

ekleksographia wave two

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Zahhak

We'd Need To Hear His Mother's Story

An Arab monarch named Merdas
made his home, in those days, in the desert.
Generous and just, he trembled before God,
and his fear turned his prayers into sighs.
Each of his herds—camels, cows,
goats, milk-giving sheep—
numbered a thousand head or more,
and anyone who needed milk
received it. Righteous Merdas had a son,
Zahhak, who was courageous but lacked kindness.
Turbulent, tending towards evil,
Zahhak was called by his father's people
Bivarasp, "ten thousand horses" in Pahlavi,
because ten thousand Arab steeds,
each with a golden bridle, were his.
Zahhak devoted his days and nights
to horsemanship, not in the heat of battle,
but to shine, sublime and wealthy, in people's eyes.

Eblis presented himself to this prince
one day at dawn, disguised
as a wise friend. He said, "There are secrets
I can share, that only I can show you,
but first you must swear to tell no one
what I say to you today."
The words flattered Zahhak's vanity,
so he agreed.

"What need is there,"
the deceiver asked, "for a leader here
besides yourself? Your father's years
stretch beyond their proper end,
leaving you to live much longer
in his shadow than is right. His rank and riches,
all his bounty, believe me, should be yours.
My advice is your advantage.
My words will make *you* the world's monarch."

Ekleksographia: Wave Two

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Poem

◦ "[We'd Need To Hear His Mother's Story](#)", from [Zahhak](#)

Richard Jeffrey Newman translates the Shahnameh

Poet, translator, essayist and educator, Richard Jeffrey Newman is the author of three volumes of poetry: *The Silence Of Men* (CavanKerry Press, 2006), a book of his own poems and *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan* and *Selections from Saadi's Bustan* (Global Scholarly Publications, 2004 & 2006 respectively), translations of two masterpieces of 13th Century Iranian poetry. As well, he co-translated with Professor John Moyné the poetry in *A Bird in the Garden of Angels* (Mazda Publishers, 2008), a selection of work by Rumi, also from 13th century Iran. Newman's poems and essays have appeared in a wide range of journals, including *Salon.com*, *The American Voice*, *Circumference*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Pedestal*

Zahhak took what he heard to heart
 but he was unwilling to kill his father.
 "What you want me to do is wrong,"
 he replied. "Rethink your plan! I refuse!"

The fiend responded, "Fail to follow
 my advice and you will violate
 the good-faith oath you made. Break
 that promise and prepare to remain
 humbled and hidden by the high regard
 your father the king will continue to command."
 That net trapped Zahhak's head.
 "Tell me what to do and I'll do it,"
 the prince replied. Eblis answered,
 "Leave the details to me. At dawn,
 your head will rise towards heaven, like the sun."

The palace grounds housed a garden
 where Merdas purified himself for prayer
 before sunrise. The servants attending him there
 lit no lantern to light the way,
 so the Devil dug a deep pit
 where he knew the king would walk.
 The noble Arab leader, eager
 to maintain the good name his praying
 earned him, hurried in the pre-dawn darkness
 to fall on his face before God.
 Instead, he fell into Eblis' trap,
 where he lay at the bottom, his body broken,
 until life left him. Then Eblis refilled
 the grave that pit became and walked away.

Merdas, that noble man, had made
 a cherished treasure of his son, raining
 comfort and wealth upon him. The wicked
 child, however, failed these gifts
 and shed his father's blood. I heard
 a sage once say that however savage
 a lion a man might be, to murder
 his father will still be beyond him. To find
 the answer to what happened here,
 we'd need to hear his mother's story.

Thus Zahhak took as his own
 Merdas' crown, making himself—
 unjust and headstrong man that he was—
 the Arabs' giver of good and evil.

Pleased with his success, Eblis

Magazine and Birmingham Poetry Review. His work has been anthologized in *Access Literature* (Wadsworth Publishers, 2005), and the title poem from *The Silence Of Men* has been translated into Dutch. In addition, he has completed a verse translation of a book-length section of *Shahnameh*, the Persian national epic. Richard Jeffrey Newman is Literary Arts Director of Persian Arts Festival, sits on the advisory boards of The Translation Project and Jackson Heights Poetry Festival, and is listed as a speaker with the New York Council for the Humanities. He is Associate Professor of English at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York, where he coordinates the Creative Writing Project. His website is RichardJNewman.com.

set a second, more sinister plan
in motion. "Because you've obeyed me," he said,
"you have all you've ever wanted;
but a greater treasure is yours if you're willing.
All creation will call you king—
the wild beasts and the tame, the birds
and the fish, the people, all will fall
to their knees and obey you—if you obey me."

A passage from the section of the Shahnameh, the Persian national epic, soon to be published by Junction Press in Richard Jeffrey Newman's translation. It is the beginning of the story of Zahhak, the epic's first evil king.

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