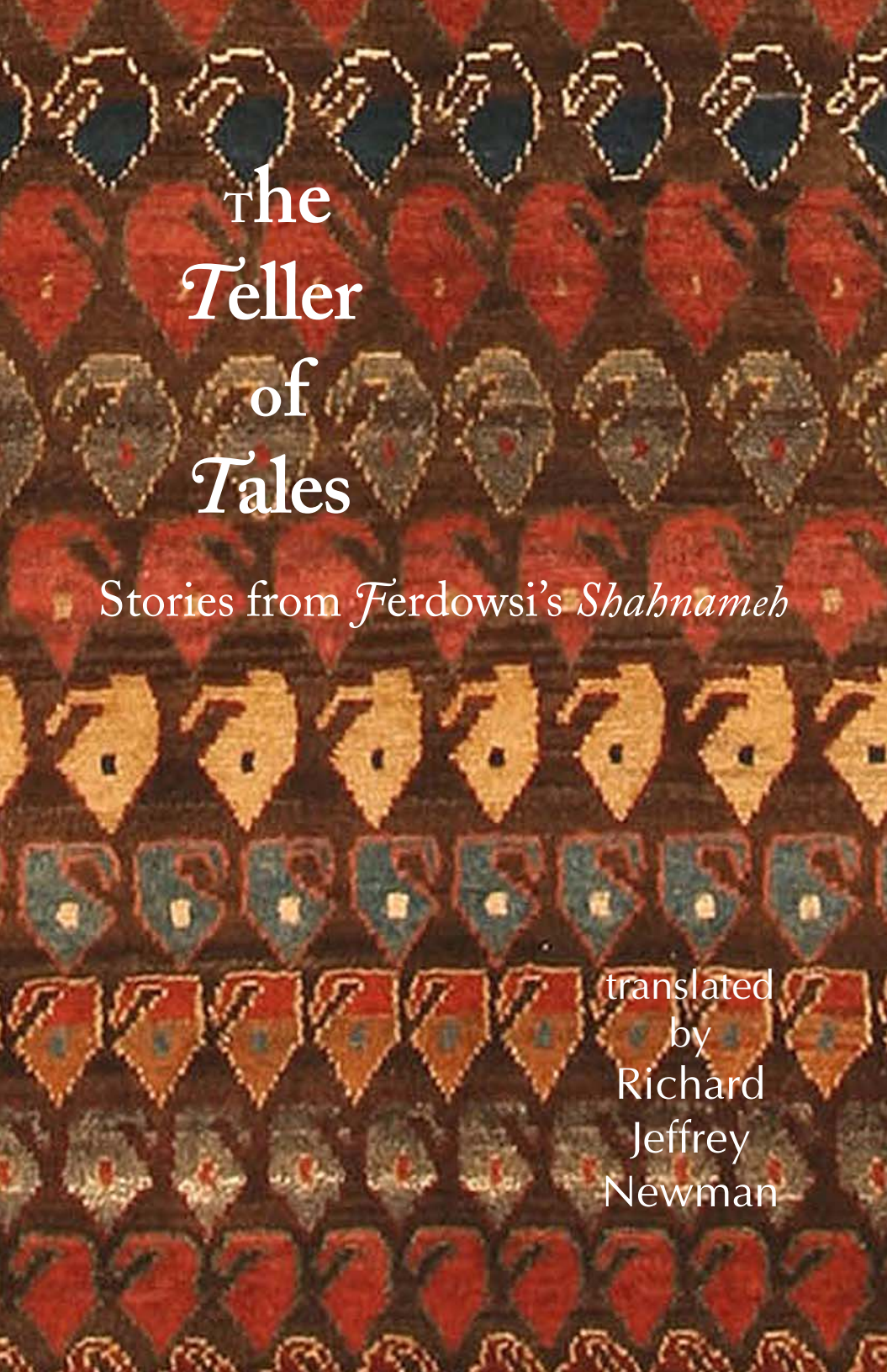
The Teller of Tales
Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh
translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman

The Teller of Tales

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"We'd need to hear his mother's story" first appeared in *Ekleksographia,* and "No one knows the secrets heaven holds" in *Dirty Goat*.

for Maryam

Introduction

Ferdowsi's Shahnameh

Often called the national epic of Iran, the *Shahnameh,* or *Book of Kings*, was written in the 10th century by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, who took as his subject the pre-Islamic history of the Iranian people, starting with the creation of the world and ending with the 7th century Muslim Arab conquest of the Persian empire. The poem is called the *Book of Kings*—as opposed to, say, the *Book of Iran*—because Ferdowsi tells Iran's story by telling the stories of the nation's monarchs, from the first, mythical, king Kayumars to Yazdegerd III, whose reign was the last before the Persian empire fell. These tales, encompassing the reigns of fifty kings, are told over the course of more than fifty thousand couplets, making the *Shahnameh* one of the longest poems ever written.

The *Shahnameh* also represents an act of cultural resistance, an assertion that the values and traditions of ancient Iran were still relevant despite three hundred years of Muslim Arab rule. Even today, as Dick Davis wrote in *Epic & Sedition*, the *Shahnameh* is "one of the chief means by which both Persian rulers and the [Iranian] people have sought to define their identity to themselves and to the world at large." Or, to put it

in a way that is perhaps more in keeping with what the *Shahnameh* meant to Ferdowsi when he wrote it, as well as to the Iranians who very quickly gave it the status in their culture that it retains today, the *Shahnameh* constitutes a literary expression of what Sandra Mackey calls in *The Iranians* "the separate identity within Islam that Iranians [have always] felt."

In the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi asserted this specifically Iranian cultural and national identity by celebrating Iran's pre-Islamic heritage and religious traditions in chauvinistic terms that would be familiar to any student of 19th century nationalism. Nonetheless, Ferdowsi's intent in writing the *Shahna- meh* was neither heretical nor seditious. He was both a devout Muslim and loyal to his king. What Ferdowsi wanted was to place Iran squarely at the center of its own narrative, pushing back against the revisionist history some Iranians were creating in order to reconcile Iran's past, ideologically and otherwise, with that of the dominant Arab Muslim culture.

The material translated in *The Teller of Tales* consists of excerpts from what I and others have called "The Poet's Preface," as well as, in their entirety, the stories of the first five kings: Kayumars, whom I mentioned above, Hushang, Tahmures, Jamshid and the Arabian Zahhak, the epic's first evil and only non-Iranian king. *The Teller of Tales* ends when Feraydun, Jamshid's descendant, defeats Zahhak and restores Iran to its former majesty.

The central concern of the stories included in *The Teller of Tales* is the nature of the social order, and it's clear from the start that this order devolves not merely from the king, but also, and more importantly, from whether or not God has deemed the king worthy to rule. The sign of God's approval is called the *farr*, a word that is almost impossible to translate, but that has at least a partial, visual analogy in the light that emanates from Jesus and the saints in medieval paintings.

The *Shahnameh*'s central value, which sustains order and wins God's approval, is that only the strictest adherence to the social and spiritual hierarchy guarantees the continued health of the realm. This applies to everyone, from the lowliest villager to the king himself; to violate that hierarchy in any

way invites disaster. Jamshid, who is credited with establishing civilized society, learns this lesson the hard way, when he allows his accomplishments to go to his head and declares himself a god:

> From this day forward, I know no lord
> but me: *my* word brought beauty
> and skilled men to adorn the earth!
> *My* word! Sunshine and sleep, security
> and comfort, the clothes you wear, your food—
> all came to you through me!
> Who else ended death's desolation
> and with medicine vanished illness from your lives?
> Without me, neither mind nor soul
> would inhabit your bodies. So who besides me
> can claim, unchallenged, the crown and its power?
> You understand this now. So now,
> who else can you call Creator but me?

As soon as these words leave Jamshid's mouth, the *farr* leaves him, and his kingdom begins to fall apart, making it vulnerable to Zahhak, who conquers Iran and institutes a thousand year reign of terror. Zahhak is not just any power-hungry despot; he is evil personified, a man seduced into becoming the instrument through which Eblis—the name given to the devil in Muslim mythology—plans to empty the world of people.

When Jamshid declares himself divine, in other words, he forfeits not only his kingdom, not only the social order he has built, but also the balance of power between good and evil. Only Feraydun, because he is a descendant of Jamshid's and therefore a true heir to the throne of Iran, is able to restore that balance in good's favor, defeating Zahhak and bringing order out of chaos. Feraydun's reign is filled with peace and prosperity until, like Lear, he decides to abdicate and divide his kingdom among his three sons. Two of them, dissatisfied with their portions, conspire to murder the third. This act of fratricide both establishes the rivalry between Iran and Turan that shapes much of the *Shahnameh*'s narrative and foreshadows the power struggles that haunt the reign of almost every sub-

sequent Iranian ruler. These struggles erode the social, political and metaphysical order over and over again, until the nation becomes so vulnerable that the success of the Arab invasion with which the *Shahnameh* ends is as inevitable as the success of Zahhak's invasion after Jamshid loses the *farr*.

This symmetry is compelling, but, as Dick Davis points out, the two invasions could not have been equivalent in Ferdowsi's imagination. For while he portrays Zahhak's reign as unambiguously evil and depraved, as a devout Muslim, Ferdowsi could not have understood the Arab conquest, which brought Islam's truth to Iran, as anything other than good. Still, seeing the Arabs as parallel to Feraydun, as his nation's saviors, is something I don't think Ferdowsi could have stomached. Muslim Arab culture, after all, had been dominant for three hundred years and the assimilationist pressure it was brining to bear on Iran's cultural imagination, as I said above, was beginning to take its toll. If only for that reason, Ferdowsi seems to have hated the Arabs, reserving for them his most scathing condemnations, describing them as racially black, villainous and in league with Ahriman, the source of evil within Zoroastrianism. Intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and even artistically, in other words, Ferdowsi probably had to separate in his imagination the Arab conquest of Iran from the fact that this conquest had made Iran a Muslim nation.

This negative attitude towards Arabs probably helps to explain why Ferdowsi ended the *Shahnameh* before the Arab conquest itself, marking a significant difference between the narrative arc of the epic as a whole and that of the five stories that I have translated here. For if the Shahnameh can be read, broadly speaking, as the story of Iran's rise and fall, the stories in The Teller of Tales trace the rise and fall and rising again of the mythical Iran that is their subject. If we think in musical terms, these stories function as a kind of overture to the entire epic, introducing the themes that will be developed in the rest of the poem—justice, loyalty, honor, the selfless righteousness of the king and the consequences of betraying those values. The stories I have translated here give us these themes in their purest form, untouched by the moral ambiguity that later sto-

ries introduce, and so perhaps they are best read as an expression of faith in the possibility of what could have been, if Iran had stayed true to its ideals and defeated its Arab conquerors.

Abolqasem Ferdowsi

We know next to nothing about Ferdowsi's life that can be verified from sources other than the *Shahnameh*. We can't even be sure what he was called, since Ferdowsi is actually a pen name meaning paradisical. We know, or at least we think we know, since Ferdowsi wrote this in the *Shahnameh* and we have no reason to doubt him, that he had a son who died young, at the age of 37. The son's name was probably Qasem, since Abolqasem is an honorific meaning "father of Qasem."

Based on other autobiographical statements Ferdowsi makes in the *Shahname*h, A. Shapur Shahbazi calculates in *Ferdowsi: A Critical Biography* the most likely date for Ferdowsi's birth, January 3, 940, and there is reason to believe that Dawlatshah, a fifteenth century biographer of the poets of Iran, is reliable when he dates Ferdowsi's death to the Muslim year 411, which corresponds to somewhere in 1019-20.

We also know that Ferdowsi was a *dehqan*, a member of Iran's landed gentry, and that he squandered his wealth while composing the *Shahnameh*; we know as well that while he did receive financial help from some people, once the poem was finished and had been sent to the royal court, he waited in vain for the reward he hoped to receive from Sultan Mahmoud, the king to whom the *Shahnameh* is dedicated.

We know for sure that the *Shahnameh* earned Ferdowsi condemnation as a heretic; and if we are to believe the stories that have been told about him, we know that he was refused burial in a Muslim cemetery. The problem with these stories is that, although they contain some factual data, they are obviously apocryphal, intended both to present Ferdowsi as an ideal man—brilliant, just, righteous, generous and destined for greatness—and to exact a kind of revenge against Ferdowsi's enemies. In the story concerning the poet's burial, for exam-

ple, after Ferdowsi's body is placed in a garden just inside the gates of his city, the cleric who denied him Muslim rites sees the poet in a dream. Ferdowsi is dressed in garments that indicate he is in paradise, and the vision compels the cleric to repent and, in one version, to spend the rest of this life making a daily pilgrimage to pray at the poet's grave.

In another story, Ferdowsi's father dreams that his very young son calls out to the four corners of the earth, and each of the four corners answers him. A dream interpreter explains that the vision foretells both Ferdowsi's career as a poet and the renown Ferdowsi's poetry would achieve. Still another tale about Ferdowsi's poetic prowess, which purports to explain the origins of his *Shahnameh*, has the poet besting in a rhyming contest four of Sultan Mahmoud's court poets, among them one of those who called Ferdowsi a heretic. The poets are so impressed by Ferdowsi's performance, which includes reference to an obscure tale from Iranian folklore, that they recommend him to Mahmoud as the poet best suited to complete the versification of the *Shahnameh*.

In fact, though, Ferdowsi never traveled to Mahmoud's court, never met Mahmoud and never met the poets against whom he is said to have competed. Indeed, taken as a whole, the stories that have been told about Ferdowsi since at least the 11th century invent a life for the poet that directly contradicts what he said about himself in the *Shahnameh*. The most famous tale we have, for example, gives Ferdowsi a daughter instead of a son and represents his primary motive for writing the epic not as one of cultural preservation, but as an attempt to secure for this daughter a dowry. The story invents a conflict between Ferdowsi and Mahmoud over the king's insufficient payment that forces Ferdowsi to go into hiding. Enraged at having been treated so poorly, Ferdowsi composes a hundred line satire against Mahmoud, which another ruler, whom Ferdowsi also never met, persuades the poet not to publish. (The satire is a complete fiction, although at a later date someone wrote one in Ferdowsi's name and inserted it into a *Shahnameh* manuscript.)

At the end of the tale—I have skipped a couple of

parts—when Mahmoud finally realizes that he has mistreated Ferdowsi and sends him what would have been an appropriate payment, it arrives just as Ferdowsi's body is being carried out of the city for burial. A cleric stands in the way of the procession, refusing to allow the heretical Ferdowsi to be buried in a Muslim cemetery, but in this version the cleric is punished. Mahmoud exiles him for having been so unreasonable and cruel. The sultan's emissaries then try to give the money intended for Ferdowsi to his daughter, but she refuses, saying she doesn't need it.

The Ferdowsi we know through these stories, fictional as he is, is the Ferdowsi who inhabits Iran's cultural imagination most fully. Indeed, when I first started doing research for *The Teller of Tales*, I found websites and spoke to people who reported these apocryphal stories as fact; and it's hard not to sympathize with them. Not only is the apocryphal Ferdowsi much more interesting and exciting than the Ferdowsi who wrote about himself in the *Shahnameh*, but there is also a way in which the apocryphal Ferdowsi is more important. The Ferdowsi we know from what he is willing to tell us about himself in the *Shahnameh* is simply incapable of being the cultural hero that the apocryphal Ferdowsi has been to generation after generation of Iranians. So, while we need to remember that when we read the *Shahnameh* we are reading the words of the literary Ferdowsi, we also need to be aware that the *Shahnameh*'s place at the center of Iranian culture was established by his apocryphal twin.

The Current Translation

Since I am not literate in Persian, though I speak and understand the language at a high beginner or intermediate level, I had to rely on sources other than the original text to make this translation, primarily the first volume of the only complete verse translation of the *Shahnameh* in English, *The Shahnama of Firdausi*, which was published in 1905 by the brothers George and Edmond Warner. A full list of the other translations I

consulted can be found in the bibliography. Especially useful have been Dick Davis' recent prose translation of the entire epic, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, which, because it is based on a Persian manuscript considered more reliable than the one that was available to the Warners, I used as a check against the Warners' content; and Reuben Levy's *The Epic of the Kings: The National Epic of Persia by Ferdowsi*, given me by the International Society of Iranian Culture (ISIC) when I accepted their commission to produce this work.

In the absence of universally accepted transliterations, I have adopted Davis' spelling of Persian names and words.

I'd also like to say a brief word about why I chose to break with the tradition established by previous translators of the *Shahnameh* of rendering Ferdowsi's verse into either blank verse or heroic couplets, the two verse forms in English that most closely approximate the Persian form that Ferdowsi used. Put simply, I did not hear in either one of those forms the potential for approximating the rich sonic landscape of the poem that is so evident when it is recited in Persian. To my ear, an alliterative line felt like more of a match, and I was gratified to find that Edward Browne, whose *A Literary History of Persia* is still a touchstone of Iranian literary studies more than a hundred years after its first volume was published, agreed with me. In a footnote to his translation of *Chahar Maqala*, a 12th century text that contains the most famous of the apocryphal biographies of Ferdowsi, Browne wrote that he thought "the old English alliterative verse would be the most suitable form" for translating the *Shahnameh*.

Though I used Anglo-Saxon meter as a kind of abstract starting point, I have not been orthodox about this choice. I have not, for example, worried at all about the placement of the caesura. The line sometimes loosens to five beats and sometimes it falls into a strict iambic tetrameter; sometimes the music in a line is rooted in assonance rather than alliteration; and sometimes it is only the rhythm that holds a line together musically.

One consequence of my choice, of course, is that I have lost entirely the regular rhythm and rhyme that is so cen

tral a part of the music in the original. Hopefully I have none tral a part of the music in the original. Hopefully I have nonetheless succeeded in doing justice to that music, and to the tales to which Ferdowsi gave form within it.

Richard Jeffrey Newman
Jackson Heights, NY
October 5, 2010

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The poet's preface

*I*n the name of the Lord of soul and of wisdom,
whose throne sits higher than thought can reach.

Sovereign of the universe, sultan of the named
and the not-yet-named, who sees our need
and gives, who guides us, and guides as well
the sky's turning; who kindles the sun
and the moon and Venus—no name
will distill His nature, no clue
reveal His reality. He is the essence
of any portrait a painter paints,
yet every version of Him you imagine
will fail.
So speak, sage! Praise Wisdom,
the greatest of God's great gifts!
Comfort and guide, root of the heart's
happiness, Wisdom shows the way
to wealth and well-being in both worlds.
Where it is lacking, all is loss.

Wisdom, You are the work of the One
who made nature manifest; You know
all things, seen and unseen.

So *you*, who presume to use words
for Wisdom's sake, make Wisdom
your advisor and keep your soul worthy.

Once you start to learn a subject,
even a single branch, you'll see
that reason's arms will never reach
the root of knowledge that wisdom is.
To start, then, you must understand
what the world's elements were
when God began to bring it to being.
God made matter from nothing
and made from that primordial mass,
outside of time, without effort,
the four elements. Fire rose,
then wind and water, and they hovered above
the fourth: the dark, unmarked earth.
God stirred the fire first,
spreading heat and dryness, and when
the flames were still, cold emerged,
and the cold unfolded, revealing moisture;
and eventually the interacting elements,
gave form to the fleeting haven
this world is. The vault of heaven
unveiled itself, revealed in its turning
the seven planets moving within
the twelve constellations, each in its place,
foretelling the future for those who can read it,
whose wit earns them their just reward.

When the heavenly spheres were complete, and they turned
one within the other, the oceans
and mountains, the deserts and meadows, made
the earth bright like a lamp. Lakes formed,
and rivers, as water gathered and ran
into the gullies at the feet of the high peaks.
The plants lifted their heads as well,
rising towards those towering heights,
but God had not given the ground they grew from

its proper station in the celestial scheme.
So fire surged heavenward, water poured
from the sky, and when the air cleared, the sun,
newborn, circled the planet. Then grass
and the different species of trees sprouted,
growing higher and higher—but growing
is all they do; and so the beasts
that move from place to place, that place
their highest value on mere survival—
on food, sleep and rest—rule them.
With neither words nor wisdom to weigh
their days, these beasts thrive on thorns, thistles
and the ground's green stubble. The good
their actions lead to, the evil also,
is far beyond what they can know.
God does not demand their worship.

oo

Humanity surpassed the animals and plants,
became, when we appeared, the key
to this tightly woven world. We walked
with our heads high, like cypresses, and
endowed by God with the grandeur of speech,
we received from Him reason and wisdom,
and every creature He created
is bound to do our bidding.
To know
some small part of our significance
travel the path the wise have established;
or if humanity is to you
distracted and scatter-brained, half-witted,
and you see nothing to prove you wrong,
remember that God took from two worlds
to give you shape, making you
a kind of bridge between them. Still,
though your nature raises you above
the rest of His creation, He made you last.
Don't devote yourself to what demeans you.

oo

The brilliance that lights the sky's blue dome—
wrought of neither wind nor water,
neither dust nor smoke, but of red coral,
bright like a spring garden—warms hearts
as it makes its way across the day.
Each dawn, it lifts its head
like a golden shield on the eastern horizon,
cloaking the earth in a shawl of light,
and as this luster travels from east to west,
night's darkness spreads behind it,
and no turning is more orderly.
Since Time's start, neither dark nor light
has tried to overtake the other.

oo

Set in the sky to light the night,
the moon. Use it to illuminate
a righteous, not an evil path.
For two days and two nights
the lunar face erases itself,
but then it reappears, a thin
yellow curve, bent like the back
of one who's suffered the scourge of love,
a sliver vanishing from view
beneath your gaze. Before your eyes,
night by night, it waxes large and bright,
until, returned to fullness, it starts
once more to regain its slender form.
This is the path God fixed for it,
and this will be the course it takes
for all the years that it endures.

oo

All that I tell here has been told;
all of it gathered in folklore's garden;
and though my lines may never ripen
on that fruit tree I would not presume
to climb, I've sheltered in its shadow

long enough that perhaps a place
at the garden's edge, on a cypress branch,
will be mine to claim as just reward
for making this history, this
memorial to Iran's famed monarchs.
Read these lines, then, not
as flights of fantasy, and so as false,
as if truth roots itself only
in an unmoving world. Most of the tales
agree with what we call good sense,
and all, at least, contain a moral.

A single poem from long ago
held our people's many legends,
but it had been broken into sections,
each possessed by a different priest.
Then, an intelligent, generous dehqan
grew curious and turned to learn
of those ancient days from the aged clergy.
He called them to him from across the country
and put to them his many questions
about the first kings who ruled the world
and the bold men whose many deeds
the priests had memorized in lines of poetry.
"When things began," he asked, "what plan
governed their governing? And the disgraceful state
in which they left the world—why
did they leave it for us like this? They lived
carefree lives despite the deeds
their days demanded. How did they do it?"

Piece by piece, they unfolded before him,
those honored men, each monarch's story,
unfurling for him the birth
of the world's changes, and when he'd heard
all they had to tell, he pulled
paper to him, producing a book
treasured by all for the treasures it held,

and so his name endures. That dehqan
wanted most to answer this:
"Who first conceived the king
as the nation's crown, then crowned himself?"

"That beginning lies farther back
in human history than memory can go,"
they answered. "A father passed that knowledge
to his son, and the son passed it on,
in every detail, just as he received it."

All who read that book burned
with the stories it told, and their hearts swelled
as they retold them—at least among
men of character and education; and then
a poet, brilliant and passionate, eloquent
and young, Daqiqi by name, declared,
"I will retell these tales in verse,"
and everyone everywhere welcomed the project.
He was, however, filled with vice,
his habits foes that all should dread,
and he found no joy in his life on earth.
Fortune turned its face from him;
death placed its dark helmet on his head.
He died by the hand of his own slave,
leaving the ancient stories still untold.
Again they faded and were again forgotten.
Dear God! Forgive Daqiqi's faults.
For what he tried to do, honor him.

When I heard that Daqiqi had died,
I turned in my heart toward the throne of Iran.
"If I can bring that book to my home,
I'll shape a poem to hold those tales,"
I said. I asked more people for help
than I can count, concerned as I was
that time would pass and so would I,
and that I too would leave this work

for someone else to do. As well,
patronage was scarce. War surrounded us,
and what potential purchasers there were
had problems bigger than my petitions.
Time did pass, but I hid my purpose,
seeing no one worthy to share my work.
The world holds nothing worth more
than noble words. When we hear them, we bless them.
If God had not given the words He did,
how could the Prophet have become our guide?

In the city, I had a friend so close
you'd say we shared a single skin.
"Pursue your path," he urged. "Your plan
sets your feet in the right direction.
I'll do my part and procure for you
this ancient Persian book, but don't
be slow. You're still young, and your poems
recall the regal speech of old.
Make these tales majestic once more.
Reach for greatness. Be remembered."

He found the book and brought it here,
clearing the gloom that clouded my soul,
and now this seeker of our heroes' stories,
this teller of tales, tells you this:

Kayumars

Kayumars, whose kingdom stretched
across the wide world, who wore
the world's first crown and called his throne
the seat of law, setting it high
in the mountains, where his fortunes soared as well,
who clothed himself in animal skins,
an example for his people to follow,
and taught them the trees' fruit was food—
this Kayumars reigned for three decades,
a shining sun spreading peace,
a glowing moon, full and tranquil,
rising high above a slender cypress.
All creatures, wild and tame, came
from each of the world's corners, seeking
refuge in his realm, revering him,
and in their reverence nurturing his splendor,
basking in the royal farr. This
is where in time religion's rise began.

Kayumars had a son, Siamak, ambitious
like his father, and wise. The sight of Siamak
filled Kayumars with joy, while the fear

that one day they would be separated
filled his eyes with tears of love.
As Siamak grew, his good name spread,
and he had no enemies, except for Ahriman,
who secretly envied Siamak's splendor
and hoped for a way to humble him.
Ahriman, too, had a son, savage
as a wolf, and fearless, who gathered a force
to wage war against King Kayumars,
spreading sedition wherever he went.

Kayumars knew nothing of this,
but Sorush, our defense against the demons,
learned the horror Ahriman planned
and appeared to Siamak swathed in leopard skin
to warn him. Siamak seethed with rage
that anyone would threaten his father's throne,
and he too summoned soldiers to fight;
but there was no armor yet, so he wore,
as he led those soldiers boldly to the field,
only the skins Sorush had shown him.
Siamak's strength was great that day
as he marched forward to face Ahriman's
son, but the demon's was greater still,
and he clove Siamak's bones with his claws,
leaving the prince dead in the dust.

News of Siamak's death darkened
Kayumars' world, and he wept, tearing
his flesh till blood streaked his face.
The king came down from his throne
broken, beating his head in grief,
and all who called his kingdom home
joined him in mourning his fallen son.
The warriors who'd gone to fight wore
blue to signal their bereavement,
and all the animals, wild and tame,
and the birds of the air, cried bitterly

as they made their way to the mountain, crowding
the king's court, sending a cloud
of dust to hover in the air above them.

The kingdom mourned its magnificent prince
for one year, till God again
sent Sorush, who summoned Kayumars
to vengeance. "Grieve no more," the angel
said, "Instead, fight that foul
demon with a force it cannot defeat."
Tear-filled eyes turned towards heaven,
Kayumars called on God to strike
with evil those whose thoughts are evil,
and readied himself for vengeance, refusing
all food while the sun was in the sky
and sleep after the sun had set.

A son, Hushang, had survived Siamak.
A man of wisdom, this Hushang—who served
as Kayumars' minister—so resembled
his father that his grandfather gave him
a son's place in his heart and raised him
as his own child. When the time to fight
had come, Kayumars called Hushang to him.
"The warriors I send to this war,"
he said, "will battle the Black Demon
with you as their leader, for the day of my death
draws near. The earth will shake
beneath your feet as you march to meet him,
and he, feeling it, will tremble with fear."

The peris answered Kayumars' call,
the wolves and tigers, leopards and lions;
all beasts of prey, all birds.
This army of animals, savage, domestic,
followed its general, proud, courageous,
whose glorious grandfather kept the rear.

The Black Demon charged hard;
dust darkened the sky as he advanced;
but the demons he commanded met
defeat, their death-dealing talons
useless against the beasts' ferocity.
Hushang hurled himself at his foe
like a lion at its prey, pulling evil
into his vise-tight grip, splitting
the demon down the middle, dividing
head from trunk, stripping the putrid
skin from its frame, giving Kayumars,
on that great day, victory and vengeance,
so he could leave the world content,
which he did, and the world's glory died
a little when he went.
This world was his
while breath was in him, and he brought
his people prosperity, teaching them
the earth was theirs to thrive on; but the world,
finally, is a tale we're told: the evil in it,
and the glory, end at the end of the story.

Hushang

Flush with his new power, Hushang
took the throne and crown as his own,
reigning in Kayumars' place, a prudent
and fair sovereign, for forty years.
"I am lord," he proclaimed, "of the seven climes,
obeyed by all, and I, obeying God,
I, generous, just, will rule them."
He did indeed establish justice,
and his wisdom flowered and the world flourished.

One day, as Hushang made his way
with some companions towards the mountains,
a long black snake with blood-filled bowls
for eyes and sun-darkening smoke
for breath charged at the monarch's party.
The king took the creature's measure,
hurled a rock with a hero's strength,
but the monster dodged Hushang's attack,
and the stone broke open on a boulder,
sending sparks into the air.
The fiend escaped, but fire had been found
in that rock's heart, and Hushang
thanked God for granting such a gift.

The flames he lit that night blazed
mountain-high, and he made this proclamation:
"Fire is divine; the wise will worship it."
Then he and his people circled those flames,
feasting and drinking wine, and the king named
their celebration Sadeh.
Then Hushang held
a stone in his fist and with fire forced
the iron within it to flow, and he worked it,
creating the blacksmith's craft, crafting
axes, saws, hatchets—all manner
of tools he taught his subjects to use.
To draw water from the lakes and streams,
King Hushang devised qanats
and fertilized the plains, where people
before had eaten only fruit,
and leaves were the only clothes they'd worn,
and they'd stored no food for their future.
He taught them to turn the soil, to sow
and to reap, and they raised their own crops
and lived off their own labor. Then Hushang
sent the beasts that men would hunt,
like onager and deer, and the domestic ones,
like cows and donkeys, to their proper places.
He killed and skinned for their warm fur
the fox and ermine, the marten and sable,
and made clothing for his kingdom. He crowned
his reign with generosity and justice, enjoyed
what the wide world provided for his pleasure,
and when his time to die arrived, he left
behind only his good name. Hushang
gave himself to giving, providing his people
with a better life, but when his better life
lay beyond the bounds of this one,
neither wisdom nor dignity could prevent his leaving.

Do not depend on this world for love;
it will never unveil its true face.

Tahmures

Hushang's son Tahmures sat next
on the royal throne. Noble, intelligent,
he promised the customs put in place
when Hushang reigned would remain, and he called
his counselors to him, speaking these words:
"This crown and throne, the army, the treasury—
they are mine now, and I, in my wisdom,
will use them to rid the world of evil,
restraining the demons, reigning supreme,
searching the world for what is useful
and giving what I find as a gift to all."

He taught his people to shear sheep
and to weave from the wool they spun
a new kind of clothing, and carpets.
He fed his flocks grass, hay,
barley; brought down from the mountains
and in from the plains the lynx and cheetah,
caging them, training them to hunt. He chose
hawks, falcons, hens and roosters
and taught his subjects to tame those birds
with generosity and kind commands.

Tahmures revealed the hidden value
in all things, and all who saw him
stood in awe at what he uncovered.
He urged his people to praise God,
who bestowed on them a sovereign's right
over the earth and each of its creatures.

The king's vizier, Shahrasb, was void
of evil thoughts. Known for his nobility,
he filled his days with fasting; from dusk
to dawn, he prayed. A star in the sky
of the king's good fortune, he guided
Tahmures on the road to righteousness, restraining
malevolent souls himself, till Tahmures
was cleansed, and heaven's farr shone clear
within him. Then Tahmures bound Ahriman
with spells, sat on evil's back
and rode the devil like a horse,
touring the earth, earning the title
"Demon Binder." At this, the demons
gathered against him. So great was this offense,
they claimed, his crown and farr were forfeit.
Tahmures learned their intent, broke their rebellion.

Girded with God's glory, his mace
raised to his shoulder and ready to strike,
he braced for battle. The Black Demon
led his force of demons and sorcerers
to the fray, their voices thundering their approach,
but the war did not last long.
Casting spells, Tahmures subdued
most of his enemy's troops. The rest
he felled with his mace, dragging them, chained,
through the dust. They pleaded to live, promising
knowledge no one else possessed.
Tahmures agreed. After he freed them,
they taught him to write, a gift he gave us.
Not just one, but thirty scripts:

Pahlavi and Persian, Arabic and Soghdian;
the Western way of writing, and Chinese as well.
They taught Tahmures to shape each letter
and pronounce the sound it stood for,
and this new and profitable knowledge
lit a light in him like the sun.

The Demon Binder reigned for three decades,
and when his days were done, his work endured.

Jamshid

Filled with his father's wisdom, when the world
was done mourning the Demon Binder,
Jamshid joined the line of men
to ascend the throne and wear the crown.
Peace spread across his kingdom,
and the birds and peris bowed to him too.
"I will," he said, "keep evil from evil-doers'
hands, and I will guide souls to light.
The royal farr rests with me. I rule
as monarch and priest."
He turned first
to making weapons, paving for his warriors
a road to glory and renown. Iron,
beneath his farr, softened, became swords
and helmets, chain mail and horse armor,
and he gave fifty years to training
the men he charged with building his armory.

Jamshid devoted the next five decades
to clothing, contriving different fabrics—
linen and silk, brocades and satin—
teaching people to spin and to weave,

to dye what they'd woven and then sew a garment
for feasting or fighting. When he finished, he divided
men by their profession, sending
first to the mountains, to worship their Master
and live lives of devotion, the Katuzi.
Second, he summoned the Neysari,
lion-hearted fighters whose luster
lit the entire land, whose leadership
and courage kept the king secure
and whose valor ensured the nation's reputation.
Those who farmed the fields came next,
the Basudi, who sow and reap,
who receive no thanks, but whom none reproach
when there's food to eat. Free people
who kneel to no one and seek no quarrel,
despite the rags they wear, their care
makes the earth flourish and nourishes peace.
A wise elder once said,
"If a free man finds himself a slave,
he has only his own laziness to blame."

Jamshid gathered the craftsmen last,
the insecure and stubborn Ahtukhoshi.
Haughty and contrary, they work with their hands,
making the goods sold in the market,
and they are always anxious. Fifty years
marched by while Jamshid showed
each person breathing earth's air
his proper place and path, teaching
the scope of the life he'd been given to live.

He ordered the demons to pour water
over earth, stirring it into clay
they filled molds with to form bricks.
With mortar and stone, they laid foundations
for public baths and beautiful palaces,
and castles to protect against attack.
From rocks, Jamshid's magic extracted

the lustrous gems and precious metals
he found hidden there, filling his hands
with gold and silver, amber and jacinth.
He distilled perfumes for his people's pleasure:
balsam and ambergris, rose water and camphor,
musk and aloe. He made medicines
to bring the sick back to health
and to help the healthy stay that way.
Jamshid revealed these secret things
as none before him had done. No one
discovered and ordered the world as he did.

Yet another fifty years
saw Jamshid building ships
he could sail quickly across the sea,
making port in each realm he reached.
Then, although he was already great,
Jamshid stepped past greatness.
He fashioned with his farr a jewel encrusted
throne, decreeing the demons should raise it
high in the sky, where he sat shining
like the sun, and the world's creatures gathered
around him, staring in awe, scattering
gems at his feet. It was the first of Farvadin,
and Jamshid set that day aside,
naming it Norooz, "new day,"
the day he rested, the first of the year.
His nobles declared a feast, a festival
of wine and song we still celebrate
in Jamshid's memory.
For three centuries,
Jamshid ruled in peace. His people
knew neither death nor hardship; the demons
stood ready to serve, and all who heard
the king's command obeyed it. The land,
filled with music, flourished. Jamshid,
however, gave himself to vanity.
Seeing he had no peer in the world,

he forgot the gratitude that is God's due
and called the nobles of his court before him,
making this fateful proclamation:
"From this day forward, I know no lord
but me: *my* word brought beauty
and skilled men to adorn the earth!
My word! Sunshine and sleep, security
and comfort, the clothes you wear, your food—
all came to you through me!
Who else ended death's desolation
and with medicine vanished illness from your lives?
Without me, neither mind nor soul
would inhabit your bodies. So who besides me
can claim, unchallenged, the crown and its power?
You understand this now. So now,
who else can you call Creator but me?!"

The elders bowed their heads and held
their tongues, silenced by what he'd said.
When the last sound left his mouth,
the farr left him and his realm fell
into discord. A sensible, pious man
once said, "A king must make himself
God's slave. Ingratitude towards God
will fill your heart with innumerable fears."
Jamshid's men deserted; his destiny
darkened, and his light disappeared from the world.

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,
fear turning 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, courageous but lacking kindness,
turbulent and 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.
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."

Zahhak took what he heard to heart
but 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 Merdas' crown,
making himself, headstrong and unjust,
the Arabs' giver of good and evil.

Pleased with this success, Eblis
set in motion a second, more sinister
plan. "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."

To empty the earth

Eblis next presented himself
as a smooth-skinned and smoother talking
young man with a yearning to serve,
who'd made his way to the king's court
to place himself at Zahhak's disposal.
"If I find favor in your highness' eyes,"
he bowed low as he spoke, "no one's
skill in the kitchen surpasses mine."
Zahhak gladly accepted the offer
and gave him the keys to the royal kitchen.
Few foods were known then
and people ate the flesh of their flocks
only rarely, filling their bellies
with the greens the ground gave them
instead. Eblis, the great evil—
presenting himself as the perfect subject,
obeying Zahhak like a slave—
began to butcher animals, bringing
each day to Zahhak's table
sumptuous meals made from their meat,
and no part went to waste.
The devil fed the foolish Zahhak
blood, like milk, to make him brave,

and each day placed on his plate
an egg yolk for strength. The king ate,
commending Eblis for each new taste
and rewarding him well. When Eblis felt
the time was right, he told the king,
"May your days be boundless and proud!
Tomorrow you will taste a dish designed
to bring your body perfect health."
Then Eblis left the king's presence
and spent all night planning
the fine meal he would fix the following day.

At dawn, the devil rose
beneath a blue dome
lit by morning's glowing topaz.
He cooked for the king a feast of partridge
and white pheasant and his mind filled
with hope as he hurried it to Zahhak's presence;
and when that witless Arab ruler reached
to take his portion from the tray, he gave
his senseless head into Eblis' hands.
On the third day, the devil fed him
chicken and lamb; on the fourth,
a saddle of veal simmered in saffron
and rose water, aged wine
and clarified musk, and after Zahhak had eaten,
he stood in such awe of the skill
his chef possessed that he said, "Consider
what you want the most, then ask for it.
You are a worthy friend." The fiend replied,
"May your majesty live forever!
Devotion for you overflows
my heart, and your eyes shine light
that sustains my soul! A small thing
I don't deserve I'll dare to ask.
Let the king command me to kiss his shoulders
and caress them with my eyes and face."
Zahhak,

who of course suspected nothing, said,
"May your good name grow more grand."
Then the king ordered the cook to kiss him
as a best friend would, which Eblis did,
then vanished—a marvel no man
in all the world had ever seen—
and two black serpents sprung
from Zahhak's shoulders. Zahhak panicked,
but nothing he knew to do removed them.
Finally, he sliced them off, then watched,
helpless, as they grew back, like new branches
sprouting. The court physicians crowded
Zahhak, filling the hall with wisdom
and advice, and cures to try, but all cures
failed. Then Eblis entered again,
disguised this time as a doctor.
He bowed low before the throne,
delivering this diagnosis, "Destiny
gave you to this fate. Change nothing!
The snakes stand where they stand. Instead
of cutting them off, offer them food.
Win their favor! Feed them, however,
only human brains. Bring them
nothing else. Such nourishment
will end their lives." Zahhak listened,
desperate, and did what the "doctor" told him.

Thus Eblis expected to empty the earth.

Withered as grass withers in the sun

Back in Iran, Jamshid's reign,
unmoored, descended to darkness and discord.
Then war came, as his friends fell
on each other, each seeking to be
Iran's next monarch. Their hearts
emptied of the love and loyalty lit there
by the royal farr before Jamshid lost it,
unwilling to bear his arrogance and vanity
a moment longer, his men abandoned him,
leaving for the land of the Arabs. There,
they'd heard, a dragon-bodied sovereign
occupied the throne. These heroes
of Iran, seeking a sovereign, stood
before Zahhak and called him king;
and Zahhak acted. Swift as the wind
he went to Iran to claim the crown,
mustering from every province a force
of the finest fighters, Arab and Iranian,
and since fortune's face had turned fully
from Jamshid, when Zahhak attacked, pulling
the noose tight around Jamshid's neck,
surrender or retreat were all that remained.

Jamshid fled, forsaking all.
Rank and wealth; throne and crown;
the forces once at his command—
he grieved it all in a world gone black,
hid himself for a hundred years,
and no one saw him or knew where he was.
Then, one day, the infidel Jamshid
reappeared near the Sea of China.
Zahhak caught him, offered him no chance
to plead for his life and, filling the world
with terror, ordered Jamshid sawn in two.

This was Jamshid's end, his power and prestige
withered as grass withers in the sun,
his seven-century rule empty
of all profit. He'd shown the world
what good and evil were, but what good
is a long life when the world reveals
her secrets to no one? She'll woo you with wine,
with honey, whisper sweetly in voices
that tell what you want to hear.
Then, when you're sure she is not evil,
she reveals herself as the fatal blow.

For all he knew was wickedness

Zahhak sat a thousand years
on his throne, and throughout the world no one
failed to follow his command.
Wise men hid and hid as well
what little good they could do. As the devil
and his demons flourished, virtue was despised,
magic respected, justice vanished.
Evil achieved all it desired.
Zahhak dragged from Jamshid's house
his sisters, Shahrnavaz and Arnavaz,
who adorned womanhood like two crowns.
They trembled like willow leaves in the wind
when he took them, and he taught them sorcery and sin,
for all he knew was wickedness—the wasting
and burning of cities, and murder, and plunder.
And each night the king's cook seized—
trying to cure his monarch's suffering—
two young men, humbly or nobly born.
He put them to death, preparing from their brains
a meal to feed the slithering evil
on either side of Zahhak's head.

Two noble men in Zahhak's realm,
Armayel the Pious and Garmayel the Prescient,
met at this time to bemoan the meals
nourishing their unjust ruler. One said,
"As the king's cooks, we could perhaps
devise a scheme to save from death
one soul from each doomed pair."
So they learned to cook, earned positions
in Zahhak's kitchen, and when the victims
were hauled before them and thrown to the floor,
as pain pierced their livers, and tears
like blood flooded their eyes, and fury
overflowed their hearts, they chose
one young man to murder, mixed
his brains with the brains of sheep, and freed
the other, saying, "The plains are safe,
and the mountains. Keep hidden. Avoid towns!"

Each month they saved thirty youths,
and when that number hit two hundred,
the cooks smuggled to the survivors
herds of goat and sheep, showing them
a place to settle that was empty of people.
The Kurds, who never live in towns,
trace their roots to this tribe.

Zahhak's rule grew in cruelty.
If a warrior hid his beautiful daughter
from the devil-king's lustful clutches,
Zahhak killed the father "for consorting
with demons," making the daughter his slave.
He reigned without regard for religion
and cared nothing for the customs of kings.

Don't think this throne will be yours forever

See what God sent Zahhak
while forty years were left in his life!
One night, with Arnavaz sleeping next to him,
he dreamed three warriors appeared.
The youngest stood tall as a cypress;
the farr shown from his face and he stepped
between the other two with a prince's bearing,
holding in his hand a bull-headed mace.
With a single blow, he sent Zahhak
sprawling, flayed him from head to toe,
bound his hands behind his back
and placed a yoke on his shoulders,
dragging him, while a crowd watched, to Mount Damarvand.

His liver turning on a spit of terror,
Zahhak writhed in his sleep and his screams
when he woke shook the chamber walls,
rousing his shapely servant girls
and Arnavaz as well. "Reveal,"
she said, "the secret shiver in your soul
that here, safe in your own house,
frightens you from a sound sleep. Your kingdom

stretches across the seven climes:
animals, men, demons—all
serve you. All are sworn to protect you."

The king replied, "I cannot tell you.
When you hear my dream you will fear for my life,
and you will not keep it secret."
"Still,"
Arnavaz answered, "you need to tell us.
We, perhaps, will suggest a solution.
There is no crisis that can't be overcome."
Zahhak described his dream. "Don't
dismiss this vision!" she advised. "Discover
who or what wants your life;
and remember, you rule the world.
All whose lives are lived within it—
animals, men, demons, peris—
kiss your signet ring. Summon
your astrologers; recite what you have seen.
Let them tell you if you should fear
a man or a demon. Then make your plans.
Don't tremble at an enemy's threat."
Arnavaz' advice comforted the king,
and her body against him was a graceful cypress,
her face shining bright with a star's beauty.
Night was a raven's wing over the world.
Then light lit the mountain tops,
as if the sun were strewing yellow gems
into the purple sky. The king called
his counselors to reveal his vision's meaning.
"Does this dream foretell my death?
Who will reign when I am gone?
Give me the truth or give me your lives."

The sages' lips grew parched, their eyes
shed tears, and amongst themselves
they whispered, "If we reveal this dream,
our souls will be nothing; our words will be water

to wash our hands of this life."
Convinced the king would kill the one
who dared say what they all saw
they said nothing for three days.
Then Zahhak spoke, "Say what you see
or I'll string you up alive." Wise
and prudent, Zirak gathered courage
against his fear and faced his king.
"Don't think this throne is yours
forever. Empty your head of vanity.
No man is born who will not die,
and nothing, not the highest iron
wall you can construct, will change this.
Many worthy rulers sat
where you sit now, and each knew
his share of joy and sorrow,
and like each king who came before you,
you will fall, your fortune ground to dust,
leaving this land to its next lord.
The youth you dreamed is not yet born.
His name will be Feraydun, and he'll be a fruitful tree.
When he reaches manhood, he'll raise his head
moon-high, seeking to make the crown
his own. Tall as a cypress, he will swing
his bull-headed mace in your life's last battle,
bringing it down on your head, and he'll bind you,
dragging you from your palace out into the street."

"But why will he bind me? Why will he so despise me?"

"A man does not do evil for no reason,"
Zirak answered. "If you were wise,
you'd understand. You will murder his father,
and you will kill the cow called Barmayeh
that will suckle him, and so he will search you out
to end your life." At these last words,
Zahhak fainted and Zirak fled, fearing
his ruler's wrath; but when that ruler

was conscious again, he cared for nothing
but scouring the world for signs
that his nemesis lived. Zahhak's life
filled with darkness, his days were sleepless
and dread emptied him of every pleasure.

His life is sweeter than my own

Zahhak's terror grew with time,
Blessed by fortune, Feraydun was born.
Youth bloomed in him with the beauty
of a slender cypress, and he stood as tall;
Jamshid's farr shone from him
like sunlight filling the sky, and his step
fell like rain on the thirsting earth.
The world put on his presence
the way the soul wears wisdom,
while over his head the turning heavens
held nothing but comfort and love.
The cow Barmayeh was born then too.
A wonder to behold, each hair on her
shone a different color. A crowd
of magicians, sages and priests journeyed
to see her, saying of her peacock splendor
that none had beheld a creature like her,
or heard one mentioned in the ancient tales.

Zahhak, meanwhile, filled the world
searching for Feraydun, whose father, Abetin,
fearing for his own life, tried to flee;
but he fell within the lion's grasp

and was brought, a bound cheetah, before Zahhak,
who ordered his murder. Feraydun's mother,
Faranak, then took flight as well,
arriving at the meadow where Barmayeh fed.

Weeping tears of blood, she pleaded
with the man whose meadow it was to make
her son his ward. "He is not yet weaned,"
she told him. "Please, take him from me
as a father would take him from his mother. Feed him
the beautiful Barmayeh's milk. In return,
I'll render you my soul and hold
my life hostage to your smallest hope."
The man accepted. "I will make myself
like a slave to your son and do all you have asked."
So Faranak gave him Feraydun,
and gave as well lengthy advice
on how her child should be raised. The man
took the boy as his own and for three years
cared for him, feeding him Barmayeh's milk.

Zahhak, however, was still hunting,
and word of Barmayeh still filled the world,
so Faranak made her way back to the meadow.
"God has given me the gift to know
it's time to take my son again.
(His life is sweeter than my own!)
We must leave this evil magician's land
in secret. We'll vanish in the Alborz Mountains
and head towards India." She told the man this,
then hastened away, like a mere messenger.
When she reached the heights, she climbed,
sure-footed as a mountain sheep,
till she came to a devout man's dwelling.
He lived alone, apart from the world.

"Holy one, I've come from Iran," she said,
"to seek your help. This boy, my son,

will lead his people to defeat Zahhak.
He'll grind that devil's belt and crown
to dust. Take him, do what you can
to protect him, like a father who fears
for his child's life." The good man agreed,
giving the boy his home without hesitation.
Rumor, meanwhile, reached Zahhak
of where that wondrous cow lived.
He marched to her meadow like a mad elephant,
but the boy was gone. So he slaughtered Barmayeh,
killing also every living thing
that made the meadow its home. Then Zahhak
found the house where Feraydun grew up.
It was empty. He burned it to the ground.

Don't fight like a child

Zahhak wreaked this havoc hounding
Feraydun before sixteen turns
of the heavens had passed over that prince's head.
When his sixteenth year arrived,
Feraydun came down from Alborz Mountain.
"Who was my father?" he asked his mother.
"From which family do I descend?
How can I say who I am? Who am I?
Tell me! I need to know the truth."

Faranak replied, "Feraydun, my son,
your home is Iran, and Abetin was your father.
He was wise and brave, and Tahmures' blood
ran in him. He wanted trouble with no one.
Zahhak, however, heard, that you lived,
and he searched the world to wipe your name from it.
When I hid you, he hunted my husband instead.
Your father fell, a sacrifice
for your survival, and my days darkened,
deprived of the light he'd been for me.
"I sought a safe place to leave you
and found at last the little known field

where I first beheld the cow Barmayeh.
She stood there, beautiful, fresh as spring,
and her keeper sat like a king before her.
I asked him to take you, which he did; and he held you
tenderly, like a son, against his chest,
and he fed you Barmayeh's milk, which made you
the courageous man you are today.
The demon-king discovered where you were
and he marched to that meadow, murdering
the mute and noble beast that had nursed you.
Then he razed our home, reducing it to ruins,
sending its dust up to the sun."

When Feraydun heard his birthright named, he burned
with fury, and his heart ached and he hungered
for revenge. "A lion learns bravery
by testing himself. The sorcerer has struck.
Now, with my sword, so must I.
With God's help, Zahhak's palace,
like our home, and by my hand, will be dust as well!"

Faranak answered, "But Zahhak can summon
to stand against you a hundred thousand
warriors. You have just one, yourself.
Don't deliver to that demon what he desires.
Drunk on the wine of youth, you think
the only man that matters is you,
a haze in which many have lost their lives.
I want for you joy and prosperity.
Bide your time! Don't fight like a child!"

No one knows the secrets heaven holds

Fear of Feraydun fixed itself
firmly in Zahhak's head, harrowing
his thoughts, bending his back beneath
its weight, wrenching his words from everything
but the fate foretold by Zirak. Zahhak
sat on his ivory throne, his turquoise
crown upon his royal brow,
and he called to his court from throughout his kingdom
the prince of each province to promise him loyalty.
"You are wise men," he said to them,
"and you've heard the world hides from me
the enemy in whose hands my fate waits.
He may seem right now unworthy of fearing,
but I won't assume he's weak. I want,
therefore, to raise the fiercest army,
my demons marching beside your men,
for me to lead into battle against him.
Approve, therefore, this proclamation. Confirm
that as your commander I've sown nothing
but seeds of righteousness and only spoken truth.
Sign here so all can see
pursuit of justice is my sole concern."

Trembling with fear, the assembled men,
knowing they couldn't say no and live,
signed their names to Zahhak's lies.
Just then, a man demanding justice
marched into the palace. The princes made a place
for him to sit. "At whose hands,"
the serpent king asked, "have you suffered
so much that you dare to seek me out?"

Stunned to be hearing the king himself,
hitting his head with his fists, the man
called out, "I am Kaveh! I have come
to protest injustice thrust to the hilt
like a knife, your highness, many times
into my heart. If what I've heard here
is true, if you pursue only justice,
grant me relief from this great grief
rooted in my soul. Show the righteousness
you claim as yours, and raise your good name
to the heavens! The hurt blackening
my days, your majesty, comes mostly
from you! You say you will not stand
for the smallest offense committed against me,
but you never hesitate to harm my sons.
Of my eighteen young ones only one
is left. Allow him to live, I beg you.
Keep my soul, my king, from the cruel
and endless torture I would endure
if you feed your serpents his flesh. Tell me,
what have I done to deserve his death?!

"And if I'm innocent, don't build my guilt
from false accusations. This misfortune fills
my mind with misery, murders the hope
children should be when you reach old age!
Injustice has a middle and a limit,
and so it has logic. Charge me, and judge me,
if you have charges to bring, or don't butcher my child!

I'm a simple blacksmith, innocent
of any wrong against you, yet you,
breathing fire, burn my life!
A dragon-king is still a king,
obliged to provide justice. Sire,
your kingdom stretches across the seven climes.
Why should this fate fall here to me?
Explain yourself! Plead your case
before us now. Bring some sense
to why my son, from among
all your subjects, must satisfy those serpents
with his brains. Submit your words to the world
and let the world judge your worth!"

Zahhak sat back, gasping,
wordless, eyes wide with wonder,
fearing Kaveh's furious courage.
Scheming to win the blacksmith's support,
he ordered the boy restored to his father,
lavished Kaveh with kindness,
and commanded him to commit his name
to the praise the declaration proclaimed.
The blacksmith read from beginning to end
and turned to the elders assembled there:
"You've made yourselves this Devil's minions,
divorced your hearts from heaven! It's hell
you look to now, bowing to this beast."

He rose, enraged, to his full height,
tore the proclamation to pieces
he stomped into the ground, then stormed
with his son out into the street.
The gathered nobles sought to soothe
what they assumed was Zahhak's wounded
pride, "O great and powerful prince
of princes! King of kings! The cool
breeze itself dares not blow above you
on the day you muster your men for battle.

Yet this foul-mouthed Kaveh calls you out,
grinding our covenant into the ground
as if his status equals yours,
rejecting your right as ruler
to his obedient submission. Swollen with scorn,
his head and heart fury-filled,
he's gone to forge with Feraydun
an alliance against you. We won't accept this!"

"Listen to this," Zahhak insisted.
"See how strange things sometimes are:
As soon as Kaveh spoke, there seemed
to rise between us a mountain of iron,
and when he hit his head with his hand,
the apparition shattered, foreshadowing
what only time will tell. No one
knows the secrets Heaven holds."

If I deliver that dragon to the dust

After Kaveh left the king's presence,
a crowd gathered round him. He shouted
for justice, urging others to join him,
and fashioned from a spear a flagpole, fastening
his blacksmith's leather apron to it.
Lifting it high as he marched from the marketplace,
dust rising as he went, he cried,
"Followers of God! Follow Feraydun!
Seek refuge in his farr and free
yourselves of Zahhak's yoke which is
Ahriman's. Let this leather, worthless
as it is, be the sign that separates
evil from good, enemy from friend!"

The army that rallied round Kaveh
was large, and he knew where Feraydun was,
so he led his followers to Feraydun's castle,
where that future king's eye found
in the banner they bore a bright future.
He embellished it with Rumi brocade
and a gold cloth glittering with jewels.
He sewed ribbons—purple, red
and yellow—to adorn its lower edge

and fitted to the spear's tip a sphere
like the moon. (Each one who wore the crown
afterward studded that blacksmith's banner
with gems of his own. Thus Kaveh's standard
grew in splendor till it shone like the sun
even in night's darkness, and everywhere
people took hope from its brilliance.)

The world went on like this for a while,
and no one knew what would happen next,
but then Feraydun felt the devil's fortune
changing, crowned himself king
and warned his mother he was off to war.
She watered her prayers with tears:
"Protect my son, dear God! Sweep evil
from his path and push the wicked from the world."

Feraydun readied himself quickly,
keeping his plans secret, except
from his two older brothers, Barmayeh
and Kiyanush, in whom he confided all.
"Take heart, my brave brothers!
Heaven's revolving, always benevolent,
will bring the kingship back to us.
Seek in the market skilled smiths
to make me a mace." From the blacksmith's bazaar
came all who practiced that craft,
hungry for the fame of having helped Feraydun.
He drew in the dust the weapon he wanted,
with a bull's head at its head. The blacksmiths
went to work and when they were done
the mace shone like the sun in the sky.
Feraydun gave its makers gold
and gifts of silver, and he promised justice
once Zahhak had been washed from the world.
"If I deliver that dragon to the dust,
I will deliver you from the dust on your heads!
For the sake of God, who gave justice its name,
I will make this world a just place!"

The heart of Zahhak's home

Lifting his head as high as the sun,
Feraydun left to avenge his father
on the day of Khordad. His destiny's star
shone above him and the day's omens
gave him hope. The army gathered
at his gate raised his glory to the clouds.
First to march were elephants and oxen
laden with provisions. Riding beside him,
reliable and resolute, his brothers,
Barmayeh and Kiyanush, as if
they were younger and he their elder.
Stage by stage, wind-swift they went,
Feraydun's head filled with vengeance,
his heart with justice, till they reached a place
where men of God made their home.
Feraydun called a halt and offered
greetings. When the day grew dark,
one man came to make them welcome,
his musky hair flowing to his feet,
his face as beautiful as a houri's. He brought
to Feraydun the mysteries of magic, made him
master of hidden things. In his heart,
Feraydun understood he stood before

a divine being, not a demon,
and he blushed cercis red, rejoicing
in his youth and his good fortune. His chefs
prepared a royal feast and Feraydun,
sated, fell to his bed, heavy with sleep.

The prince's siblings witnessed what
the holy man had bestowed upon their brother.
They saw success stretching out in front of him
and in their envy sought to bring
his reign to ruin before it started.
Feraydun slept at the foot of a mountain.
His brothers crept away from the camp,
climbing to a boulder balanced above
the spot where their brother slumbered, and they sent
that stone tumbling down the mountainside.
God, however, gave it a great noise,
waking Feraydun before it reached
his head. He rose and hurled a spell,
stopping the stone in mid-descent.
They say it never moved again.
Then he ordered his forces to break camp
and ride on, revealing to no one,
not even his brothers, the night's events.
He marched his men to the Arvand river—
the Deljeh in Arabic, if Pahlavi
is closed to you—camping on its banks near Baghdad.
He sent word to the river's keeper,
"Give us good boats to carry us
across. Leave no one behind!"
The guard ignored the order, kept
his vessels moored and replied by messenger.
"The world's ruler told me recently,
in private, to close this crossing to all,
even to an insect who fails first
to obtain a permit with his seal."
Stirred
by these words to a war-like wrath,
Feraydun fastened his armor and fearlessly

spurred his red steed, Golrang,
into the Arvand's churning waters.
His army followed suit, sinking
saddle-deep as they struggled with their steeds
against the current. Once across, they continued
their journey towards Jerusalem—in the ancient
tongue, it's Gang Dezh Hukht—where Zahhak
had built his palace, its walls glowing
gently against the heavens like Jupiter;
its towers rising to such a height,
it seemed they would sweep the stars from the sky.

Feraydun saw this sight from afar,
and it looked like a place of joy and love,
but he knew it was the dragon's lair.
He turned to his comrades, urging them on,
"The man who made that mighty tower,
building it up from the earth's bowels,
has, I fear, fate on his side.
Better to bring the battle to him
than to wait." He grabbed his mace, gave
his horse free rein and fell like fire
on the palace guards, who gave way
till none remained. Thus, riding
Golrang, giving thanks to God,
young with a youth's inexperience
but filled also with a fierce courage, Feraydun
entered the heart of Zahhak's home.

Inside, an idol Zahhak had fashioned,
gilded with a name other than God's,
dwarfed all men. Feraydun laid it low,
along with the demons and wizards who sought to destroy
him,
crushing their skulls with his mace. Then he claimed
his place on Zahhak's throne, placed
the crown on his own head, and called
from the harem those black-haired beauties,

whose faces shone like the sun. They shivered
and shook, as if they'd been drinking, fearing
Feraydun's wrath, but he freed their minds,
dragging the dark from their deadened souls
till Zahhak's blasphemy vanished, and the path
of righteousness revealed itself to them.

Tears stained Jamshid's sisters' cheeks.
"May your fate be to remake the world!
Which star has favored you?" they asked Feraydun.
"On the branch of which tree did you ripen?
This courage to conquer the lion's lair—
where did it come from? Wasting away,
at the mercy of that murderous fool of a magician,
we have suffered and waited, but till now
no one strong or brave enough
to seize the kingdom from Zahhak has come."

Feraydun replied, "Neither fortune
nor a king's reign remains forever
with one man. Zahhak murdered
Abetin, my father, in Iran;
and he butchered Barmayeh. Her blood,
too, I will avenge, giving evil
neither rest nor peace, till I've raised this mace
and crushed Zahhak's head with it!"

Arnavaz spoke next, "Are you
King Feraydun, come to crush
magic and sorcery, to end tyranny
and erase Zahhak? We are Jamshid's
sister's. That serpent spared our lives
because we married him, but, my lord,
just imagine such a marriage!"
"If the stars don't conspire against me,
I will wipe that foul fiend from the world!
Tell me, truthfully, where is he now?"
Hoping to see Zahhak's head

held high on the tip of a spear,
those two beautiful women spoke,
"He fled in fury and in fear to India,
seeking to spread his sorcery there.
He cuts down thousands, each one
innocent, and, in desperate defiance
of the fate he knows will find him,
he murders beasts as well, mixing
his victims' blood in a vat he bathes in—
believing this magic will bring him power
to fashion a future where he is the victor—
and still he endures the hungry devils
growing from his shoulders, their greed
causing constant pain. He runs
from country to country, trying to escape,
but he's run out of countries. He must come back."

Feraydun sat, rapt, as the ravishing
women gave voice to their grief.

Your kingdom now will not last long

When Zahhak left the land, he left
in his place—to manage the palace—a man
who served him like a slave, an unjust fool
called Kondrow. Kondrow controlled
the treasury and throne when Zahhak was away,
and when he heard commotion in the royal hall,
he rushed to see what was happening, and he saw,
crowned with Zahhak's crown, a stranger
sitting where only the king should sit.
This young prince, handsome as a cypress
standing in the light of a new moon,
sat between Shahrnavaz and Arnavaz.
Asking no questions, covering his feelings,
Kondrow bowed low as he approached:
"Live, my liege, as long as time!
The farr your face shines with
declares that you deserve dominion.
May the seven climes serve you like slaves
and your head be lifted above the clouds."

Feraydun called Kondrow closer,
commanding him to reveal the secrets

of his office. Then Feraydun said, "Find
and cleanse the royal regalia, and find
as well wine and musicians. Prepare
for me a banquet and bring to celebrate
my good fortune anyone whose knowledge
or skill with music will give me pleasure."
Kondrow followed Feraydun's instructions,
setting wine before the prince,
bringing musicians and summoning nobles
worthy of the new king's presence.
When Feraydun saw the wine, he called
for music and spent the night feasting
like a king. In the morning, Kondrow mounted
the swiftest steed he could find and rode off,
searching for Zahhak. When he found his master,
he made this report, "Majesty! Sovereign
of the mighty! I have seen the signs foretold
of your fortune's decline. From a foreign land,
three warriors have brought war
to your palace. The youngest stands like a cypress
between his brothers, his bearing
a king's, his mace, a piece of mountain.
"More radiant than his companions, he rode
on horseback into your home, his siblings
on either side, and when he arrived
at your throne, he threw down your idols,
broke your spells and sat himself
where only you should sit. And the courtiers
who attend you in your pillared hall? Humans
and demons, he dealt them their deaths,
mingling their brains with their blood
as he tossed them from the palace walls."

Zahhak answered, "Perhaps he's a guest.
Let him stay and be entertained."
Kondrow called back, "A guest?
Who bears a bull-headed mace
into your home? Who takes your place

on your throne, removes from the crown and royal
belt your name and beguiles your followers
with the blasphemy of his own faith?
If you would give a guest's seat
of honor to such as him, go ahead."

"But an arrogant guest," Zahhak said,
"bodes well for us, so don't protest
this one too much."
"I've heard that too,"
Kondrow bristled, "but listen to this:
if that warrior is a worthy guest,
what business does he have in your harem? He sits
with Jamshid's sisters, and while they talk—
and there is nothing they will not talk about—
he fondles with one hand's fingers
Shahrnavaz's cheeks, and Arnavaz's
carnelian lips leave lingering kisses
on the other one. When dusk comes, a cloud of musk
cushions his head: the fragrant hair
of the two women you have worshipped in your heart."

This news roused Zahhak to a wolf's rage
and he wished with his own howling words
for death. "My castle," he threatened Kondrow,
"will never again be yours to guard."
Kondrow replied, "My king, your kingdom
now will not last long. By whose leave
will you ever again leave me to lead
in your place? Look instead to your own needs.
Nothing like this has happened to you.
How will you defend yourself?
You've been plucked from the throne like hair out of dough."

Take up once more the tasks that were yours

Enraged and resolute, Zahhak commanded
his men to saddle his sharp-eyed steed
and with an army of demons massed behind him
set off to take his revenge and to make
his palace his again. He approached
in silence, ordered his forces to seize
the parapets and palace gates,
but Feraydun's men leapt from their horses,
hurling themselves into hand to hand combat.
All in the city who could fight that day
sided with Feraydun, united, finally,
in their hatred of Zahhak.
Like hail from a dark
sky, bricks and stones fell
from the walls, and poplar arrows and swords
cluttered the streets. The people deserted
Zahhak, the young new to battle
and the battle hardened veterans, and a voice
from the fire temple called out,
"If the king came to us a wild beast,
still, we'd serve him loyally, young
and old alike, but not Zahhak,

the devil with dragons growing from his shoulders!"
Over the city, a dust cloud rose,
the battle dimming the sun, while Zahhak,
seething with envy, left his troops
to find another way to win.

Disguised in armor none would recognize,
he seized a kamand sixty lengths long,
climbed quickly to the palace roof,
and beheld the bewitching Shahrnavaz,
her cheeks shining bright as day,
her long hair falling like the night,
closeted with Feraydun, calling curses
from heaven onto Zahhak's head. Zahhak
felt then the fate fixed for him
by God: that he'd given himself to evil's grasp,
leaving himself no escape. His heart
searing, he climbed down the kamand
as if his life were not at risk
and he didn't care to reclaim the throne.
He pulled his dagger and, without a word,
the weapon poised, he crept towards the couple,
his single desire to spill that beauty's blood.
The moment his boot touched the ground,
however, Feraydun bore down on him
with a storm's force, splitting Zahhak's helmet
with a single blow of the bull-headed mace.
Then Sorush spoke, holding him back,
"Don't! The day of Zahhak's death
has not arrived. Bind him tightly—
beaten as he is—and bring his body
to where two mountains stand together.
His prison will be the mountain's root,
where his people can't reach him."
Feraydun heeded
the angel's words, working quickly
with lengths of lion skin to lash
Zahhak's arms to his sides so securely

a raging elephant could not have released him.
Then he sat on Zahhak's golden throne,
voided that devil's past decrees
and had proclaimed at the palace gate
these words: "Wise and worthy men
like you should not bear the burden
of war, wielding weapons, seeking
renown in bloody battle; better,
also, that soldiers should not stray
from their calling and seek to become craftsmen,
for when one group gives itself
another's task, chaos results.
That venomous devil, whose evil kept
you cringing in fear, is in fetters. Freed,
may you live long and happy lives
and take up once more the tasks that were yours."

The wealthy men and the men of rank
came to pay Feraydun homage.
He received them gladly, and with grace, giving
advice and offering God his gratitude,
"This court is mine, and my star, shining,
will spread prosperity and peace
across this land I've liberated. I am lord,
though, of all the earth, and so
I can't remain in the same place for long.
If I could, I'd live here many years."
The nobles kissed the ground, the drums sounded
and Zahhak, bound, was brought out,
tossed across a camel's back
and taken towards Shir Khan,
where Feraydun prepared to send his head
hurtling down the mountainside.
Sorush appeared again, however,
and spoke persuasively to Feraydun,
telling him to take Zahhak to Damarvand.
Feraydun did this, chaining the devil
in a narrow passage, pushing nails

through his flesh to fix him to the rock face,
avoiding the vital organs to increase
the greedy dragon's endless pain;
and Zahhak hung there helpless, hopeless,
alone with his slow wounds, his heart's
blood staining the soil beneath him.

Notes

The Poet's Preface

I have left out several sections of Ferdowsi's preface to the *Shahnameh* because they refer to the social and cultural context in which the epic was produced and require more historical knowledge to appreciate fully than the average reader will have. I decided to include the section about Daqiqi, however, because Ferdowsi actually incorporated into his *Shahnameh* the thousand or so lines that Daqiqi had written before he died, though those lines are not part of the *The Teller of Tales*.

The "vices" Ferdowsi refers to when talking about Daqiqi most likely have to do with the fact that the murdered poet was Zoroastrian and therefore a heretic. Indeed, some stories about Daqiqi suggest that he was murdered not by a slave, but by Muslims who did not want his by definition blasphemous *Shahnameh* completed.

Daqiqi's Zoroastrianism, even though Ferdowsi does not refer to it directly, plays a fascinating rhetorical role in the *Shahnameh*. By incorporating into the epic both the actual lines Daqiqi wrote and Daqiqi's religious/spiritual framework, Ferdowsi places himself at one remove from material he needs to include to be historically accurate, but which might have gotten him in trouble because of its blasphemous nature. He could counter any accusations made against him, in other words, by pointing out that he is relying on someone else's work to depict the heresies of pre-Islamic Iran, not writing something he actually believes.

Kayumars

Ahriman: The principle of evil in Persian/Zoroastrian mythology.

Peris: In Persian folklore, the peris were a race of beautiful supernatural beings, descended from fallen angels, who were excluded from paradise until their penance was complete. The

divs, or demons, were their enemies. Peri also came to be used as a way to describe a very beautiful and graceful girl or woman. Our words faerie and fairy are derived from peri, but the faeries of English folklore bear little or no resemblance to the peris in Iranian tradition.

Hushang

Qanat: A water-management system, native to Iran, that taps into subterranean water supplies using gravity, thus enabling large quantities of water to be delivered to the surface without the need for pumping.
Do not depend on this world for love: See the brief discussion of Zurvanism in the introduction.

Tahmures

Soghdian: Soghdiana was an ancient Persian kingdom.

Zahhak: We'd need to hear his mother's story

An Arab monarch named Merdas: Ferdowsi's negative, racialized ideas about Arabs are still present in Iranian culture and are reflected in policies of discrimination that target Iran's ethnic Arab population. On the one hand, then, it is ironic that Ferdowsi portrays Merdas, an Arab ruler, as such a righteous man. On the other hand, that Zahhak can be so easily seduced into a plot to murder his father, even though he does not commit the actual murder himself, seems clearly to represent Ferdowsi's view that Arabs are inherently corrupt. In this light, the poet's suggestion that we'd need to hear what Zahhak's mother had to say about her son in order to understand how Zahhak could have done what he did might not be only a statement about our lack of information. Rather, Ferdowsi might be taking a swipe here at the ostensibly evil, devious

and corrupt nature of Arab women. Clearly, Zahhak's bad character did not come from his father. It must, therefore, have come from his mother.

Pahlavi: Pahlavi is the name given to Middle Persian, which was written using the Pahlavi writing system. It is the linguistic predecessor of Persian as it is spoken in Iran today.
Eblis: Also spelled Iblis. The name of the devil in Islam.

His Life Is Sweeter Than My Own

He'll grind that devil's belt and crown to dust: A royal belt was part of the king's ceremonial dress.

If I deliver that dragon to the dust

Rumi brocade: Rum signifies the land and peoples to Iran's west. Rumi is the adjectival form.

The heart of Zahhak's home

Khordad: In the Persian calendar, Khordad is the third month, but it is likely that the "day of Khordad" refers to "Khordad Sal," which takes place six days after Norooz, and is celebrated as the birthday of Zoroaster.
Houri: The word houri is used to refer to a beautiful young woman, but it also, and primarily refers in Islam to the virgin companions of the faithful once they reach paradise.
Cercis: The Judas-tree.

Take up once more the tasks that were yours

Kamand: A kind of lasso or lariat used as a weapon.