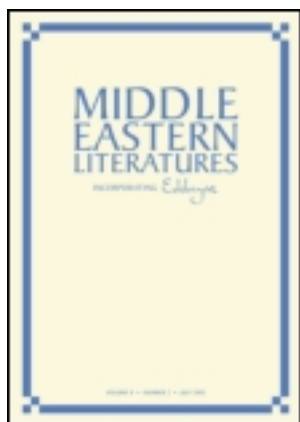


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The Shāh-nāma and Medieval Orality: Critical Remarks on the 'Oral Poetics' Approach and New Perspectives¹

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REVIEW ARTICLE

The *Shāh-nāma* and Medieval Orality: Critical Remarks on the ‘Oral Poetics’ Approach and New Perspectives¹

JULIA RUBANOVICH

1.

Since the pioneering and fundamental study of Th. Nöldeke on the Iranian national epic,² the *Shāh-nāma* of Firdausī has generated an extensive scholarly literature embracing a vast array of fields, such as textual criticism, source studies, literary reception, comparative motif and theme analysis. In the last two decades, special attention has been given to various questions of orality in connection with the Iranian epic literature in general, and the *Shāh-nāma* in particular. One of the early and more controversial contributions to the subject was Olga M. Davidson’s study *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, which recast in a somewhat amplified form her article ‘The Crown-Bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings.’³ Davidson’s study has represented an attempt to approach Firdausī’s epic from a comparativist’s standpoint and apply to it theoretical tools and findings that had long been implemented in the study of Greek epic tradition, the oral formulaic theory of M. Parry and A.B. Lord being the most prominent. Notwithstanding a commendable endeavor to broaden the research vistas of *Shāh-nāma* studies, alongside positive responses the book has given rise to intense disagreement with most of its premises, generating a heated debate amongst Iranists as to the methodological soundness of studying the *Shāh-nāma* along the lines of ‘oral poetics.’⁴

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¹This is a review of Olga M. Davidson’s *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*, Bibliotheca Iranica: Intellectual Traditions Series, No. 4, Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2000, 158pp., \$19.95, ISBN 1-56859-098-9.

²Th. Nöldeke, ‘Beiträge zur Geschichte der Alexanderromans,’ *Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen AW in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Classe* 38, no. 5 (Vienna: In commission bei F. Tempsky, 1890); Th. Nöldeke, ‘Das iranische Nationalepos,’ in *Grundriß der iranischen Philologie*, ed. W. Geiger and E. Kuhn (Strassburg: K.J. Truebner, 1896–1904), vol. II, 130–211.

³See Olga M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994), and Eadem, ‘The Crown-Bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings,’ in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, ed. H. W. Bailey et al. 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1985), *Acta Iranica* 24, 25, vol. I, 61–148.

⁴See, especially, M. Omidshalar, ‘Review of Davidson 1994,’ *Īrānshināsī* 7 (1995): 436–57; M. Omidshalar, ‘Unburdening Ferdowsi,’ *JAOS* 116 (1996): 235–42; M. Omidshalar, ‘Orality, Mouvance, and Editorial Theory in Shāhnāma Studies,’ *Jerusalem Studies of Arabic and Islam (Studies in Honour of Shaul Shaked)* 27 (2002): 245–82; M. Omidshalar, ‘Mutūn-i sharqī, shīva-hā-yi gharbī, *Shāhnāma* va ab‘ād-i idīlūjīk-i Shāhnāma-shināsī dar maghrib-zamīn,’ *Āīna-yi mīrāth* 7, no. 17 (2009): 19–67; and F. de Blois,

Davidson's more recent collection, *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*, comprises seven essays, the bulk of which (essays one to five, pp. 1–97) is an attempt at rebutting the principal criticisms leveled upon her 1994 book by buttressing her argumentation and expanding the examples. Essay six (pp. 99–121) and essay seven (pp. 122–44) represent new research tackling respectively the themes of the hero's boasting, 'as a form of first-person praise poetry' (p. xiv), and the women's lament; both themes are discussed in the context of performance and within the framework of the Indo-European epic tradition.

The polemical stance that pervades the first five essays of the collection demands of the reader a proper conversance with the main points of the preceding debate, thus limiting the audience of the book to those who have been directly involved in the polemics or followed them closely. Moreover, their assessment becomes a tense undertaking for a reviewer as well, for it might grow at best into a cyclical movement of rebuttals or at worst into an exercise in fault-finding. To avoid the above traps, I will not join the acerbic debate that, I believe, has by now had a wearying effect upon the scholarly community, but will rather regard Davidson's collection of essays—first and foremost essays one to five—as a vantage point for mapping some major ongoing controversies in *Shāh-nāma* studies, among which are the question of the role of oral poetics in the production, transmission and reception of the *Shāh-nāma*.

2.

One of the subjects that loom large in Davidson's collection concerns Firdausī's reliance on oral sources. To anchor Firdausī and the patterns of his work in oral tradition, Davidson utilizes the two main arguments that she had presented in her earlier book.⁵ These are based on two passages from the *Shāh-nāma*. The first passage (starting *ba-shahr-am yak-ī mihrabān dūst būd / tu gufti ki bā man ba-yak pūst būd* etc.)⁶ deals with what Davidson defines as the 'mystical gift' from a 'mysterious friend' (p. 45), which, according to her, serves Firdausī for 'laying claim to the authority of all previous "books of kings"' and 'is typical of oral traditions that coexist with written traditions' (ibid.). The other passage concerns Firdausī's description of his rendition of the Pahlavi source (*yak-ī nāma būd az gah-i bās'tān / farāvān ba-d-ū andarūn dās'tān*, etc.),⁷ which Davidson refuses to take at face-value and considers as the motif of the 'regenerated archetype' (p. 46) typical of other national traditions of epic poetry.

To validate her statement, Davidson refers to the authority of G. Nagy,⁸ who uses in turn her earlier analysis of the 'mystical gift' and the 'regenerated archetype' motifs as parallel to ancient Greek myths on the evolvement of the Homeric corpus (pp. 49–51, also p. 52), thus creating a circular argument that, by definition, can hardly be convincing. The samples borrowed from medieval European literatures to support the idea

Persian Literature. A Bio-bibliographical Survey. V. Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1994), 53–8.

⁵Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, 32–4, 21–4 and 47–53.

⁶Abū al-Qāsim Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, gen. ed. Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭlaq (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988–2008), Persian Text Series, N.S. 1, vol. I, 14, l. 140 and no. 6 and 7. In Davidson's collection of essays, all references are to the Moscow edition by E.É. Bertel's et al.

⁷Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, vol. I, 12, l. 115.

⁸As formulated in G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

that Firdausī spoke of his work as a stylized performance or a stylized book appear to this reviewer rather to be a topos of a rhetorical nature; in any case, they do not explain why the process of compiling or translating the book from Latin to a vernacular by analogy turns into ‘a re-creation, through living oral traditions, of lore learned from both books and “singers”’ (p. 57) in Firdausī’s case. All the more so since Firdausī, unlike the author of the French 13th-century romance *Guiiron le courtois*, one of the examples which Davidson adduces as pertinent to the ‘regenerated archetype’ motif, nowhere mentions his efforts of gathering, collating or translating his sources. Indeed, the motif of the ‘regenerated archetype’ can be quite apposite as far as Abū Maṣṣūr’s *Preface* is concerned, but it would be of secondary value at most for Firdausī’s *Shāh-nāma*. In fact, rather than reflecting the mentality of an oral poetic tradition or a myth-made stylization of oral poetry, as Davidson believes (pp. 44–58), the claim that a written source has been followed suggests the author no longer justifies his work from within an oral tradition.⁹ Be that as it may, because of the virtual absence of factual evidence, any arguments against or in favor of oral and/or written sources of the epic, as well as the patterns of their interplay, inevitably remain highly speculative and hence counterproductive.¹⁰ In this reviewer’s opinion, the solution to the problematics of the *Shāh-nāma*’s origins should be either postponed or abandoned altogether, depending on the un/availability of new data.

3.

In addition to the question of sources, in these essays Davidson treats, or rather defends, her premises as regards Firdausī’s dependence upon the aesthetics and conventions of oral poetics, orientation to performance being one of its major features. In her attempt to show that ‘the metaphorical world of the *Shāh-nāma* reflects the real world of the poet as its performer’ (p. 32), Davidson examines various contexts in which the word *sarāyanda* is used in the *Shāh-nāma*, enlarging upon a similar examination in her 1994 book.¹¹ Her purport to demonstrate that *sarāyanda/surāyanda* in Firdausī’s usage is analogous to a ‘singer of tales’—as employed terminologically to denote a performer of oral poetic traditions following Albert Lord’s definition—stumbles, however, upon the infelicitous translation (or misunderstanding?) of most of the examples she brings. Let me reconsider three examples, the first two of which Davidson labels ‘straightforward cases’ (p. 34).

1. Example 5 (p. 34)

ba-afsānahā rāh kūtāh kard
*surāyanda bisyār hamrāh kard*¹²

⁹Cf. D.H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800–1300* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 162.

¹⁰Cf. also K. Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics. Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003), 7, Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures. Supplements to the *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26.

¹¹Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, 34–7.

¹²Davidson cites Firdausī’s original in Persian. For the sake of consistency I transliterate the citations.

is translated by Davidson as follows:

He [= Shāh Anōshirvān] took with him several *surāyanda*-s
to shorten the journey with stories of the past [*afsānehā*].

Davidson provides the context, stating that the verse comes to describe Nūshīn-ravān's relief at his having overcome 'the machinations of his own minister, the treacherous Mahbud ... Yearning to recover his own sense of certainty, he takes with him ... on the hunt several *surāyanda*-s to shorten the journey with their tales/parables/stories of past events, *afsānehā*' (ibid.). This example, according to Davidson, demonstrates that '... the *surāyanda* is explicitly described as a court poet whose task is to glorify the kings of the past for the edification and continued glorification of the king of the present' (ibid.). Davidson's interpretation, however, is simplistic and plainly erroneous—including a characterization of a loyal and slandered Mahbūd as treacherous, probably caused by an insufficient attention to the overall plot—when one checks it against the passage in which the verse appears:

vu-z-ānjāy-gah sū-yi nakhchūr-gāh / biyāmad chunān dāgh-dil bā sipāh
zi-har kas ba-rah-bar sakhun kh^oāsī / zi-guftār-hā dil biyārāsī
surāyanda bisyār hamrāh kard / ba-afsāna-hā rāh kūtāh kard
dabīrān-u Zarvān-u dastūr-i shāh / biraftand yak rūz gūyān ba-rāh
*sakhun raft chand-ī zi-afsūn-u band / zi-jādūy-u Āhaaman-i pur-gazand ...*¹³

This reviewer's working translation:

From there (i.e., the royal stables) [Nūshīn-ravān] came to the hunting place /
with his army, as bereaved as before.

On his way he was seeking conversation with everyone, / he adorned his heart
with utterances [of all kind].

He made many a speaker (*surāyanda*) accompany him, / he shortened his way
with tales.

One day, scribes, Zarvān and the King's minister / travelled while conversing.
For a while the conversation turned to [the subject of] spells (*afsūn*) and
charms, / to sorcery and the all-harmful Ahrīman ...

As is clear from the larger context of the translated passage, *surāyanda* here is not necessarily equivalent to a court poet whose task is to glorify and edify the king; it can be 'everyone' (*har kas*) possessing the ability of eloquent and engaging speech. By the same token, *afsāna* by no means belongs to a poetic genre, but rather to a short tale in prose or even a parable, a kind of *pand*—a domain not exclusively associated with courtly poetry. It is helpful to bring in here Bundārī's translation: *wa kāna lā takhlū mawākibuhu min al-ulamā' wa al-ḥukamā' yurawwihūna sirrahu bi-l-ḥikam wa-yū'allilūnahu bi-l-samar wa 'atāyib al-kalīm*,¹⁴ who clearly opts for 'scholars and sages' as those who counsel the disquieted Nūshīn-ravān, grieving for his guileless vizier Mahbūd, thus skipping 'court poets' altogether.

¹³Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, VII, 227, ll. 1662–5.

¹⁴Cited *apud*, Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, VII, 227, n. 27.

2. Example 6 (pp. 34–5)

dil-i shāh shud z-ān sakhun shād' mān
sarāyanda-rā guft k-ābād mān
kih ūy-ast parvardagār-i pidar
v-az-ūy-ast paydā ba-gifī hunar

is rendered by Davidson as follows:

The heart of the Shāh rejoiced at these words.
 He said to the *sarāyanda*: 'May you continue to flourish,
 for he [Rostam] was *parvardegār* [giver of nourishment as a foster father and
 mentor] to [my] father,
 and from him *honar* [virtue and skill] springs into the world.' (p. 35)

According to Davidson, Kay-Khusrau here 'speaks to the *sarāyanda* in the singer's capacity as a court poet, telling him to study the greatness of the hero Rostam as the stuff of great poetry' (ibid.). However, from the lines immediately preceding the verses quoted:

ba-pīsh-andarūm Zāl bā anjuman / darafsh-i banafsh az pas-i Piltan
tabīra bar-āmad zi-dargāh-i shāh / hama bar-nahādand gurdān kulāh
*yak-ī kishvar az-jāy bar-khāstand / padhūra shudan-rā biyārāstand;*¹⁵

... at the head (of the army) Zāl with the (noble) assembly, / the violet standard is behind Piltan.

From King's (Kay Khusrau's) palace the [sound] of drums rose, /the champions donned their helmets.

The whole of the country rose, /arranged a welcome meeting

it becomes clear that the *surāyanda* here is none other than a courier, an envoy who informs Kay-Khusrau of the Sistani heroes' approach and whose message (*sakhun*) incites the king to confer a blessing upon him (*ābād mān!*), at the same time praising the approaching heroes. It is not at all fortuitous that some of the manuscripts supplement the passage with an additional verse explicitly mentioning the message reaching the king (*pas āgāhī āmad bar-i shahriyār ... or: chu āgāhī āmad ba-nazdik-i shāh*).¹⁶ Another instance in which *surāyanda* is used in the same sense of 'messenger, envoy' is the epithet used for Jandal, Farīdūn's messenger, to King Sarv of Yaman (p. 40, ex. 14a).¹⁷ For her part, Davidson translates the word as 'sweet talking Jandal' (p. 41), implying that '[w]hat makes the "sweet talk" of these negotiations and instructions really "sweet" is the fact that they are formulated through and in poetry, through and in the traditional medium of the *sarāyanda*' (ibid.).

¹⁵Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, III, 5, ll. 26–8.

¹⁶Ibid., III, 5, n. 9.

¹⁷Ibid., I, 98, l. 140.

3. Example 16 (pp. 42–3)

This example clearly shows the oddity of Davidson's approach:

tu dānī ki man kh^v ad sarāyanda-am
parastanda-yi āfarīnanda-am

You know that I myself am a *sarāyanda*
 and that I am a *parastandeh* [*sic*] (worshipper, visionary, poet) of the
 Creator.' (p. 42)

The verse describes Kay-Khusrau's supplication to God regarding his pursuit of Afrāsiyāb. In Davidson's interpretation, Kay Khusrau 'says of himself that he has been a good singer in his own right. In asking for 'news' about Afrāsiyāb, however, he is in effect asking for even more aptitude in knowing the songs; that is, in knowing what it is that poets sing about the deeds of Afrāsiyāb' (ibid.). Why should Kay-Khusrau be concerned with presenting himself as 'a good singer' before his Lord? By what magical trick of stretching linguistic boundaries has the *parastanda* turned from 'worshipper' into 'visionary' and 'poet'? Here *surāyanda* is clearly a *sitāyanda*, 'a praiser' (cf. the variant reading *surāyanda—sitāyanda*),¹⁸ and even if a praiser does need some degree of eloquence, it still does not turn him into a court poet, let alone into 'a singer of tales.'

In these and other examples Davidson is entirely consistent in her effort to demonstrate that the use of the word *surāyanda* echoes the poetic medium of the *Shāh-nāma* itself and reflects, even if only metaphorically, the traditional craft of a court poet, which, by the way, Firdausī was not. In her view, all of the instances in which the references to *surāyanda* occur are contingent on the intention of 'the sweet-talking poet' (i.e. Firdausī) to reassign to the characters the lines (i.e. verses) that have been prefabricated for them (p. 41). If this reviewer understands the purport of these efforts correctly, Davidson refers to the meta-narrative level of the epic composition to demonstrate its all-pervasive character as performance, which by itself is a sound idea. Actually, no speech act is devoid of a performative aspect. This is all the truer regarding works created in the Perso-Arabic medieval literary domain. This domain was characterized by constant medium shift, not only in poetry but also in other types of texts such as epistolary compositions. In addition to being read silently, they might have been transmitted by reading aloud. However, such texts were not in the first place intended for oral/aural transmission and reception; they were designed to be received by a private reader and were structured accordingly. Their 'vocality'—*vocalité*, to use the term coined by P. Zumthor and widely used by Davidson¹⁹—functioned in a purely rhetorical way, as a ritual discourse of sorts, a good example being the formal ceremonial recitation of epistles in an assembly. The idea of linking the feature of the epic's performance-oriented quality to its composition according to the principles of oral poetics as well as considering Firdausī as a 'singer of tales,' a performer of oral poetic traditions, albeit original, seems far-fetched and lacking evidence.

¹⁸Ibid., I, 98, v. 150 and n. 24.

¹⁹P. Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix. De la 'littérature' médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 21ff.

4.

Although unattached to specific literary court circles, Firdausī did not exist in a literary-historical vacuum. However little information he supplies about himself and the precepts of his composition, his work was part and parcel of the literary-historical milieu of his time, oral traditions and oral communication being integral parts of it. The alternative to perceive him as a savant, averse to everything that is oral and popular and scorning all things unwritten and unverifiable in writing, appears to me the other extreme to be avoided in *Shāh-nāma* studies, for it undermines the richness and multifaceted nature of Firdausī's work (here, I am in agreement with a highly pertinent remark by Kumiko Yamamoto, who concludes: '... What emerges from the controversy [concerning the literary or oral basis of the *Shāh-nāma*] is the fact that whichever position one might take, the interpretation of textual evidence is ideologically predetermined and cannot yield decisive results').²⁰ However, with all the possible factors that Firdausī might have been influenced by and most of which cannot be convincingly proved, the authority he cherished was not the authority of oral tradition preserved in 'all previous "books of kings"' (p. 45) or the one of all previous performances, as Davidson would like to argue, but the potency of literary written expression in poetry versus prose. 'Prose is like subjects and poetry like a king,' states the author of the *Qābūs-nāma*,²¹ 'Be the tale as sweet and pleasurable as it may, / it will obtain a renewal due to metre and rhyme,' urges Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī.²² In her polemics with François de Blois around the latter's statement that Firdausī and other poets were 'merely retelling what they found in a 'book'' (essay four), Davidson seems to be unaware of the main thrust of Firdausī's—and for that matter Gurgānī's—intentions to create a versified version as the only means to bestow value on the prose text and preserve it from oblivion, a tendency so characteristic of the evolution of Neo-Persian literature in the sixth/11th and seventh/12th centuries.

What is more, oral poetics tend to obviate the individual authorial voice. Firdausī's composition, however, is dominated by a conscious *authorial* attitude that comes to the fore assertively in his comparison of his own work with that of Daqīqī. Davidson interprets Firdausī's attitude towards his predecessor in terms of his appropriation of 'the cumulative poetic traditions of his Zoroastrian predecessors,' which are 'oral,' thus again linking Firdausī with the features of oral poetics.²³ This reviewer, by contrast, regards Firdausī's passage on Daqīqī's verses as an expression of one of the cornerstones of literary composition in the Persian domain, to wit the contentious and competitive relation of a creator to his/her precursor(s) in the field. This relationship is of a dialectical nature: on the one hand, it implies continuity and admiration for a forerunner (hence, Firdausī's referring to Daqīqī as *rāhbar*, 'guide'),²⁴ however, on

²⁰K. Yamamoto, 'Naqqāli: Professional Iranian Storytelling,' in *A History of Persian Literature*, gen. ed. E. Yarshater. Vol. XVIII: *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages. Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik. Companion Volume II to A History of Persian Literature*. Ed. Ph.G. Kreyenbroek & U. Marzolph (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 242, n. 1.

²¹Unşur al-Ma'ālī Kay-Kāvūs b. Iskandar b. Qābūs b. Vushmagīr b. Ziyār, *Qābūs-nāma*, ed. Ghulām-Husayn Yūsufi (Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'ilmī va farhangī, 1375/1996), 190.

²²Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī, *Vīs-u Rāmīn*, ed. M. Tūduā and A. Gvākhāriyā (Tehran: Bunyād-i farhang-i Īrān, 1349/1970), 28, l. 48.

²³Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, 24. The Zoroastrianism of Daqīqī has been refuted; see Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, 'Daqīqī,' *Elr* VI (1993): 661–2.

²⁴Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, V, 176, l. 1043.

the other hand, it is permeated with the conscientious and persistent search for literary (poetic) self-identification, which frequently involves a dire struggle for poetic superiority (hence Firdausī's well-known affirmation of the weakness of Daqīqī's one thousand lines).²⁵

In addition to the patterns of literary contest and the evaluative attitude towards the medium of poetry *vis-à-vis* prose, the *Shāh-nāma* is imbued with two other important markers that betray the poet's literary mindset. The first of these is the concept of *yādgār* ('remembrance, memory, memorial'), according to which it is only through the writing down of one's work and thanks to it that the memory of the poet/writer or his patron will be immune to the destruction caused by the vicissitudes of time. Most manifestly the concept of *yādgār* is expressed in Firdausī's famous invocation to Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna:

O King, I rendered a service / in order that the memory of me would remain in
the world.

The inhabited buildings will decay / by rains and the heat of the sun.

[However] I laid down a lofty palace out of [my] verse / which will not be
destroyed by gusts and rainfalls.

Years shall pass over this book; / those possessing wisdom shall keep reading it'

yak-ī bandaḡī kardam ay shahriyār / ki mānad zi-man dar jahān yād'gār

banā-hā-yi ābād gardad kharāb / zi-bārān-u az tābish-i āftāb

pay afgandam az naẓm kākh-ī buland / ki az bād-u bārān nayābad gazand

*bar-in nāma bar 'umr-hā bugzarad / hamī kh'ānad-ash har kih dārad khirad.*²⁶

The other salient marker of Firdausī's literary outlook is his historiographically informed approach to his work, one of the attributes of which is faithfulness to the source material. Julie S. Meisami has convincingly shown that Firdausī was creating a historical narrative embodying the basic historical paradigm of the rise and fall of states and the transfer of power, and it was only because of the changing linguistic situation and the alternating concept of history with the emphasis on the Islamic narrative at the beginning of the fifth/11th century that the *Shāh-nāma* failed to be recognized as a historical composition in its proper sense.²⁷ The examples of the poet's fidelity to his written source(s) have been cited and discussed.²⁸ To them this reviewer would add a cursory observation on Firdausī's treatment of the Candace/Qaydāfa episode in the chapter about Iskandar in the *Shāh-nāma*.²⁹ The comparison of the Qaydāfa episode with its counterpart in the Syriac recension of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* (the Greek Alexander Romance), representing one of the few extant versions from which the Islamic

²⁵Ibid., V, 175, ll. 1030–6.

²⁶Ibid., IV, 173–4, ll. 65–8. For the concept of *yādgār* as a marker of the literary written tradition of Firdausī's time and later, see J. Rubanovich, 'Metaphors of Authorship in Medieval Persian Prose: A Preliminary Study,' *Middle Eastern Literatures incorporating Edebiyât* 12 (2009): 133, n. 32.

²⁷Julie S. Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 38–45, 51–3.

²⁸See, for instance, Jalāl Khāliqī-Muṭlaq, 'Az *Khudāy-nāma* tā *Shāh-nāma*. Justār-ī dar bāra-yi ma'ākhiz-i mustaqīm va ghayr-i mustaqīm-i *Shāh-nāma*,' *Tār-numā-yi nūf* (January 2009), 10–11, www.noufe.com/persish/Khaleghi/pdf/azshahnametakhodaname.pdf (accessed January 27, 2012).

²⁹Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, VI, 52–74, ll. 690–1055.

tradition of the Alexander Romance derived, demonstrates that Firdausī follows the episode as it appears in the Syriac work very closely—motif by motif.³⁰ If one takes into account mediator texts that stood between the Syriac recension (sixth century) and the *Shāh-nāma* (possibly an Arabic version or versions, a Neo-Persian version or versions), the significant degree of closeness is impressive indeed and can be explained solely by Firdausī's accurate treatment of his source material. Although accentuating the motifs differently and molding the message of the episode in accordance with the overall import of the chapter on Iskandar, the poet stays aloof from the variability and fluidity that comprise the core features of oral traditional poetics.

5.

To conclude, it seems to be quite a futile undertaking to look for any definitive oral background to the *Shāh-nāma*, be it by means of searching for oral sources and oral formulas in the spirit of the oral-formulaic theory of M. Parry and A.B. Lord³¹ or by examining the epic somewhat anachronistically in the light of structural and thematic features of a much later practice of *naqqāhī* performance.³² In this reviewer's view, there are other significant and much less speculative directions of research in the realm of orality from which *Shāh-nāma* studies can truly gain. Among these, the most promising is the exploring of the *Shāh-nāma*'s transmission and reception across the centuries and geographical realms. Such an investigation would embrace a variety of transmission modes—from silent reading through reading aloud to recitation from memory of the whole epic or of its parts—which would demonstrate varying degrees of textual stability, theoretically ranging from a 'conservative' transmission that promises the maximum textual stability, to an 'innovative, audience-dependent' transmission with a certain amount of textual fluidity.³³ The latter, for instance, appears to be the case of the *Shāh-nāma* reception by medieval *dāstān* compilers.³⁴ In this regard, the peculiarities of the *Shāh-nāma* manuscript history with the massive interpolation of 'secondary epics' are fascinating in their own right. Although a source of vexation and disapprobation on the part of classical textual scholarship striving to arrive at an ultimate edition of Firdausī's work, these interpolations can be exploited for clues as to how the epic tradition at large and the *Shāh-nāma* in particular were received and perceived in the medieval popular culture to which the 'secondary epics' relate and which is strongly imbued with oral traditional aesthetics.

This reviewer cannot but wholeheartedly support Olga Davidson's emphatic resistance to 'the notion that any single group of specialists, any single school of thought, can claim the authority to contain or control the methods applied to the study of this

³⁰See J. Rubanovich, 'Re-Writing the Episode of Alexander and Candace in Medieval Persian Literature: Patterns, Sources, and Motif Transformation,' in *Alexander the Great in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, ed. M. Stock and St. Schmitt (Toronto: TUP, forthcoming); and Eadem, 'Qaydāfa,' *EIr* (forthcoming).

³¹O.M. Davidson, 'A Formulaic Analysis of Samples Taken from the *Shahnāma* of Firdowsi,' *Oral Tradition* 3 (1988): 88–105; and Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, 54–72 and 171–81.

³²Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics*. For an assessment of this interesting, although controversial attempt, see J. Rubanovich, 'Orality in Medieval Persian Literature,' in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. K. Reichl (Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 655–6, De Gruyter Lexicon.

³³Cf. K. Reichl, 'Plotting the Map of Medieval Oral Literature,' in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Reichl, 28.

³⁴See J. Rubanovich, 'Aspects of Medieval Intertextuality: Verse Insertions in Persian Prose *dāstāns*,' *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006): 247–68.

[i.e. Persian] literature ...' (p. xv). The charting of new paths and the application of new theoretical approaches, however, require a sensitive, conscientious and unintrusive attitude towards any medieval composition studied, when the text and the literary-historical milieu within which it was created remain the main touchstone of their validity.