

PARADIGMATIC RELATIONSHIPS AMONG KINGS AND HEROES IN FIRDAWSI'S SHAHNAMEH

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ABSTRACT

Firdawsi's *Shahnameh*, widely recognized as the Iranian National Epic, may be considered as the essence of the thousandfold-year Persian culture and civilization. In the depth of several incidents, characters, places, and other elements forming this huge epic work, one can identify traces of some religious beliefs, traditions, or historical events related to the lives of the Iranian people. Some scholars have argued that the contents of the *Shahnameh* may be divided into three parts: the mythological part, the heroic part, and the historical part. Although such a categorization highlights the presence of the heroic element in this epic, the present study suggests that, chronologically speaking, one can divide the types of relationships existing among the major characters appearing in the *Shahnameh* (i.e., between kings and heroes) into two eras. While the first era is marked by a “**king-hero**” type of relationship, in which, due to the absence of distinct social classes, indeed, both of the roles are played by the same character; the second era is characterized by a “**king-and-hero**” relationship, in which, as distinct social classes gradually develop, the two characters assume two different identities and social roles.

Key Words: Persian epic; Kings/Heroes in the *Shahnameh*; Firdawsi's epic; Iranian national epic; Characterization in the *Shahnameh*;

1. Introduction

It is said that “there is no clear demarcation between history and mythology, and this, by itself, can be an indication of the dilemma that man's soul has ever been facing, always wandering between fantasy, on the one hand, and reality, on the other hand” (Sarkarati, 1979 ,p. 119)¹. The *Shahnameh* [the epic of kings], composed, organized, and given its final

order by Firdawsi (born ca. 940 AD), the great Persian poet—considered as well one of the world’s greatest epic writers—is indeed the essence of the thousandfold-year Persian culture and civilization. There lie behind most of the incidents, characters, settings, and other components of this vast epic certain religious faiths and rituals. Here and there in his epic poem, the poet hints to certain historical facts and actual events experienced by the ancient Iranian people. As far as we know, it was Theodor Nöldeke, who for the first time called Firdawsi’s *Shahnameh* “the Persian National Epic” (cf. Nöldeke, 1990). Such a label by itself justly implies that it should be regarded as a literary work of remarkable value.

It is said that Lamartine (1790-1869), the famous French poet and writer, once commented, “In the *Shahnameh*, the superior power belongs to the heroes, not to the kings.” Whereas the very title of Firdawsi’s work (since the Persian word ‘*Shahnameh*’ literally means ‘the book of kings’) might bring into mind the notion that the creator of the National Epic has placed the kings so tightly at the center of the events that everything should revolve round their characters, it must be mentioned from the outset that this is not the case. Although kings and heroes together constitute the central figures throughout the work, the heroes, in fact, represent the masses of common people within the ruling class (see, for instance, Eslami Nadoushan, 1995, p. 30; 1997; Afifi, 1974; Rahimi, 1990). Despite some other national epics, in which the central characters are commonly great rulers, kings, or princes, in the Iranian National Epic, Rustam, the most outstanding character throughout the poem, is associated with the class of heroes, not with the rulers or kings. From among the *Shahnameh* researchers, Mokhtari (1989, p. 150), discussing the issue of heroism in the *Shahnameh*, has elaborated on the relationship between heroes and the ruling power. Moreover, on the functions of the kings in Firdawsi’s epic poem, Perham (1991) has also proposed some beneficial points.

E. E. Bertels (1984), the Russian author, has argued that the content of the *Shahnameh* includes three main sections: the mythological section, the heroic section, and the historical section. His classification not only signifies the strong presence of the heroic figures throughout the poem, but also emphasizes the fact that perhaps the most graceful and the most elaborate portion of the work deals with the episodes concerned with the heroic exploits. In spite of the fact that some scholars have found some faults with Bertel’s categorization of the episodes of the *Shahnameh* (as, for instance, one may argue that the heroes are also present in the mythological

section, or, conversely, some mythological elements can be traced in the heroic part of the work, and so on), taking everything into account, the framework of his classification has been widely accepted in the field.

However, the major question posed by the researchers in the present paper is concerned with the type of relationships that exists among the central figures, i.e., kings and heroes, in Firdawsi's *Shahnameh*. To answer such a question, it seems that we have to modify Bertel's type of classification. To put it in other words, proceeding in a chronological order, we have identified two major periods in the episodes of the *Shahnameh*, each period marked by certain paradigms of relationships between the kings and heroes, as they will be discussed in the following part of the paper.

2. The King-Hero Paradigm

In terms of our classification, the first period simultaneously started with the accession of Kayoomars, the first king of the Pishdadian dynasty, and nearly lasted until the final portion of Jamshid's reign. What distinguished this period from the following era was the fact that neither had the distinct social classes been formed yet, nor had the "king" and the "hero" assumed separate social roles. Rather, the kingly and the heroic identities, as the two basic elements of the epic, were integrated into a single figure. Indeed, this same period embodied the most comprehensive model of the king-hero paradigm. Moreover, the mere fact that the kingly and the heroic identities were personified in the same figure suggests that neither was considered superior to the other; the two served as a pair of symmetrical halves forming a complete pattern. One major point with regard to this issue is that the kings and the heroes in the *Shahnameh* rose from a common origin; it was not the case that one was developed from the left side of the other! Such a common development further implies that in the mythologically-oriented minds of the ancient Persians the heroic figures, who represented the common people in the circle of those in power, possessed an incomparable rank. In particular, if one views the *Shahnameh* from a sociological angle, the latter point will appear to be of great significance—that ancient Persians seemed to be deeply fond of the king-hero type of relationship.

The ancient Persians' mythologically-oriented mentality was so preoccupied with the king-hero paradigm that even during the post-Jamshidian era, when separate social classes had already been developed, and the king and hero were associated with different social classes, we do see that partial instances of that same paradigm still appear here and there

in the *Shahnameh*.

Manoochehr, for instance, was one of the figures who possessed both kingly and heroic qualities. As a prince, on Fereidun's death, Manoochehr succeeded to the throne. This was the kingly aspect of his character. During the reign of Fereidun, however, he had been appointed to the post of commander-in-chief, a position, according to the *Shahnameh*, traditionally occupied by heroes. After fighting against Salm and Toor, he wrote Fereidun to "announce his victory" (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 96)². In his "victory announcement", he described

whatever had happened in the war and, at the same time, made a request

for the king's further commands. According to the tradition of the *Shahnameh*, it is the job of the heroes to write such "victory announcements", not of the kings.

As another partial model of the king-hero paradigm, we may mention Goshtasp. A prince by origin, he later succeeded to the throne. Meanwhile, we are also told that he fought with a wolf and a dragon. According to the Persian National Epic, slaying a dragon was a prerequisite for achieving the heroic position. In the Iranian history, it has been reported that Bahram-e Gour, or Bahram V, the Sassanid king (accession 421 AD), possessed such qualities—that is, he succeeded to the throne and slew both a dragon and a wolf (*Shahnameh*, vol. 5, p. 30). One more example of that same paradigm was Key-Khosraw, who was a prince, later succeeded to the throne, and served as the commander-in-chief as well (*Shahnameh*, vol. 4, p. 38).

Even among the princes, one can find partial representatives of the king-hero paradigm. Isfandiar, a prince of royal descent, for instance, managed to pass through the "seven exploits". Passing through the "seven exploits" is associated with heroic deeds in the *Shahnameh*. Fariborz was also one of the princes who are mentioned as heroes in the text.

More interestingly, one may even find examples of the above-mentioned paradigm among the hero class as well. For instance, Rustam, whose mere presence in the epic made the heroic identity find its significance, in some episodes of the *Shahnameh*, assumes a kingly role. As when he led the victorious Persian army to Tooran (the legendary Turkistan or Transoxiana), ascended the throne for seven years, like a real king, appointed governors to different states and regions, honored his governors with royal necklaces, golden belts, and sent them charters. During this period, he is offered the

title of “king” by Firdawsi:

Throughout Indochina and china proper, the report said
That Rustam had ascended the throne as the great king.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 235)

The reign of Zal’s descendents in Zabolistan, Kabulistan, and afterwards, in India, a kind of sovereignty slightly more than a local government, may also be regarded another instance of the same partial king-hero paradigm. Goshtasp, the Iranian king, addressing his son, Isfandiar, once complained that Rustam regarded himself “the elderly king” but recognized him merely as “the new king” (*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 235).

The above-mentioned examples clearly indicate that in the collective mentality of the Iranians the king-hero paradigm has been of desire and much interest; to the extent that even after the development of social classes, when the paradigm practically came to an end, one may still find some traces of such a desire and interest reflected in the shape of other partial models of the paradigm in some of the episodes of the Iranian National Epic.

3. The “King” Versus “Hero” Paradigm

The distinction between the king and hero in the *Shahnameh* does not occur instantly; it takes place through a distinct process. The first stage of the process of separation is marked by the development of social classes during the reign of Jamshid. Having developed four separate social classes, he practically indicated that the time of king-hero paradigm was over, and it was time the king stood off other social classes:

Only do I deserve glory and the Crown,
Who dares to challenge me as the unique king?

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 128)

Therefore, the “king” found his own independent identity, but heroism merged into the social classes of people, without having a distinct identity. Contrary to the king’s figure that abruptly found its shape, the hero’s figure took shape after the occurrence of several incidents and undergoing a few stages.

One of the crucial incidents was the rising of the people against Jamshid and ousting him from kingship. The rising may be considered as the second stage in the process that led to the separation of the king and hero’s functions. In the rebellion mentioned above, people actually acted on behalf

of the heroes, since what they accomplished was to oust a king, no longer qualified to rule properly, an exploit that, in line with the tradition of the *Shahnameh*, was the heroes' concern. One may argue that by structuring the society into four separate classes, Jamshid helped the kingly figure find its independence and definite identity. The people, however, by rising against the king took the first steps to identify the typical heroic figure.

One more incident that accelerated the process was Armayel and Garmayel's appearing on the scene. These two young men by means of an elaborate trick found their way to the royal kitchen of Zah-hak as cooks, their real intention being to save the lives of the youths who were brought to the court every day to be murdered. They actually fulfilled two major functions: to stand against a tyrant's malicious intents and to defend the common people's rights. At this stage, the hero's figure appeared to get more and more distinct. While in the previous incident, the common people themselves appeared on the scene, without any sign of a certain figure, in the latter case, such a figure gradually came into sight, though it would take longer until the full shape of the heroic figure came into view.

The entry of Kaveh, the blacksmith, into the epic site marked a new stage in the development of the heroic figure. Kaveh fulfilled the same functions attributed to the heroes in the *Shahnameh*: rising against a tyrant king, ousting him from office, and helping a qualified man ascend the throne as the new king. Such heroic exploits characterized a new figure standing face to face with the kingly figure, one who equaled him in power and assumed roles comparable to those associated with the king.

The process through which the hero's figure was to develop, through Gharen, Kaveh's son was shifted to Sam, who delivered an important speech in front of King Manoochehr and his associates. His eloquent oration marked a turning point and may be regarded as an official declaration that was to establish the status of the heroes vis-à-vis the court. After that event, the heroes would be regarded as people's representatives in the ruling class. The above-mentioned stages may be summarized in the form of the flow-diagram that follows:

Jamshid (the King) King-Hero

People's rising Armayel & Garmayel Kaveh Gharen Sam (the Hero)

From that time onward, the king and hero, assuming separate identities and fulfilling differential functions, started a face-to-face relationship, the king standing on one side and the hero on the other side. Thus, two states

were probable: Either the king and hero would proceed coordinately, or they would confront each other.

3.1 The King and Hero Proceed Coordinately

Such a paradigm sustained provided that the king took into account two principles: ruling wisely and pursuing the country's glorification. In that case, the king was on the throne, and it was the heroes' job to protect the kingdom and superintend the king's governance.

Under such circumstances, the heroes fulfilled various functions, one of which being the selection of a new king, a task referred to as "crown granting" by Firdawsi. In the episode of Kaveh, the blacksmith, we are told that he led the rebellion to overthrow Zah-hak and paved the way for Fereidun to ascend the throne. After defeating Zah-hak, Kaveh led a crowd of people to have a meeting with Fereidun and asked everybody to obey his orders as the new king (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 218). The very reason that Fereidun chose 'Kaveh's Banner'³ as his official flag points to the role Kaveh played in paving the way for him to ascend the throne. Zal, Rostam's father, also fulfilled a similar function twice—that is, paving the way for two of the kings to ascend the throne. The first is related to the episode in which Firdawsi describes how Zoutahmasb came to the throne. Zal brought together an association, most members of which being heroes, to decide about the selection of the new king. Although the sons of Nowzar—i.e., the king who preceded Zoutahmasb—were present in the capital, the association decided to designate Zoutahmasb as the new king (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 218). The second episode concerns Key Ghobad's ascending the throne. Once more, Zal called for an association to come together to designate the new king. In both cases, the designated king was away from the capital, yet the association decided to crown him as king.

In the episode of Key Khosrow's ascending the throne, the heroes as well played a crucial role.

The heroes' ability to select the king has also been portrayed in Lohrasb's ascending the throne. Key Khosrow, without consulting the heroes, declares Lohrasb as his successor. The heroes, however, object to the king's decision in the same meeting:

The Iranians made a clamor, saying that
 "O king, we won't gird for fighting any more."

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 4, p. 130)

Lohrasb, being aware of their protest, in his inaugural address implicitly vowed that he would proceed in the right direction and respect the heroes viewpoints:

I will do whatever the king ordered me to,
And will try my best to act and rule benevolently.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 4, p. 137)

It was then that Zal, the universally-celebrated hero, recognized him as the king:

Thou art the king and we are not thy equal;
We won't disobey thy commands and ideals.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 4, p. 137)

Another function that the heroes fulfilled was related to the war and the issues associated with it. They regularly participated in the consultation sessions held by the king before they started fighting. In such sessions, the heroes commonly made the decisions; the king chiefly played an officially symbolic role (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 232; vol. 2, p. 55). Occasionally it happened that the king disregarded the heroes' viewpoints and had his own decisions executed (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 243; vol. 3, p. 120; vol. 4, pp. 17, 68). In case there was a war, the hero chiefly served as the commander-in-chief. He was supposed to regularly report the front news to the king and, at the same time, ask for his commands (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, pp. 107, 110). After the war was over, the king left the court to welcome the heroes (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 144), honored them with royal robes, praised them much, and ordered for celebrations in honor of their victorious returning (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, pp. 110, 132).

There were also cases in which the heroes serve as sages to advise the king what to do (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 253; vol. 2, p. 141; vol. 4, p. 115). Such an enlightening role by heroes indicates their intellectual status in the Iranian political system.

It should be mentioned that the heroes fulfilled two more functions as well: having the princes educated and asking the king to forgive the guilty. Rustam's having Siavash and Bahman—two Iranian princes—educated may be mentioned as two relevant examples. Key Khosrow's bringing up by some shepherds on Ghela Mountain and Fereidun's bringing up by a field watchman may be regarded as primitive forms of this same function. The episode related to Tous demonstrates the interceding role of the hero. Having made several mistakes, he had aroused the king's wrath to the

extent that he said about him:

To me, a man like the ignoble Tous is the same as a dog.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 5)

Nevertheless, after Rustam interceded with the king on his behalf, Tous was forgiven (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 6). In a similar manner, Gorguin, having deceived Bijan and even having told the king lies (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 172), was also forgiven after Rustam interceded:

The triumphant king accepted Rustam's intercession.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 186)

One more role played by the heroes was to remedy the complicated problems that arose. Some examples of the fulfillment of such a function are: releasing Key Kavoods, who had been put in chains by Demons in Mazandaran (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 271) and had been held captive by the king of Hamavaran (*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 15); saving Bijan, who had been confined and fettered by Afrasiab in the dark depth of a well, by Rustam (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 175); the annihilation of troublesome boars by Bijan (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 151); and the safe transference of Key Khosrow from Touran to Iran by Geev (*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 240).

Therefore, in the universe of the *Shahnameh*, the heroes played roles at the executive and decision-making levels. As long as the king and the hero fulfilled their allotted functions, their relationship was based on mutual respect and holding the balance of power.

3.2 The King-Hero Confrontation

Like anything else in the traditional era, the incidents in the *Shahnameh* revolve round binary confrontations. The king-hero confrontation may as well be interpreted in the same framework. There are often two causes for such a confrontation: either the king did not make sensible decisions with regard to his ruling or the hero acted in a manner inconsistent with heroic morality. The first confrontation of the king and hero took place in the reign of Jamshid, who made people angry by his silly behavior. However, as in that part of the *Shahnameh*, the typical figure of the hero had not emerged yet, the common people, as an incomplete representation of the hero, confronted the king. Another instance of confrontation has been manifested in the episode of Kaveh and Zah-hak. In both cases just mentioned, as the party at fault was the king, he was forced to abdicate the throne.

There are, however, other cases in which although the king is not ousted from his office, the process of confrontation is still there. As, for instance, when the Iranian king, Nowzar, started to rule in an unjust manner, the heroes held a secret meeting with Zal and asked him to oust Nowzar and ascend the throne (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 192).

During the reign of Key Kavooos, as he was not wise enough, there were more confrontations. For example, when he made a stubborn decision to leave for Mazandaran, the heroes held a secret meeting to discuss the problem (*Shahnameh*, vol. 1, p. 246). The confrontation becomes more serious as he repeatedly takes the wrong direction, to the extent that Goodarz, one of the heroes, calls him ‘imbecile’, ‘tyrant’ and even ‘crazy’ (*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 24). In a meeting with the king, he addressed him violently and disrespectfully (*ibid.*). Other heroes also behaved in a similar manner when they were addressing a king who was at fault. In the episode where we are told that Key Kavooos was angry with Rustam, having paid little attention to his command to leave for the capital immediately and having arrived too late, another instance of such binary confrontations takes place. Rustam thundered at the king and reminded him that there would be no throne or crown without the support of the heroes. In the end, by apologizing, the king put an end to the debate:

I did not intend to offend you –oh, great hero,
I feel so regretful—may my mouth be filled with soil!

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 65)

The encounter of the king and Rustam, after Siavoosh’s death, is also worth noticing. In that story, it was the king’s imbecility and his wife’s sensuality that tragically led to the young prince’s death. Rustam entered the capital. After reproaching the king and talking disrespectfully to him, to everyone’s surprise, he entered the king’s inner court without asking for his permission, grabbed Sudabeh—the king’s wife—by hair, dragged her up to the middle of the court hall, and slew her in the very front of the king’s eyes. Key Kavooos shuddered with fear:

King Kavooos trembled with fear on the throne.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 2, p. 219)

These were examples of cases in which the king behaved foolishly and the heroes, as the ones who were to superintend his manner of ruling, had to confront him.

It sometimes happened that the heroes' wrong actions caused such confrontations. Tous, the Iranian hero, for example, caused the death of Foroud - Key Khosrow's brother - and the decisive defeat of the Iranian army. Tous's insubordination and disobedience marks the starting point of such an encounter and humiliation; the king's order to put him under fetters and chains may be regarded as the climax of the episode (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 6). One more example of this type is Gorguin's wrong action, which resulted in Bijan's confinement in the depth of Afrasiab's well, and telling the king lies about the incident; thereupon, the king had him fettered and chained (*Shahnameh*, vol. 3, p. 172).

To conclude, as to the king and heroes' encounters, one may contend that the party at fault, regardless of the position or office they held, was doomed to defeat. In terms of the Iranian National Epic, the wrongdoer is doomed to be punished duly for their evil deeds:

Lo! Listen to what the wise man said:

Whoever does evil will have to pay for his wrongdoing.

(*Shahnameh*, vol. 4, p. 354)

Notes

¹The quotations in this paper, including the lines from the *Shahnameh*, were originally in Persian; they were translated into English by the authors.

²All the references to the *Shahnameh* are from the six-volume Persian version edited by J. Mohl (1990).

³While Kaveh was leading the Iranians' rebellion against the tyrant Zahhak, he turned his blacksmithing apron into a banner and raised it as the symbol of uprising against the king. The "banner", regarded as a national symbol afterward, came to be known as "Kaveh's Banner" in the history of Iran.

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