act as though they could. Internally, they must consent to the fact that ultimately they are nothing more than vessels, intermediaries, puppets on a stage, dispensers of divine will, who perform their duties as best they came until fate comes to claim them like everybody else. Perhaps this is why Firdawsi chooses to conclude his story with another philosophical sigh over the sad state of man. We can't understand why things are this way, nor can we hope to change things in our favor; we simply have to grin and bear our appointed lives until they take us to our final destination.

*Unto the world, such is the custom and way
It has never been constant in granting the good
One man it raises up from the black dust
Another man it drags from the Kayanid throne
Don't be happy from that, nor pained from this
This is the custom of the house of misfortune
Where are those heroes, where are those champions?
Keep your heart far from such cares, if you can³²*

جهان را چنین ست آیین و دین
نمانده ست همواره در به گزین
یکی را ز خاک سیه برکشد
یک را ز تخت کیان درکشد
نه زآن شاد باشد نه زین دردمند
چنین ست رسم سرای گزند
کجا آن یلان و کجا آن گوان
از اندیشه دل دور کن تا توان

32. Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmah, Jang-i Buzurg-i Kaykhusraw*, ll. 3094–97.

Sekandar

When the stage is set for the contest between Sekandar and Dara, a few aspects of their characters immediately become apparent. First, they share the same father, Darab, and so the upcoming war can be seen as the struggle between two legitimate claimants to the throne, both possessed of royal blood—not the historical invasion of Iran by an outside power. Second, their personalities are immediately set in contrast along the lines of wisdom and intemperance. Of Dara, Firdawsi says “he was young, fiery-tempered, quick to take offense [*tīz u barnā u tund*], and his heart and tongue were hard enough to blunt a sword,” while Sekandar on the other hand “became adroit, intelligent, grave in his manner, and knowledgeable” (*bushbivār, bāsang u bisyārdān*).³³ Such a reputation for wisdom is hardly spurious, given that the young prince has a philosopher no less than Aristotle himself for his tutor. Thus, the relationship between the two kings is something akin to a meeting between hot-headed Zahhak and wise Jamshid.

Perhaps because of this love of knowledge instilled by his teacher, Sekandar is marked from the very beginning with a desire to see the world. Firdawsi refrains from telling us how this desire came about—it simply appears as Sekandar rises against Dara’s tax-collector and musters an army, saying, “Not even a good man can escape the turning of the heavens. I must travel the face of the earth, and reckon what there is of good and evil in the world.”³⁴ Given our knowledge of the past, Sekandar’s first statement seems very well-considered; learning to accept one’s destiny is perhaps the hardest and most important lesson the kings of Iran have had to face. Why, then, does he wish to see the length and breadth of the world? Is he trying to break the eternal cycle of greatness and decline? Is he a nihilist, seeking the thrill of adventure for its own reward, or does he hope that, if he can see the deepest secrets of the world, he may yet revive the era of Jamshid and establish eternal rule over the world? Does he, deep down, believe that with enough wisdom, he still might succeed in deciding his own fate? Regardless of his motives, in this short statement, we see the glimmerings of an internal conflict that will haunt his life: a lover of wisdom, Sekandar is never at peace if he is not seeking out some new place or wonder of the world, yet even as his wisdom grows, he becomes ever more aware of the futility of his search.

In his first confrontation with Dara, Sekandar spells out his desire plainly in what must have been a surprising overture:

I have no wish of waging war with the Shah,

مرا آرزو نیست با شاه جنگ

33. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 455–56; Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmāh, Dārā*, l. 2; *ibid.*, *Dārāb*, l. 123.

34. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 457.

*Nor am I in a hurry to seize Irazamin
I hope to travel the earth a little
To go and see the whole world³⁵*

نه بر بوم ایران گرفتن درنگ
بر آنم که گرد زمین اندکی
بگردم بینم جهان را یکی

This is not all that is unusual about the missive, for it is delivered by none other than Sekandar himself, disguised as his own ambassador. Such a practice is apparently unheard of prior to this; many of the great conflicts and dramas of the *Shahnameh* up to this point are developed through the back-and-forth exchange of letters between princes. Again, no explicit motivation is given, save for that he wishes to see for himself “the strengths and weaknesses [*kam u bīsh*] of my enemy.”³⁶ There is a hint that he is also impatient, that he quickly wearies of endless sessions of council and debate among his advisors. As a sign of either his peerless intelligence or supercilious folly, he is utterly confident in himself as the only one fit to assess and make judgements around his own affairs. The ruse, in any case, catches Dara completely off guard, and it seems that Sekandar takes great satisfaction out of his little game, pilfering the golden goblets from his host’s table and then tricking him into giving him one filled with rubies—he barely manages to escape as Dara starts to wise up to his presence. For all his other qualities, Sekandar may just be a little vindictive.

Dara’s fall from power is swift and sudden; Sekandar falls upon his army “like a storm cloud charged with hail [*chū abri tund bārash tagarg*],”³⁷ leaving the once-proud monarch reeling in astonishment. His forces are scattered, and heroes abandon his service in droves—it is as if the great upheaval of the past has revisited Iran, as Dara tearfully informs his ministers: “They are Zakhak, and we are now Jamshid.”³⁸ Sekandar, for his part, shows no lack of courtesy or nobility; he grants quarter to his prisoners of war and spares their property, saying,

*I’ll keep my hand back from people’s things
I’ll lead wisdom down the right path³⁹*

ز چیز کسان دست کوتاه کنیم
خرد را سوی روشنی ره کنیم

In fact, one would suspect that it is only through this invasion that he is able to demonstrate the kingly comportment he is capable of. By the time he confronts his adversary face-to-face,

35. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Dārā*, ll. 75–76.

36. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 458; Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Dārā*, l. 73.

37. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 528; Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Iskandar*, l. 1890.

38. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 463.

39. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Dārā*, l. 229.

the war is already over: Dara has been betrayed and stabbed by his own renegade advisors. Sekandar's glory shines even more brightly as he mourns the fate of Persia's king and brings his murderers to justice. In the final moments of clarity that only come to the dying, Dara thanks his brother for his wise ways and warns him not to let his power overwhelm his humility: "Look at me before you say 'I am exalted above all this great company of heroes.' Know that evil and good both come from God, and see that you remain grateful to him for as long as you live."⁴⁰ He then dies, bequeathing everything to the new king. Having seized the crown of Iran through heroic deeds, demonstrated his capacity for munificence and justice, and married Roshanak, the daughter of Dara, to maintain the royal bloodline, Sekandar is poised to inherit the ancient institution of the monarchy and establish a great era of peace and prosperity upon the land—if he can only control his wanderlust. As this first part of the story draws to a close, Firdawsi himself intervenes in the narrative, seemingly begging Sekandar to reconsider his chosen path, and sounding an ominous warning of the tribulations that lie ahead.

*As best as you can, don't seek the world's secrets
She will turn them away from the seeker's face⁴¹*

تو راز جهان تا توانی مجوی
که او زود پیچد ز جوینده روی

Sekandar on the World Stage

Sekandar, of course, has no intention of settling down. Now that he has mastered Greece, Egypt, and Iran, he is ready to begin his real voyage and match wits with the kings, queens, and emperors of the world at large. There are two alternating threads to this story, each illustrating the two distinct sides of Sekandar's conflicted personality. His official line is that he is a peace-loving philosopher who simply wishes to see the wonders of the world and attain its secrets before he dies, as he writes to Foor for instance: "You will have heard how God has given me *farr*, victory, good fortune, crowns, thrones, and sovereignty over this dark earth. But none of this will last, and my days draw on. . . . My only ambition is to leave a good name and no disgrace behind me on this sublunar earth."⁴² Yet there is also a note of arrogance in the young king's voice. Proud and confident in his intelligence, there is nothing he loves more than a good trick. As we saw in Dara's case, he is far happier to humiliate an opponent in the palace than to crush him in the battlefield. Sekandar is no bloodthirsty warlord—he is

40. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 468.

41. Firdawsi, *Shāhnāmāh, Dārā*, 1. 229.

42. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 483.

a brilliant scholar and soldier whose only real satisfaction comes from testing himself against the greatest challenges the world can present to him. So far, the *farr* remains in his possession and he can do no wrong; but how long he can keep this game up will very much depend on the purity of his motives.

His first adversary is Kayd, whose wise advisor Mehran realizes that all that is needed to placate the approaching general is to offer him all he possess of wisdom, lore, and marvelous things of the world. Fortunately, Kayd is not penniless in this regard; he has a first-rate philosopher and physician at his court, a daughter of unsurpassed beauty, and a wondrous cup that is always full. True to form, Sekandar insists on “testing” these wonders first-hand, engaging in a battle of riddles with the philosopher, assessing the physician’s diagnostic skill, drinking from the goblet, and marrying the daughter. Pleased by what he sees, he thanks Kayd and proceeds on his way, curiously burying the excess treasure in the mountains, where it remains hidden to this day. Sekandar next approaches Foor of India in much the same fashion, demanding to be acknowledged as his superior. Proud and noble of lineage, Foor is not pleased by such impertinence and replies, “Have you no shame that you summon me like this? Isn’t your wisdom disturbed by this kind of talk? . . . All you think of is your own glory.”⁴³ Sekandar, willingly enough, resolves upon war—but he still gets to play his tricks. He wins the battle, not by force or stratagem, but through an ingenious invention: he builds a cavalry of iron horses, filled with burning oil, that rout the elephants of the Indian army. He then similarly kills Foor when his adversary is distracted by a great cry from his soldiers.

Although he has humbled another king, the fame of Sekandar’s tricks and devices have begun to precede him. His next target is Andalusia, ruled by the shrewd Queen Qaydafeh, who is easily Sekandar’s rival in the ensuing battle of wits. Anticipating his arrival, the queen secretly dispatches a painter to spy on the king of the Greeks and depict his likeness to her so that she will know his face when he arrives. Sekandar, meanwhile, switches places with his vizier and, with this ruse, fools Qaydafeh’s son into thinking that the king is a bloodthirsty monarch who will only be stopped if she sends tribute. The false vizier then sets out, accompanied by the unsuspecting prince, for the Andalusian court, hoping to repeat the ruse he pulled on Dara. Qaydafeh, however, has outwitted her opponent—she recognizes Sekandar’s face and exposes his disguise, and it is only due to her magnanimity that he is allowed to go free. Having won the game, she consoles her foe with a word of warning that echoes the counsel of Dara:

O lion-like king, don’t let yourself be led astray by your male pride! The Indian king Foor wasn’t killed because of your glory, and neither were Dara and the

43. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 484.

heroes of Sind. Their good fortune was at an end, and yours was in the ascendant; and now you're so full of your manly valor because you've become the greatest man on earth at the moment. But you should know that all good things come from God, and while you live you should be grateful to him. You say the world is yours because of your knowledge, but what you say does not seem true to me. What will knowledge avail you when you go into the maw of the dragon death? Acting as your own envoy is sewing your shroud while you are still young.⁴⁴

Yet Sekandar, for all the warnings he has been given, has not yet learned his lesson. For a third time, he will be his own envoy, seeking to outwit the king of China. This time, he has no need of the disguise, for the king of China is so wealthy and powerful he only meets Sekandar's bellicose words with disdain. He replies:

I am not afraid of you and I will not make war against you, neither shall I puff myself up with pride as you are doing. It is not my habit to shed blood, and besides it would be unworthy of my faith for me to do evil in this way. You summon me, but to no purpose; I serve God, not kings. I send with this more riches than you have dreamed of, so that there shall be no doubting my munificence.⁴⁵

It is in this moment that we see to what extent the king has been driven by his pride and arrogance. To see a monarch who is so powerful, he cannot be cowed by the threat of war, so noble, he will not demean himself in empty blustering, and so wise, he knows not to covet his wealth—and to see himself cast in this man's shadow as nothing more than a petty, small-minded princeling—this is the lesson that finally teaches Sekandar humility. Despite his extensive journeys and unforgettable experiences, the battle wounds and hard licks of the past, and the best advice of kings and philosophers, the only thing that can liberate Sekandar of his pride is to see it dragged through the mud. The one to do this is a true monarch, so self-assured in his place in the world he does not need to prove himself to anybody. It is a pivotal moment in Sekandar's life. His games are at an end; there is nobody left to play.

The Search for Wisdom

Along with these hard lessons in life comes a darker tale, in which Sekandar is forced to confront the tragic paradox of his life. Let us consider the existing circumstances around the

44. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 496.

45. *Ibid.*, 521.

time of his birth. Iran has an acknowledged king, Darab, a direct descendent from Lohrasp, of the line of Hushang. Darab has selected his son Dara to succeed him, and had Sekandar never been born, we can assume that the transfer of power would have taken place without any disturbance. With a legitimate claim to the throne, however, Sekandar can be understood as a king *in potentia*; if he so desires, he can attempt to seize power for himself without disrupting the dynasty. If he stays home, he will live out his life in peaceful anonymity, while Dara will be remembered in the history books. In setting out on his journey, he creates the conditions possible for him to prove his valor, demonstrate his worthiness, and turn fortune away from his brother. The divine *farr* comes to him, it seems, out of an act of choice.

The problem, of course, is that he does not ‘choose’ to become the next king. His desire is not for the outer world of *bazm u razm*, banquets and boasting, but the inner world of secret knowledge. Dara was not his enemy, no more than Foor, Qaydafeh, or the Emperor of China—they were all just obstacles in his way. All the battles, tricks, and parleys were diversions, amusing opportunities to prove himself in contests of war and guile. We may even guess that he is happiest during these episodes because they earn him the praise of his peers and followers, while keeping his mind from brooding on the uncomfortable truth: it is the very search for forbidden knowledge that has brought him into the spotlight of history—should he turn away from it in defeat, he will no longer be invincible, no longer will the *farr* shine upon his face. As he delves farther and farther into the corners of the world, he becomes evermore aware of the futility of his search, yet he cannot abandon his quest any more than he can hope to accomplish it. He is no more free than a condemned man who knows he is only alive because the date of his execution has not been set.

Sekandar knows this is his doom, yet he cannot help but try to avoid it—he has no other choice. This is why, after his political fortunes are reversed at the hands of Qaydafeh, he sets out on the third and final part of his journey, to the lands at the edge of the world, south, north, west, and east. First, he sets out to the land of the Brahmins, whom he questions intently about the nature of man: “Who is the king of our souls? What is the reality of this thing that makes us weep with longing?”⁴⁶ They reply that they are greed and need (*āz* and *niyāz*), and blessed be the one who accepts wisdom in his soul!⁴⁷ They then goad him into confronting his own foolishness, asking him if he can procure for them a cure from old age and death. When he admits that he cannot, that nobody can cheat death, they pointedly ask him what is his purpose, why does he flit from here to there seeking a remedy for that which has no cure? Poor Sekandar turns pale at these words, and has no answer to give.

From this point on, all of Sekandar’s life has become fixated on understanding the rela-

46. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 504.

47. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Iskandar*, l. 1111.

tionship between the certainty of death, the hope of eternal life, and what role wisdom plays between the two. His adventures lead him to repeated encounters with the supernatural, from messengers from beyond the grave, to birds, trees, and the Angel of Death, Esrafil himself. Twice, he comes across corpses dressed in the finest of raiments, surrounded by treasure and the clammy air of death; one warns him that the heavens are turning against him, while the other urges him back from his quest: “O king, still filled with longing and desire, don’t play the fool much longer! You have seen many things that no man ever saw, but now it’s time to draw rein.”⁴⁸ He meets the mysterious Kheyr, who promises to guide him to the Water of Life; in the darkness of the journey, however, Sekandar loses his way. He then reaches Esrafil atop his high mountain, who cries out, “O slave of greed [*bandab-i āz*], do not struggle so hard, for one day the great roar of the Day of Judgement will reach your ears.”⁴⁹ At the end of the world in the east, he comes across the tree that speaks in two voices, one male and one female. She-he tells him that he will not live to see his mother, family, or homeland again, and the stars and heavens have had enough of him and his story (*shavad akhtar u tāj u takht az tu sīr*).⁵⁰

The knowledge about the nature of death that Sekandar learns in these adventures is slowly killing him; he returns from the tree “wounded in his heart, by the sword of fate” (*kbastah gashbah bih shamshīr-i bakht*).⁵¹ He is caught in a spiral of despair, for he knows that he cannot stop this quest, that this was the work he was born to do, yet at the same time he knows that there is nothing to avail him in this long and meaningless journey. He therefore must remain victorious, for to fail means death, yet with every victory, the goal that he seeks grows ever more distant from his grasp. Bitterly, he complains:

<p>To him [<i>Esrafil</i>] the king answered, “Thus my lot came down from Fate: That apart from roaming and wandering in this world, I see nothing of what is clear and concealed!”⁵²</p>	<p>چنین داد پاسخ بدو شهریار که بهر من این آمد از روزگار که جز جنبش و گردش اندر جهان نبینم همی آشکار و نهان</p>
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And then, a moment of grace. Sekandar, once again breaking the rules and playing his own ambassador, comes into the presence of the Emperor of China, and for the first time

48. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 516–17.

49. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Iskandar*, l. 1401.

50. *Ibid.*, *Iskandar*, l. 1542.

51. *Ibid.*, *Iskandar*, l. 1543.

52. *Ibid.*, *Iskandar*, l. 1403–4.

in his life, experiences his own insignificance, gaining the sense of humility he had so sorely missed. The way ahead is finally made clear for the tormented king; at last, he can give up his quest and return home, even though he knows he will never get there alive. It is this foolish wisdom, the ability to pretend and believe in personal agency when in fact none exists, the hope that his actions will be meaningful in a world where everything passes away, that grants him reprieve from his endless wandering. The consuming desire he held to unlock the secrets of eternal life has finally given way to an acceptance of the mystery of his own death. Ironically, it is only through recognizing his inevitable failure that he finally attains the knowledge he has sought for so long.

It is a very tricky paradox to unravel—perhaps Firdawsi can say it best. Here is part of the elegy his wife Roshanak says over Sekandar’s coffin:

<i>You were like a swift cloud bearing hail</i>	چو ابری بدی تند بارش تگرگ
<i>I said you had been protected from death</i>	ترا گفتم ایمن شدهستی ز مرگ
<i>From so much fighting and war and bloodshed</i>	ز بس رزم و پیکار و خون ریختن
<i>Whether alone or in an army</i>	چه تنها چه با لشکر آویختن
<i>Fate, I said, gave you the wherewithal</i>	زمانه ترا داد گفتم جواز
<i>That you keep a secret from men⁵³</i>	همی داری از مردم خویش راز

Sekandar has gone down in history as the invincible world-conqueror, the general whom no one could defeat. His legend grew even bigger in the centuries after his death, when he became not only a conqueror of the world, but of the world’s secrets. In many representations of his journeys and exploits, he is seen to board a submarine to survey the bottom of the ocean, to stand at the edge of the world, to journey to the land of the dead and come back out. Yet, in Firdawsi’s highly fatalistic view of world history, in which all things live and die under a fate that is beyond their means to control, Sekandar cannot succeed in his quest to conquer death. No one can, not even Jamshid, who came closer to this goal than any other king. This is especially hard for someone like Sekandar to accept, because the whole reason for his *farr* and his glory is the aura of invincibility, that impression of a charmed life that cannot be touched by death, that pushes him ever outwards to the edges of the earth. He is caught in a trap: all too aware of his own mortality, he must run ever faster towards his goal, the knowledge of everlasting life, while death is hot on his heels in pursuit. He knows that if he stops, death will overtake him in an instant, yet he also knows that the goal he is after is categorically unattainable. Only defeat will teach him humility and bring him the knowledge that he

53. Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmāh*, *Iskandar*, ll. 1890, 92.

needs to find the answer to his search, which is the very abandonment of the quest—yet who can defeat Alexander the Invincible?

In the end, only Sekandar can be his own conqueror. Only by giving up his journey and welcoming death's embrace can he overcome his fate of restless wandering, searching for answers that cannot be found. Armies, monsters, dragons, and even the Angel of Death cannot turn him away from this course—his will is too strong, his intelligence too great. Only when he could see himself reflected in the image of the Chinese emperor, the Nushirvan of his age, a true universal monarch who knowingly accepts his place in the world and lives up to its ideal form, can recognize his own smallness and so discover true wisdom, that death cannot be overcome by eternal life, but through accepting death—that is, turning away from his quest in defeat. The only one who could ultimately defeat—and thereby redeem—Sekandar was himself. In this, at least, he has learned something from his predecessors.

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