Orality in Medieval Persian Literature

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The issue of orality and the interplay between the oral and the written have long been an 'academic backwater' in the study of medieval Persian literature.¹ There were mainly two reasons for this: (1) the choice of subject-matter for scholarly research has all too often been guided by evaluative aesthetic criteria, restricting it to the study of acknowledged masterpieces and leaving out whole layers of medieval literary production which might offer themselves most opportunely to inquiry from the viewpoint of orality, such as, for example, folk prose literature; (2) there has been a reluctance to make use of theoretical tools and approaches developed on the basis of inquiry into similar issues in Western literatures. In the last two decades, however, the problem of the interdependence of oral and written traditions has received growing attention, first of all in the context of Shāh-nāma studies. The Shāh-nāma (The Book of Kings) of Abū al-Qāsim Firdausī (d. c. 1020) is a vast epic poem, whose current standard edition includes over 50,000 rhymed couplets (Khāleghi-Motlagh 1999). The epic spans Iranian history from the mythical Gayomart, the First Man, to the fall of the historical Sasanian dynasty as a result of the Arab conquest in the seventh century, and is thus considered the national epos of Iran.²

The other focal point for studying orality in medieval Persian literature has become the Persian dāstān. Dāstāns are capacious fictional prose narratives with branching plots, which relate the heroic-romantic adventures of their eponymous heroes, often with a religious, Islamic emphasis. Their composition and transmission are connected with the institution of professional or semiprofessional storytellers, who at different historical periods were known as muḥaddithūn, qīṣa-khānān, and, more recently, since about the Safavid period (sixteenth century onwards), as naqqālān.³ Lacking a strict genre definition, dāstāns were variously referred to by their authors as 'tale, story' (dāstān, rivāyat, ḥikāyat or qīṣa) or 'book' (kitāb). In research literature they are defined as folk stories (dāstān-hā-yi ‘ammīyāna),⁴ as narodnye dastany (Borsevshkiy 1963:10–11), popular romances (Hanaway 1970:7, and 1971), or as heroic novels (romanhai pahlavānī) (Salmov 1971:14–15). The writing down of the dāstāns most probably began in the eleventh century; the tradition of their composition survived till the second half of the

¹ The expression is borrowed from Mukerji 1991:1.
nineteenth, while their dissemination in lithographic and in typographic print as ‘popular booklets’ continued well into the twentieth century.⁵

1 The Shāh-nāma and the Quest for Orality: Sources and their Provenance; Patterns of Composition and Transmission

The relationship of the Shāh-nāma to oral tradition and in particular to pre-Islamic Iranian oral poetics proves to be a knotty issue, owing to the disappearance of Firdausī’s sources and to our very partial, mostly conjectural, knowledge of the state of the art of Middle Persian epic poetry which might have influenced his work.⁶ Following the conclusions of fundamental studies on the Iranian national epic, notably by Theodor Nöldeke (Nöldeke 1896–1904; 1890), it has come to be generally believed that Firdausī relied on written sources, first and foremost a recension, probably in New Persian, of a lost Middle Persian Xvadāy-nāmag (Book of Kings), a prose collection of legendary and historical materials pertaining to the Iranian past and compiled in the late Sasanian period.⁷ Even if some oral material was added to this, it was reworked with firm adherence to contemporary written literary poetic patterns, including the use of quantitative meter (mutaqārīb in the case of the Shāh-nāma), unknown in Middle Persian poetry and shaped under the influence of Arabic poetics.⁸

At the same time, attempts were made to trace a more immediate connection of the Shāh-nāma with oral traditional poetic forms and themes. Thus, Olga M. Davidson argued for the oral sources of Firdausī’s epic and its close connection with the Indo-European epic heritage (drawing mostly on George Dumézil), and suggested that the Shāh-nāma should be considered as an ‘authoritative corpus of Iranian oral poetic traditions.’⁹ Davidson interpreted the expressions of speaking and listening, as well as references current in the epic to mubāds (Zoroastrian priests), dihqāns (courtly landed gentry) and sarāyandagān (singers, narrators), who in Iranian tradition were credited as bearers and guardians of the mytho-heroic past, as indicative of Firdausī’s use of oral,

⁵ See Marzolph 1994: 1–4. Extant works comprise Samak-i ‘Ayyār, Iskandar-nāma, Dārāb-nāma, Abū Muslim-nāma, Junayd-nāma, Fīrūzshāh-nāma (the work was originally published under the mistaken title Dārāb-nāma, and later emended by the same editor to Fīrūzshāh-nāma; see Šafā 1960–63: II, 765–66); the so-called Safavid Iskandar-nāma that came down in several disparate versions, some of which are attributed to Manūchihr Khān Ḥakīm; Ḥamza-nāma; Husayn-i Kurd-i Shabistari; Amīr Arsalān; Sālim-i Javābī and some others.

⁶ On the only surviving specimen of ancient Iranian epic poetry in Pahlavi, Ayādgār i Zarērān (Memorial of Zarēr), see Boyce 1989. For the possible role of Parthian minstrels (gītānš) in the dissemination of the epic tradition in Sasanian Iran see Boyce 1957 and 2003; see, however, the critical comments by M. Omidsalar on the limited value of this evidence for our knowledge of the development of the epic in New Persian (Omidsalar 1995: 451–52, and 1996: 239–40). A survey of the controversy around the issue of Middle Iranian metrics, as well as hypotheses as to their nature, appears in Shaked 1970.

⁷ For a summary of the contention concerning Firdausī’s sources, see de Blois 1994: 120–24, and Yamamoto 2003: 3–6.

⁸ For a succinct survey of transitions in the metrical system from Middle Persian to Neo-Persian poetry, see de Blois 1994: 42–53.

performative (as against textual) sources, thus dismissing the prevalent view of his mediated reliance upon the Middle Persian chronicle mentioned above. In addition, she made an attempt to apply to the Shāb-nāma the concepts of the oral-formulaic theory of M. Parry and A. B. Lord, suggesting that the building-blocks of the epic were functional formulas.¹¹

The endeavour to prove that the composition of the Shāb-nāma was based on the rules of oral poetry has generated an intense discussion of pros and cons among scholars.¹² In fact, the use of ’oral’ verbs, especially in medieval texts, has only limited corroborative value for their oral provenance, while references to the figures conventionally associated with oral tradition and transmission, might have entered Firdausī’s work from his written sources and functioned as topoi or rhetorical means.¹³ Rather than reflecting the mentality of an oral poetic tradition or a myth-made stylization of oral poetry, as Davidson believes (1994: 48–53, esp. 48; 2000: 44–58), the claim that a written source has been followed suggests that the author no longer justifies his work from within oral tradition (Green 1994:162). Moreover, the formulaic language – provided its existence gets proved beyond the limited selection analysed by Davidson – is not necessarily indicative of the oral composition of the epic.¹⁴

The Oral-Formulaic Theory being of limited value in dealing with the Shāb-nāma, an alternative Oral Performance Model (abbreviated as OPM) was further proposed to appraise the extent to which the oral tradition might have affected Firdausī’s work, as well as later epics which emulated the Shāb-nāma in metre, themes and motifs (Yamamoto 2003: esp. 51–52). The OPM suggests examining samples from the Shāb-nāma in light of structural and thematic features of the practice of naqqālī performance, a form of Persian professional storytelling that evolved since the Safavid period (sixteenth century) onwards. The Shāb-nāma figured prominently in the naqqālī repertoire, albeit in prose retelling, having been amplified and blended with the material of the so-called ’secondary’ epics comprising the Persian ’Epic Cycle’.¹⁵

According to the OPM, some formal and thematic criteria typical of storytellers’ tūmans, i.e. ’scrolls’ containing the written basic story-line of an orally performed prose narrative, are found in Firdausī’s work as well.¹⁶ On a formal level these include the

¹² K. Yamamoto has painstakingly recorded all the instances of Firdausī’s allusions to his sources, showing that their interpretation as oral and/or written is essentially ambiguous and ambivalent (2003: 60–80). She concluded that Firdausī was ’[…] manifestly conscious of the “literary-written” nature of his undertaking’ (80). See further de Blois 1994: 54–55; Omidsalar 1995: 442–49, and 1996: 240–41; Khāliqi–Muṭlaq 2009: 1–7.
¹⁴ On the Persian ’Epic Cycle’ and on ’secondary’ epics and their characteristics see de Blois 1998b; 1994: 562–76; Molé 1953; Hanaway 1978; on the influence of the Shāb-nāma on the naqqālī tradition, see Rubanovich 2010b.
¹⁵ On tūmans see Page 1979: 198–212; Rubanovich 2010b. The materials on the basis of which the OPM was elaborated and tested by its author, comprised the tūmār containing the story of Rustam and his son Suhrāb by the storyteller Murshid ’Abbās-i Zarīr (see Dūstkhāh 1991) and the part on the reign of King Kay Khusrāw from the Shāb-nāma (Khāliqi–Muṭlaq 1988–2008, vols. 3 and 4).
punctuation of episode boundaries by narrative markers (e.g., ‘on this/that side’) and temporal markers (e.g., ‘when’, ‘then’, descriptions of sunrise/sunset), the variety of which, however, is much narrower than in storytellers’ tūmārs, perhaps due to metric constraints (Yamamoto 2003: 85–93). On a thematic plane, in conformity with the OPM, similarly to a naqqāl, Firdausī appears to have used such narrative techniques as interlacing, i.e., weaving two story-lines together; introducing irony and suspense and changing narrative speed; using structural repetition and false signals. At the same time, although Yamamoto’s sample meets the thematic criteria characteristic of oral performance in the sense that the story is constructed around a key motif accentuated by the narrative techniques indicated above, it nevertheless does not demonstrate the full array of formal characteristics typical of oral naqqāli performance as embodied in the tūmār studied (2003: 107–9, 141–42). Whereas the tūmār text is structured in a serial way by means of instalments and episodes of more or less equal length, to satisfy the performing naqqāl’s pragmatic audience-oriented need for a similar duration of storytelling sessions, no such regularity is observed in the Shāh-nāma. Viewed pragmatically from the standpoint of transmission and reception, this finding means that Firdausī could hardly have intended his work for oral serial performance. Another observation emerging from the application of the OPM to the text of the Shāh-nāma concerns the virtual lack of immediate interaction of the narrator with his audience, of the kind that A. Dundes has pertinently termed ‘raconteur’s asides’, be they of explanatory, evaluative, amusing, didactic or other nature (1966: 511). This is not to say that the Shāh-nāma is devoid of meta-narrative comments, quite the opposite; in the epic, however, the narrator’s digressions follow the logic of the literary text, which, contrary to oral performance, is meant to be read and pondered upon, and the narrator’s commentaries are therefore mostly patterned as prologue or epilogue to entire stories.

The general conclusion drawn by Kumiko Yamamoto as regards oral influence on the characteristics and structure of the Shāh-nāma as they emerge from her application of the OPM to a concrete sample story is that Firdausī ‘modelled this particular story [...] intuitively on oral performance’ due to his personal experience with oral performances as a listener. At the same time, according to Yamamoto, Firdausī broke with the oral tradition in that he revised the orally-based story in view of the written medium ‘to enhance its “readability”’ by altering the length of instalments and episodes, varying the number of episodes in each instalment and modifying the dramatic intensity of the instalments (2003: 141).

As for the Shāh-nāma’s distribution, a view has often been expressed in favour of parallel oral and written transmission. This notion rests largely on two unsubstantiated premises: the fluid manuscript tradition of Firdausī’s work and the epic’s broad popularity in Iranian folk oral tradition since its composition (tenth and early eleventh centuries) up to the present. Thus, drawing on Paul Zumthor’s model of mouvance, Davidson argues that ‘patterns of variation’ in the text of the Shāh-nāma attest to its performativ-

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¹⁶ For the examination of these narrative techniques in the pmār, see Yamamoto 2003: 42–45; in the section from the Shāh-nāma, Yamamoto 2003: 97–107.
¹⁸ For examples and detailed examination, see Sarrāmī 1989: 111–53; see also Yamamoto 2003: 93, 108
ity and an ongoing recomposition-in-performance.¹⁹ Statistical sampling, however, shows that textual variants in the Shāh-nāma manuscripts can largely be explained in standard paleographic terms rather than as representing different performances.²⁰ Regarding the epic’s popularity, in support of which the activities of naqālīs are anachronistically evoked, the ready dissemination of the Shāh-nāma in folk culture is not to be taken for granted. Prior to the Safavid period there is little historical evidence of any significant oral performative ways of transmitting Firdausī’s poetry.²¹ Although since early medieval times there existed an institution of shāh-nāma-khānīs (Shāh-nāma readers/narrators), who specialized in the recitation of epic-heroic stories, including that of Firdausī, they seem to have practiced mostly prose retelling, sporadically interspersing their epic material with poetic passages.²² Furthermore, as I have shown elsewhere, until the fifteenth century the reception of the Shāh-nāma may have been restricted to learned circles of courtly makers of lyric and epic poetry and historical writings, while its infiltration into folk literature spanned a longer period (Rubanovich 2010a). The absorption of the courtly makers of lyric and epic poetry and historical writings, while its infiltration into the medieval folk milieu appears to have succeeded the canonization of the epic in ‘high’, courtly literature, in which it provided, among other things, a useful tool for conferring legitimacy on non-Iranian, Turco-Mongol rulers.²³

Although in Persian culture the improvised composition and recitation of poetry (badība-sarā’ī) were widespread and much praised throughout the centuries, it was nevertheless first and foremost an elaborate and erudite art based on the poet’s mastering of the contemporaneous poetic canon and his minute acquaintance with poetic metrics and rhetorical figures.²⁴ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Firdausī’s Shāh-nāma constituted a recommended text to be read and studied by courtly writers of both prose and poetry in order to attain perfection in eloquence and versification.²⁵ Extemporized performances were presented at court or during learned gatherings (majālis); they were largely limited to ‘small’ poetic genres – ghazal (lyric poem), qaṣīda (ode), mu‘āmmā

²¹ See Davidson 1994: 56–60. – Besides the scarcity of evidence, our knowledge of transmission patterns in medieval Persian culture is further impeded by the polysemanticy of the Persian verb kb‘āndan, which can be interpreted as ‘to read’, ‘to sing’, ‘to recite’, or ‘to study’.
²² Firdausī’s Shāh-nāma is only one version of the Iranian national epic generally known as the Xa-dāy-nāmag (Book of the kings) tradition. The Shāh-nāma was preceded by a number of works in prose and verse, now lost (for a recent detailed analysis of the relationship of various early medieval Arabic and Persian sources for the ‘Books of the kings’, see Khālīqi–Mutchaq 2009: 24–42, and the stemma on p. 48. Hence, the references to the Shāh-nāma in Persian sources of the tenth and eleventh centuries for the most part concern epic works other than Firdausī’s. See Līsān 1975: 7–8; see also Afshārī and Madāynī 1998: Introduction, 27.
²³ See Melikian-Chirvani 1997 and 1988. On a theoretical level, the historical reception of the Shāh-nāma finely reflects the dynamic nature of the literary system as viewed in the Polysystem Theory, when a device, a product, a model of writing etc., after having been canonized, is transferred in the course of time to the periphery of the literary system and is adapted by its non-canonical stratum. See Even-Zohar 1990: 13–17; Sheffy 1990.
²⁴ See Bagley 1989. Examples of the extemporized composition of poems by courtly poets, which demonstrate the importance of this technique in classical Persian poetry, can be found in Niẓmī ‘Arūḍī’s Chahār maqāla (see Mu’in 2001: 57, 68, 74, 85).
²⁵ See Mu’in 2001: 22; Iqbal 1921: 57.
(riddle) and others, – and were guided by conventions which had nothing in common
with the oral composition-in-performance of folk bards, except for the shared media,
i.e., oral and aural channels of transmission and reception. It seems, moreover, that in
Iranian oral popular poetic tradition as such, both medieval and modern, the component
of rote memorization with the subsequent reproducing of a text exercised a significant
role, downplaying the element of improvisation.

Thus, while enumerating the six rules of poetry recitation (nazm-khānī) in his
chapter on popular entertainers, Mullā Ḥusayn Vā’iz-i Kāshīfī (d. 1504/5) urges the
reciter to explain to the audience the meaning of a difficult verse.²⁶ In addition, the
reciter is adjured to pay homage to the composer of the poem (sāḥib-i 'in nazm) he
recites, either at the beginning of the performance or at the end, by citing the author’s
name and sending him blessings. Beside dependence on a fixed text – whether memor-
ized from the writing or by ear – such prescriptions imply the foregrounding of the
author and of his authority at the expense of the performer, who is perceived as a trans-
mitter and a proficient commentator, rather than as a (co-)creator. In such a case, the
oral performer’s skilfulness, instead of recomposition, would be expressed in his ability to
impress and move his listeners and avoid tedium and incomprehensibility.

The importance of the text in the transmission and distribution of the Shāh-nāma,
either by means of silent, private reading or through reading aloud, can be glimpsed
from occasional references in an anonymous dāštān, the Iskandar-nāma (The Book of

²⁶ Mahjūb 1971: 305; the full translation of the passage is in Omidsalar 1984:207–8.
Alexander [the Great]), written down approximately in the twelfth century and reworked probably in the fourteenth century. Thus, the narrator comments on the popularity of the tales of Siyavush, Kay Khusrau and Afrasyab, all three being characters of Firdaus’s epic, saying: ‘These tales are in the mind of most of the people who have read the Shab-nama.’ In another instance the reference is entwined in the characters’ dialogue; Alexander, having heard the tale of Kay Khusrau’s disappearance in a snowstorm recounted to him by his vizier Aristotle, asks the latter: ‘Did you read all this from the written (az nivishta khvândî)?’ – ‘Yes’, – was the answer.

It appears that starting from the end of the eleventh/beginning of the twelfth century the common way to familiarize oneself with the Shab-nama, perhaps due to its sheer bulk, was by means of mediatory works which included selected fragments (Rubanovich 2006: 256–58, and 2010a). With regard to folk literature, we know of collections which were compiled by professional storytellers and comprised an inventory of ready-made poetic examples to be memorized and then recited in relevant narrative contexts during performance. The study of dastans which show a substantial affinity to oral traditional patterns, demonstrates that from the fifteenth century onwards verses from the Shab-nama used to be inserted in set narrative contexts, such as exhortations on the vicissitudes of fate, depictions of battle scenes, descriptions of the alternation of day and night and the like, probably extracted from such collections. The fragmentary reception of the Shab-nama accounts for various modifications that the verses underwent on their insertion into prose narratives. These include de-contextualization, substitution for the sake of plot adjustment, and inventive augmentation, where the verses are freely diluted by stylized lines of the storytellers’ own making (Rubanovich 2006: 253–54, 258, and 2010a). The Shab-nama is thus perceived by folk storytellers as an ample reservoir of materials to be reworked in accordance with the traditional aesthetics of the dastan genre, i.e., its profound narrativity, formulaity, and aural mode of reception.

Theories of oral composition thus appear to be hardly effective in dealing with the Shab-nama, whose author conceived of his work as a book to endure through the centuries and become a monument (yâdgâr) to his name – an aspiration in line with the established written literary tradition of Firdausi’s time. In view of the absence of

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27 Afshâr 1964: 201; the translations are mine if not otherwise stated.
28 Afshâr 1964: 208. For a similar reference, see Şafi 1965–68: I, 509 (‘Everybody who read the Shab-nama, knows [the tales of Gaudarz].’). It cannot be ruled out, however, that here some other collection of heroic legends, generically known as Shab-nama, is meant. See n. 22 above.
29 Rubanovich 2006: 250–51. See Mary E. Page’s observations as regards the training of naqqâls in modern Iran. Each day an apprentice (shâgird) is apportioned by his teacher (ustâd, master), himself a professional storyteller, a segment from the Shab-nama to be memorized line by line. The material learned is then checked the next day (Page 1979: 198). Thus a naqqâl gets acquainted with the story-line of the epic and stocks in his memory a sufficient amount of verse citations from the Shab-nama to recite them occasionally at relevant points of prose narration in the course of his performance.
30 Most manifestly the concept of yâdgâr is expressed in Firdausi’s invocation to Sultan Mahmud 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-i bandagi kardam ay shahriyâr / kih mânâd zi-mân dar jahân yâdgâr // banâ–hâ–yi abâd gardad kharâb / zi-bârán-u az
knowledge about Firdausī’s sources and their provenance, as well as the uncertainty concerning the problem of continuity between the Middle Persian poetic tradition and its Neo-Persian post-Islamic counterpart, the quest for orality in the Shāh-nāma is a hazardous undertaking. To draw inferences about the oral traits and modalities of performance in the Shāh-nāma by means of projecting the data obtained in the study of the relatively modern practice of naqqālī without attending to possible structural differences conditioned by the changing media (poetry versus prose) of the material, can hardly be considered methodologically sound. Tenable in the orality context is the examination of the impact exercised by Firdausī’s epic on medieval popular literature, such as dāstāns in the domain of subject-matter, motif transformation, poetic interpolations and the like.

2 The dāstān Genre in Medieval Persian Literature: Aspects of Production

From the point of view of their making, dāstāns do not represent the product of oral composition-in-performance: they do not constitute transcriptions of concrete storytelling events or or the outcome of dictation, as has sometimes been suggested with regard to some of them.³¹ As I shall make clear below, the dāstāns were composed in writing by authors who were part and parcel of the world of medieval literacy. In contrast to a work composed in a purely oral manner without recourse to writing, the production of dāstāns was therefore removed in time and space from the phase of transmission and reception.

Oral antecedents must have played a considerable part in the evolution of dāstāns. It is highly probable that thematically and structurally the dāstāns are based on cycles of folktales or legends which had crystallized around the eponymous heroes and had been transmitted orally in the course of multiple storytelling events.³² At a certain point these fragmentary narrative traditions were unified into a coherent narrative framework;³³

³³ The majority of the medieval dāstāns appears to have been written down between the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries (e. g., the anonymous Iskandar-nāma is dated to the end of the twelfth/beginning of the thirteenth c.; see Maḥjub 1967: 454–55; Dārāb-nāma very cautiously to the eleventh – twelfth c.; see Salimov 1971: 36–37; or to the end of the twelfth

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*taḥīsh-i aʃtāb // pay afgandam az naẓm kābh-i buland / kih az bād-u bārān nayābad gazand // bar-in nāma bar ‘imr-hā bugzanad / bami kb‘inad-ash bar kih dārad khvād; Khālīqi-Muṭlaq 1988–2008: IV, 173–74, ll. 65–68). See also the elaborate reflection on the instrumental role of writing down tales (original as well as translated) in immortalizing one’s (mostly, a ruler’s) name in the older preface to the so-called Abū Maṃṣūr prose Shāh-nāma (c. 957–958) (Riyāḥ 1993:171–72 and n. 7 above). See the statement of Niẓāmī Arūḏi–yī Samarqandi in his Chābār maqāla (Four Discourses; compiled in 1156–1157): ‘The richest portion and most excellent part of poetry are to immortalize one’s name (baq‘ā i ism-aš)’ (Mu’in 2001: 47). For additional references, emphasizing the centrality of the notion of yāḏgīr in medieval Persian literature, see Rubanovich 2009:133, n. 32.*
hence the conventional self-identification of the authors of dāstāns as ‘compilers/gatherers’ (jamʿ-īvananda, jamʿ-īkunanda) and the description of their activity as ‘compiling/gathering’ (jamʿ kardān). Farāmarz b. Khudābād al-ʿRājaṇī, the author of Samak-i ʿAyyār, affords a rare glimpse into how he composed his book: having heard a great many tales from the masters delighting the heart (ustādān-i dil-shād), he found them all ‘incomplete’ (nā-tamām), not covering every subject. Therefore, on the insistence of his friends (dāstān), he ‘arranged, combined and put in proper order’ (bijārīstām-u dar-ham afkandam-u tartīb kardān) an account that would comprise adventures, experiences and feelings of all kinds.³⁴

While piecing the parts into the whole, the authors of dāstāns used to expand their narratives with miscellaneous extraneous materials borrowed from books of a popular variety, such as hagiographical collections of ‘Stories of the Prophets’ (qiṣṣās al-anbiyā), Qurʾānic commentaries (tafsīrs), compendiums of mirabilia (ṣajāʾīb), historical works, epic poems, as well as from oral folk tradition. The sources of the borrowed subject-matter are almost never mentioned; the material itself is largely reworked in conformity with the conventions of folk tradition, in the spirit of what Lauri Honko termed ‘geographical-morphological’ and ‘traditional-morphological’ adaptation.³⁵ Some of the dāstāns, namely the anonymous Iskandar-nāma and Samak-i ʿAyyār, were further subject to redaction at the hands of medieval redactors, the former most probably in the fourteenth, the latter in the sixteenth century. The anonymous redactors’ tampering with the original text betrays their learned, scholarly stance, presenting a sharp contrast to the traditional folk patterns characteristic of the work of the original compilers and thus creating a peculiar interplay between popular folk culture and the learned, ‘high’ counterpart.³⁶

Just as the authors of dāstāns barely offer information on the manner of their work, likewise they do not supply any details about themselves or elaborate on the reasons for

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³⁴ Khānlārī 1959–67: IV, 3–5. A similar line of development is typical of the Arabic folk sīra (ṣīra shaʿbīyya) and the Turkish dāstān in prose, two genres homologous to the Persian dāstān. Thus, for example, it follows from the account of the anonymous author of the sīra Qiṣat Fīrūzshāh that he recorded the tales about Fīrūzshāh which had circulated orally, putting them in proper order and supplementing them with poems of renowned poets (Ṣafā 1960–63: II, 766). Likewise, Abū al-Khayr Rūmī, the author/compiler of the Turkish Saltq-nāma, intimates that whenever he heard a legend about Sari Saltq, the eponymous hero of the dāstān, he wrote it down and then arranged the material he had recorded in the form of a book (Iz 1974–84: fols. 617r–v; Dedes 1996: I, 43). [See also ch. 24 on the Arabic sīyar by T. Herzog and ch. 26 on Turkish medieval oral epic and romance by K. Reichl in this volume.]

³⁵ For discussion see Rubanovich 2004: 131–35, and 2010b.

undertaking the compilation. The author might as well be an external observer who, having watched the storytellers, sets about writing down the materials he has heard, in a new narrative framework. He might do this either at the order of a patron or on his own initiative, striving to present the tales in a fresh form to an audience which would differ from that of storytellers, such as a court circle. Curiously, the particular situation of recording stories at a behest ‘from above’ is reflected in the plot of the anonymous Iskandar-nāma; there the king, Alexander, orders his vizier Aristotle to write down the tales related to him by various storytellers who themselves function as secondary characters in the narrative (e.g., Afšār 1964: 279, 286, 434). Aristotle thus acts as an educated agent, an outsider to the world of the storytellers, who is authoritatively commissioned by his master to keep a written record of the orally transmitted accounts. This procedure could have been interpreted as a conventional motif found in abundance, for example, in the Arabian Nights (Elisséeff 1949: 102–3), if it were not for the fact that it is the Iskandar-nāma proper into which the tales are inserted. Furthermore, not only the tales recounted to Alexander, but all his adventures during his circumnavigation of the world are put down in writing. He bids Aristotle: ‘We have completed [our travels] in the West, and all the marvels were written down. Now, start a new volume, where the
darn are put down in writing. He bids Aristotle: recounted to Alexander, but all his adventures during his circumnavigation of the world

differ from that of storytellers, such as a court circle.³

³ Contrary to other genres of medieval Persian prose, dāstāns are generally devoid of the authorial prefaces and/or epilogues which are conventional loci for meta-narrative statements. On the absence of paratextual units in dāstāns as conditioned by the high degree of their orality, see below, pp. 24–26. ⁴

⁴ See M. Gaillard’s suggestion with regard to Șamak-i ʿAyyār; Gaillard 1987: 166–67.

⁵ One wonders whether keeping a record of Alexander’s travels in the Iskandar-nāma could be a vestige of a vague tradition that ascribes to Alexander himself the chronicling of his journeys. See al-Masʿūdī 1896:263–64, and more explicitly the Ethiopian version of the Alexander Romance (composed between the 14th and 17th centuries): ‘He (i. e., Alexander) reached the heights of heaven and explored them. And he saw the east and the west thereof, and the beauties and the terrible things thereof, and the stations of the rising stars and their courses. And he described fully all these things in a large book which he called, “The Book of the Works of the whole World”’ (Budge 1933:167).

⁶ Compare in this respect the case of the Turkish Saltık-nāma, compiled on the order of an Ottoman prince Jim Sultan (d. 1494) (İz 1974–84: fols. 617r–v; also Dedes 1996: I, 43), as well as the Turkish translation of the Sīrat Antar made at the behest of Sultan Mehmet (Heath 1996: 241). The request ‘from above’ to compile a dāstān should be distinguished from ordering a copy of a manuscript, which indeed occurs time and again with regard to the MSS of some Persian dāstāns. Thus, for example, the sixteenth-century MS of the Dārāb-nāma was copied by a certain Kay Qubād ibn Mahyār-i Pārsī for Nūshirvān ibn Bahmanshāh-i Pārsī, the latter probably being a nobleman of Nausāri in the Indian Gujarat. It is noteworthy that according to the scribe’s post-note to the text, the MS he copied had been borrowed from the Royal Library of the Emperor Akbar due to the unavailability and rarity of the MSS of the Dārāb-nāma during the scribe’s time-period (Șafā 1965–660
To pursue further the possibility of dāstān compilation by external observers, one might think of an individual with a strong literary mindset who, disapproving of the multiformity of orally transmitted stories, sets them down in writing in order to preserve them from ‘distortion’ and ‘aberration’. Such was the motive, for instance, of the Arabic compiler of the Qiṣṣat Firūzshāh (The Story of Firūzshāh); he objected to the proliferating circulation of accounts about this hero, to the original version of which ‘one added and the other deleted as they wished’.⁴¹ Among the Persian dāstāns, however, no indications of such a way of production can be traced.

Whereas these scenarios of production imply a strict dichotomy between the literate/learned/written and the illiterate/uneducated/oral, the latter being identified with the world of the storytellers, the reality appears both more dynamic and more subtle. Muḥammad-i Bighami, the fifteenth-century author of the Firūzshāb-nāma (The Book of Firūzshāh), explains his motives for compiling the dāstān as follows: ‘The aim of putting this tale together is that the name of the humble one (i.e., Bighami himself) would endure amongst the people of speech (ahl-i sukhān), and, God willing, [the story] will be received [favourably] by the brothers (barādarān); and if there is any flaw in it (i.e., in the story), they shall generously correct it and magnanimously pardon the humble one. Verse:’⁴² When this renowned book comes to an end / the world will become full of praise of me; / From now on I will not die, I will endure, / for I have spread the seeds of speech; / Everyone in possession of understanding, good sense and knowledge / will exalt me after my death’ (Ṣafā 1960–63: II, 372–73). Muḥammad-i Bighami therefore compiled the work on his own initiative with the purpose of gaining a certain position among ‘the people of speech’ and ‘the brothers’. Although he does not specify who these two groups are, we learn from the Futuwat-nāma-yi Sulṭānī of the above-mentioned Mullā Ḵūsray Vā‘īz-ī Kāshīfī, Bighami’s near contemporary, that the expression ‘people of speech’ denotes popular performers whose occupation is connected with verbal activity, as opposed to the display of physical prowess by ‘the people of strength’ (ahl-i zūr) and of tricks by ‘the people of play’ (ahl-i bāzī) (Mahjūb 1971:279). According to Vā‘īz-ī Kāshīfī the ‘people of speech’ are divided – in a diminishing order of importance – into the extollers of the Prophet Muḥammad and his family (maddāhān va gharra-khānān), the soothsayers (khwāṣ-gūyān va biṣṭ-andāzān) and the tellers of stories and legends (qiṣa-khwānān va afsānā-gūyān) (Mahjūb 1971:280). Bighami must have belonged to the third category.⁴³ In the same section of the Futuwat-nāma-yi Sulṭānī the expression ‘the brothers of the path’ (barādarān-i ʿṭariq) is used to designate fellow-professionals, i.e., performers (maʿraka-gīrān), who by the fifteenth century may have been organized in a guild of some sort, to which ‘the people of speech’ also belonged (Mahjūb 1971:279).

⁴² The lines that follow are borrowed with modifications from Firdausī’s Shāh-nāma; see n.30 above.
The professional storyteller Muḥammad-i Bīghāmī, who probably specialized in the tale of Firūzshāh, thus intended his work for distribution first and foremost among his colleagues, either to enrich their repertoire or to provide a manual which could be used in the professional training of apprentices.44 The possibility of ‘inner consumption’ of the Firūzshāh-nāma has further support in a specific terminology employed by the author in the storytelling formula that punctuates the text.45 There the addressees are mostly defined as ‘friends, fellows’ (dāstān), once as ‘young and clever’ (javānān-u ‘āqīlān) and once as ‘experts of speech’ (dānandagān-i sukhān), the two latter expressions apparently indicating various levels of skill in Bīghāmī’s fellow storytellers.46 The same designation – ‘friends, fellows’ – as referring to the intended audience is also given by the author of Samak-i Ayyār (see above, p. 12), a fact that bespeaks a certain consistency corroborating the possibility of the dāsṭān’s ‘inner consumption’. In fact, apprentices used to acquire the necessary knowledge of the story while listening to the performances of experienced storytellers, or by learning the text by heart, either independently or under the guidance of a master. However, whereas the former way of learning presupposed exceptional memorizing abilities and could not suit every one, the utilization at the stage of apprenticeship of a full textual version of the story prepared by an experienced storyteller like Maulānā-yi aẓam (the great master) Bīghāmī or some other authoritative storyteller in case of another dāstān, was a more accessible way of mastering the profession.

However, besides the need to satisfy the professional demands of their fellow storytellers, dāstān compilers were motivated by a strong belief in the power of the written word which they saw as the most appropriate means to immortalize their name. The author of Samak-i Ayyār expresses the hope that thanks to his work he will deserve being prayed for after his death (Khānlarī 1959–67: IV, 5); Bīghāmī emphasizes the same view, with the help of the almost cliched verses of Firdausī on the subject, cited above, while the author of the Iskandar-nāma, again through the voice of his hero, Alexander, sees the act of recording as the only way to gain a good name in this world and secure God’s mercy in the next. The expressiveness and clarity with which the matter is stated in the Iskandar-nāma are apparent in two passages which fully display the apologetic stance of the author, camouflaged in Alexander’s words: ‘This chronicle of mine (i. e., Iskandar-nāma) will become renowned in the world, it will be copied and studied; when kings of the world will hear my life story, they will rejoice; they will read, copy and learn my history till the Day of Judgment [...]. But my life, alas! Were it loyal to me, I would have extracted from the world so many marvels that a mule would be needed to

44 Bīghāmī’s work was already copied in his life-time by a certain Maḥmūd Daftar-khān, ‘the reciter of booklets’; daftar-khāns specialized in reciting books at courts (Dīkhūdā 1994: Šafā 1960–63: II, 768).

45 On the storytelling formula as one of the oral features of the dāstān genre see below, pp. 22–23.

46 For dāstān see, e. g., Šafā 1960–63: I, 430, 579, 592, 663; II, 304, 755; jāvānān-u ‘āqīlān: Šafā 1960–63: I, 204; dānandagān-i sukhān: Šafā 1960–63: I, 674. – Compare one of the fundamental rules prescribed to storytellers (jadāb-i hikāyat-gūyān) by Vā‘īz-i Kāshīfī: ‘If [the storyteller] is a novice, he has to read/recite the story that he wishes to perform to his master; whereas if he is experienced, he must repeat [the story] to himself in order not to get stuck [in the course of a performance]’ (Maḥjūb 1971: 304).
carry the *Iskandar-nāma* (Afshār 1964: 164). And again: ‘I hope that the redemption of my many sins will be in that when I depart from this world and the *Iskandar-nāma* shall remain and will be read, one of the slaves of Allah, be He extolled, will hear some of my chronicles, will shed a tear and his heart will rejoice; then God, be He extolled, on his entreaty will pardon and in His generosity take compassion [upon] me, for God is forgiving and merciful’ (Afshār 1964: 185).

In their work of writing down the *dāstāns*, professional storytellers were thus guided by their firm belief in the immortalizing and absolving power of the written word in general and the book in particular as imbued with the potential to arouse empathy in the addressee and afford an emotional-aesthetic pleasure bordering on catharsis. This approach did not differ from the ethic-pragmatic view on the value of writing as the basis of cultural activity that permeated the state of mind of medieval learned Perso-Arabic litterateurs.⁴⁷ The authors of *dāstāns* were conscious of creating an independent entity, a book, quite unlike the purely oral singer/storyteller who could not detach himself from his creation.

At the same time, although influenced by the rhetoric of the written word, *dāstān* authors were not affected by the idea of textual fixity and did not cherish individual authorship. Thus, instead of claiming propriety rights to the written version of the *Firuzshāh-nāma* to obviate any likelihood of tampering with his text, Muhammad-i Bighami, for example, encourages his colleagues to introduce changes and improvements into it, if they find it necessary. This approach clearly contradicts the attitude of a purely literary author towards his text, who would strongly resist any interference with his original work.⁴⁸ Thus, although the arranging in writing of scattered, orally-transmitted tales into unified narratives was an effort on the part of professional storytellers to bring forth a model for future performances, regulating to a certain extent the framework for prospective storytelling events, they by no means meant to produce fixed authoritative and canonical textual versions. They continued to consider the text in terms of oral poetics as multiform and open to addition and change, as one that is not given to the exceptional authority of the author/compiler, but constitutes an integral part of the storytelling tradition.

The inquiry into the aspects of *dāstān* production has shown an interplay between the literate and oral traditional patterns of text production. Functioning on the interface between the written and the oral, the creators of *dāstāns* made use of the technology of writing with its possibilities for the linear organization of the text; they displayed

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⁴⁷ See, e.g., Arazi 1997: 377–78, 398–401; Rosenthal 1974: 6–7; Heck 2002: 107–10. It should be noted that the attitude of literary circles to the written word as described here was opposed to the views upheld by the Muslim religious milieu of *ḥadīth* scholars, who claimed priority for oral discourse in the transmission of knowledge and perceived writing as corrupting the quality of transmission, but in practice could not renounce its usage completely; see Cook 1997; Heck 2002.

⁴⁸ To cite two examples illustrating the difference: the Arab historian al-Mas’ūdī, the author of a voluminous *Murūj al-dhahab*, rigorously prohibits the slightest modification or distortion of his original text, threatening the trespassers with God’s wrath (Barbier de Meynard and Courteille 1861–77: I, 22–23; IX, 78–80). Likewise, the Persian historian Muhammad-i Rāvandī in his *Rāh at as-sādūr va āyat as-sārūr* hurrs one hundred thousand curses at those who would dare add a letter or a word to his work, to abridge it or interfere with it in some other manner (Iqbal 1921: 64). See also Zhukovsky 1926: Persian text, 2; Rosenthal 1974: 46.
acquaintance with certain cognitive patterns characteristic of the literary mindset, e.g., belief in the superiority of the written word as authoritative and immortalizing. But they remained true to the aesthetics of folk oral tradition, which conditioned their flexible approach to a text and dictated quite specific ways of the textualization of traditional materials, to be discussed below.

3 Modalities of Communication

On the basis of indirect historical evidence, it is generally believed that dāstāns were transmitted in performance, performative situations ranging from re-enacting a memorized text with varying degrees of improvisation to reading aloud. The basic orientation of dāstāns towards interaction with the addressee determines the discourse mode of ‘involvement’, as opposed to ‘detachment’ in the case of silent reading. On the level of discourse structure, the mode of involvement implies the wide use of meta-communicative markers which function as pragmatic devices intended to sustain interrelation between the narrator and his audience. They also facilitate the addressee’s aural reception of the text by means of punctuating shifts in the story-line. Meta-communicative markers in Persian dāstāns include:

(a) *Expressions indicating speaking and listening*, such as the verbs ‘say, tell, relate’ (guf-tan), ‘retell’ (bāz guftan), ‘listen’ (shanidan) and a participial noun ‘listener(s)’ (shanavanda(gān)). Examples are: ‘God willing, we (i.e., the narrator) shall tell [the story] in its proper place’ (Iskandar-nāma); ‘Their tale will also be told’ (bi-khidmat gufta kb‘āhad shudan) (Firūzshāh-nāma); ‘This is an extraordinary story, listen [to it]!’ (Bishinau!) (Firūzshāh-nāma); ‘And you, listen to the command of God, be He extolled, so that you realize that nothing is in your hands’ (Firūzshāh-nāma); ‘There is no doubt that God, be He praised and extolled, sliced him (i.e., the vicious enemy) in two by means of Alexander’s sword, in order that it would be a lesson to the listeners’ (... tā ‘ibrat-i shanavandagān bāhad) (Dārāb-nāma).

(b) *Deictic references*, represented by deictic phrases and adverbial expressions, which assist the addressee to follow the narration, at the same time providing anaphoric and cataphoric cross-references. Theoretically, these can be divided into two broad categories, namely, deictic references pertaining to time and those denoting space, their choice being conditioned by two different cognitive systems of conceptualizing the discourse in temporal or spatial terms. The ‘metaphor’ of time entails a dynamic process that takes shape during reading aloud/listening and is thus associated first and foremost with oral medium and oral/aural discourse. By contrast, the ‘metaphor’ of space verbalizes the two-dimensionality of a written text, having evolved with the appearance of the concept of the book.
In the dāstāns temporal meta-narrative markers, such as ‘now’ (āknūn) and ‘then, that time’ (āngāb) prevail. Examples from the Dārāb-nāma: ‘We (i.e., the narrator) have now reached the story of Ţamruṣiya’s mother; ‘Now we shall tell what happened to Hamārpāl’; ‘And we shall resume storytelling about them when it will be the turn [to relate] about Alexander. When Alexander comes to them, then (āngāb) we shall tell what happens with the ascetic and the merchant’ (Ṣafā 1965–68: I, 268; II, 211; I, 131). The last example, in which the temporal aspect is reinforced by the syntactic means of a temporal clause, corroborates the ambient relation between the ‘metaphor’ of space and the high degree of orality of a discourse. In it the difference between the discourse time and the event time of the narration is annulled, as if the narrator experiences the events in the plot as actually taking place during the storytelling. The blending of the real time of storytelling with the fictional time of the plot echoes the conception of time typical of the ritual-mythological thinking of oral culture, when the performer identifies himself with the myth, whose pattern is being reconstructed in the performance ritual.

(c) Discourse markers facilitating the segmentation of discourse. In texts of the dāstān type which are communicated orally and received aurally, the segmentation of discourse bears a pragmatic function of prime significance. The oral/aural mode discards the conventional graphic division of a lengthy text into chapters with headings as of no use to listeners, privileging instead more scrupulously detailed structural means of holding the listener’s attention throughout the lengthy narrative. The reservoir of discourse markers employed in the dāstāns is too vast and various both morphologically and syntactically to be listed here in full; I shall concentrate therefore on the most typical and representative ones:

(1) A storytelling formula.⁵⁴ This is a characteristic feature of dāstāns and is paradigmatic in the sense that it possesses a fixed syntactical structure (noun phrase + complete predicate in the present tense) and a shared phraseology, indicative of oral narration. For instance, ‘The possessor of the story thus relates that ...’ (khudā-vand-i ḥadith chūnān riwāyat mīkunad kih) or ‘The teller of the tale thus says ...’ (rāvī-yi dāstān chūnīn giyād).⁵⁵ Functionally, the storytelling formula provides a structuring device that organizes the narrative.⁵⁶ It appears at points of switching from one episode to another, indicates shifts in theme, marks the retrieving of the storyline after a descriptive passage, a poetic insertion or the like. W. Hanaway draws an apt comparison between the storytelling formula in dāstāns and a typographical device of indentation (1970: 250); in fact, the storytelling formula loses its semantic significance, becoming a discourse marker meant to articulate structural

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⁵⁴ Hanaway (1970: 148) refers to the device as ‘conventional opening phrase,’ which however misidentifies its function, since it appears in different segments of the text and not only at beginnings. In addition, it is necessary to distinguish between the storytelling formula treated here and formulas as units of oral composition in Parry’s and Lord’s sense.

⁵⁵ For more variants of the storytelling formula see Rubanovich 2004: 248–49.

relations within the text for both performer and addressee. Indeed, it guides the performer in the pacing of his performance, signalling the eye-voice span and preparing him for a change in the narrative subject or for placing the correct logical-intonational emphases at relevant points. Such functioning explains the frequent interpolation of the storytelling formula by copyists on the margins of manuscripts, as well as the use in red ink in some manuscripts to distinguish the formula from the rest of the text. As for the audience, the storytelling formula punctuates narrative segments, such as episodes, for instance, drawing the listener’s attention to a forthcoming change and thus facilitating the processing of the orally-transmitted text.

(2) **Connectors.** The common use of connectors – such as *pas* (then), *va* (and), *akhün* (now), *al-qisṭa* (so) – has frequently been referred to by scholars who have studied or translated Persian *dāstāns*. The usual approach is to consider them as ‘weed-words’ and to dismiss them in translation and even in scholarly editions. The connectors, however, have an important pragmatic function in structuring segments of discourse, losing their conventional lexical meaning and turning instead into discourse markers. One example will suffice to illustrate the phenomenon: ‘[King Alexander] travelled till he reached a town. Then¹ (*pas*), when they arrived two stations from the town, there was a despotic and heathen ruler in the town, who spent his days and nights bothering girls and established this bad habit in the town. Then² (*pas*), when King Alexander arrived in the town, a rumour [about his arrival] spread out….²⁰ The first ‘then¹’ introduces expository information on the despotic king, while the second ‘then²’ signals a return to the plot-line after the orientation segment, both ‘then’s being deprived of their temporal meaning and narrative function. Notwithstanding the typicality of the discourse segmentation in the *dāstān* genre, not every change or digression from the plot-line is signalled by discourse markers. Their use therefore does not seem obligatory or systematic and no strict conventions of segmentation can be established.

(d) **Manifestations of interaction ‘storyteller → audience’.** These include:

(1) **Direct address of the narrator to the addressee** to attract attention to structural changes in the narrative or to a didactic message. Examples: ‘Keep them (i. e., the heroes) here and listen from the other side (i. e., a parallel plot-line)’ (*Abū Muslim-nāma*); ‘Leave them (i. e., the heroes) till we (i. e., the narrator) reach their story’ (*Abū Muslim-nāma*); ‘But this is a marvellous story, listen!’ (*Fīrūzhāh-nāma*);

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⁵⁷ See Levin 1979: I. Compare in this regard the conclusions of D. Pinault concerning the pragmatic role of the storytelling formulas *qāla ar-rāvi* (‘The narrator said’) and *qāla ḥāfīz al-badīth* (‘The possessor of the story said’) in *A Thousand and One Nights*. These formulas mostly conclude secondary stories framed by the main narrative or else follow verse passages, thus conveying to the professional reciter of the written text an alteration in narrative tempo or voice (Pinault 1992: 13–14, 171–72, 174).


‘Now, look well at the account of Alexander and take example from this just king’ (Dārāb-nāma); ‘I related [the story] so that you may know that there was no injustice (in what had happened)’ (Samak-i ‘Ayār).61

(2) Rhetorical questions meant to invoke the addressee’s interest in the continuation of the story. Examples: ‘What was the washerman’s story?’ (Dārāb-nāma); ‘Who was that mounted warrior and where did he take the queen of the fair ones?’ (Fīrūzshāb-nāma); ‘What happened to them?’ (Fīrūzshāb-nāma); ‘What kind of horse is it?’ (Samak-i ‘Ayār).62

(3) Reconstruction of the storytelling event or some of its components. The phenomenon is most prominently expressed in the anonymous Iskandar-nāma, occurring in connection with the tales – thirty-seven in number – inserted into the main narrative by the original compiler of the dāstān and later abridged and/or deleted by the medieval redactor (see above, pp. 11–12). Since the subject has been dealt with in detail elsewhere, here I shall briefly present the principal findings (Rubanovich 1996: 71–100; 2004: 135–43). The insertion of tales into the main narrative reproduces the general scheme characteristic of setting up a story session by a storyteller. This comprises a number of stages. During the preparatory stage the storyteller signals his addressee (King Alexander in the case of the Iskandar-nāma) that the storytelling event is about to begin by asking the king’s permission to relate the story and announcing the story’s theme. The choice of the theme is conditioned by a number of factors, such as the contextual circumstances of the main narrative. Examples: Alexander’s misadventures with women are illustrated by a series of misogynic tales with a didactic and therapeutic purport, communicated to Alexander by various storytellers (Afshār 1964: 260–62, 279–86); the physical location of Alexander (e. g., when going to Turkestan, Alexander asks a storyteller to tell him tales of Iranian heroes whose exploits are linked to this area (Afshār 1964: 201, also 129); as well as the ethnic or religious adherence of the internal storyteller (e. g., the headman of Egypt recounts to Alexander the story of the Arab king’s daughter; an aged ascetic ‘from among the descendants’ of the Prophet David is asked by Alexander to narrate accounts of the Prophets David and Solomon) (Afshār 1964: 157–62, 259, also 251–52). The choice of theme is often accompanied by a ceremonial negotiation between the storyteller and his addressee, with the potential to evolve further into an active interaction between the two, during the storytelling proper and in its aftermath (e. g., Afshār 1964: 345–46; 250–51).

The interaction in the course of the storytelling comprises addresses to Alexander on the part of storytellers, including the conventional phrase of salutation ‘Long live the King of Kings!’; Alexander intervenes in the process in order to request an explanation or clarification of certain points or to express solidarity with the story, drawing on his personal experience (Afshār 1964: 293, 346, 158). The identification of the listener with the message of the story is also characteristic of the last stage of the storytelling, as it is reconstructed in the Iskandar-nāma. At times Alexander parallels the situation to the


state of his own affairs, trying to extract a lesson from the story or else he authoritatively confirms the storyteller’s account; in other cases, he reacts in an emotional way, expressing satisfaction, delight, empathy ‘moistening his robes with tears’, or anger.\(^6\) Besides the verbal and sensorial responses which are common to every audience whatever its social status, Alexander’s reactions are further conditioned by the doubling of his function as a listener with his social role as king. Hence the rewarding of favoured storytellers with ‘the robe of honour’ (khvalat) in line with the medieval courtly tradition prevalent at the time when the Iskandar-nāma was committed to writing (Afshār 1964:189, 130, 263). Yet another manifestation of the royal benevolence is Alexander’s encouragement of specific storytellers to continue their storytelling in consecutive evening sessions, or his order to write down the most rare and instructive tales, to be stored in the royal repository (Afshār 1964:154–55, 162–63, 348, 279, 434).

Besides the Iskandar-nāma, some components of the storytelling event are reconstructed in Samak-i ‘Ayyār. In this dastān one encounters the narrator’s/ storyteller’s asides, when he halts his narration creating suspense, and asks his audience for remuneration, otherwise he will stop telling the story. For example:

Shirvān Bashan approached Farrukh-rūz and said something into his ear. Farrukh-rūz wept, then laughed. Ālam-afrūz was so astonished: ‘What had been said that he (i. e., Farrukh-rūz) wept and laughed?’ However hard he thought, he could not figure out […]. You (i. e., listeners) also will not figure it out, unless you give [me] ten sugar candies [to prepare] rose-water, for my throat sores. If not, then pronounce one al-hamd prayer for the sake of the book’s compiler in order that God, be He extolled, will spare him. We shall resume our talk and relate what Shirvān Bashan said into Farrukh-rūz’s ear, why Farrukh-rūz [first] wept and then laughed. Thus relates the possessor of the story and the storyteller […] (Khānlarī 1959–67: IV, 295)

On other occasions the storyteller requires monetary reward from his listeners to buy sherbet or a tray of sugared halva; in some cases he contents himself with asking for prayers for the sake of the compiler or the copyist (Khānlarī 1959–67: III, 244; IV, 101, 286, 295; V, 15–16).

A peculiar instance of such meta-narrative asides occurs when the link of the fictional world of the narrative with the extra-narrative reality becomes most conspicuous. This involves the characters’ intercession for the storyteller, as in the following example:

‘Ālam-afrūz said: ‘O, woman, who are you after all?’ Saman-rūk answered: ‘If you want me to tell you who I am, then request that this audience (i. e., the extra-narrative listeners to the story) should give one thousand golden dinārs to the compiler of this book, for he has experienced much hardship and expended much time to compile the story. I mentioned [the sum] which I myself find proper. If they do not have and cannot give [it], let them give according to their own capacity, but not less than five dinārs. Now, each and every one should pronounce an al-hamd prayer for the sake of the lives of the book’s maker (zāzand-yi kitāb) and of the book’s copyist and entreat God Almighty to pardon him [sic], so that God, be He exalted and extolled, will pardon and spare them in His mercy and grace.’ Ālam-afrūz said: ‘Everything has been fulfilled, so who are you? […]’\(^64\)

\(^6\) Afshār 1964: 162; 129–30; 201 (see also 156, 191, 207, 297); 199.

In general, this kind of aside reflects a traditional storytelling practice, as can be seen from a brief remark of the Turkish translator of *Samak-i 'Ayyâr*, who, rendering one of the storyteller’s requests for remuneration, glosses it as ‘the habit of the masters’ (*qâ’ida-yi ustâdân*); the practice was still very much alive in the 1920s in Iran, documented, for example, for performances of the puppet theatre (*khayma-shab-bâzi*) (Galunov 1929: 3).

Whether the vestiges of storytelling events preserved in these *dâstân*̄s testify to the actual history of these texts or, alternatively, function as a stylized device, is difficult to determine with any certainty (see also above, pp. 20–21). It is apparent, however, that in itself such a reconstruction is indicative of the profound anchoring of the *dâstân*̄s’ producers in the oral storytelling tradition, the patterns and frames of which they continued to perpetuate.

4 Oral Traditional Aesthetics

In addition to aspects of production and communication, the impact of orality in *dâstân*̄s is manifest in the feature of traditional referentiality that to a large extent determines the decoding of their meaning.\(^{65}\) The meaning in an oral tradition-oriented text can be successfully inferred only if one takes into account, – i. e., ‘refers’ to – motifs, narrative patterns, protagonists, characters and other background information which has been accumulating for many generations and is stored in the reservoir of a particular oral narrative tradition, each performance echoing earlier ones and thus validated by the tradition itself. In the following I will demonstrate the mechanisms of traditional referentiality in the *dâstân*, inquiring into three of their most characteristic facets, namely the lack of paratextual apparatus, the phenomenon of lacunas in the plot, and the chronological inconsistency in the narrative.\(^{66}\)

\(^{(a)}\) The absence of a paratextual apparatus. Theoretically, the paratext in general and particularly the preface are meant to mediate between the author (and his work) and the addressee, imposing on the latter a certain interpretative approach towards the text, as well as claiming the author’s ownership of his work (Genette 1997: 197–98; 209–29). It implies physical distance and emotional detachment between the author and the community of readers, at the same time signifying a rather crystallized concept of individual authorship. Persian *dâstân*̄s usually start and end *ex abrupto*, the only paratextual unit being, as a rule, a colophon. Although in some cases, the lack of preface and postface can be explained by the physical incompleteness of certain manuscripts, this will not apply to the majority of the *dâstân*̄s which have been preserved in full.\(^{67}\) Although mostly written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries or later, i. e., during the period when in ‘courtly’ prose the authorial preface and postface had assumed a firm canonical status ushering in the formation of the authorial personal voice, *dâstân*̄s lack

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\(^{65}\) For the definition and elaboration of the concept of traditional referentiality, see Foley 1991: 6–8.

\(^{66}\) For the term ‘paratext’ and its definition, see Genette 1997.

\(^{67}\) Thus, for instance, the only extant MS of the *Iskandar-nâma*, on which the scholarly edition is based, lacks a couple of folios at the beginning and a large part at the end. The *Firuzshâb-nâma* supposedly possessed additional volumes (on one of these, probably the third, copied in 1787, see Mahjûb 1991). But see also n. 68.
any contextual framework which might offer the author’s statement of intent and his status vis-à-vis the tradition, and define his target-audience, thus serving as an instrument of authorial control (Rubanovich 2009: esp. 128).

The transmission of dāstāns in an unmediated interaction with the listener seems to weaken or even eliminate altogether the necessity for any preliminary contextual information, as well as for explanations regarding the preferred way of reception. Indeed, due to its variable nature, each and every performance sets up a new context as far as performer, audience, and temporal and local circumstances are concerned. Prefacing a text intended for multiple performances implies the fixation of a specific context out of a variety of potential performative situations, thus going counter to the rationale of this type of communication. In addition, unlike an author targeting addressees distanced from him in time and place, an oral storyteller possesses a range of linguistic, para-linguistic (intonation, rhythm), and non-linguistic (facial expressions, body movements) means enabling him to control and channel the audience’s response at every point of the performance. The addressee thus activates various semiotic codes and situational contexts to complete the textual message (Oesterreicher 1997: 209–10). What is more: the common reservoir of themes, motifs, allusions etc., shared by a storyteller and his audience, obviates the need for some sorts of contextual information; recourse to conventional devices anchored in the oral tradition, such as the storytelling formula, is sufficient for a performer to inform the addressee that the traditional framework of performance is being set in motion, thus activating pre-knowledge regarding the oncoming event and its contents (for details see pp. 31–33 below).

At the same time, since the concept of individual authorship appears to have been alien to the creators of dāstāns, who conceived a text in terms of oral poetics as multivariant and receptive of changes and additions (see above, pp. 19–20), they did not feel a need to have recourse to a preface for stating their ownership of the work.⁶⁸

(b) Filling up lacunae and deciphering allusions. The narrative texture of Persian dāstāns reveals a dense web of lacunae, elliptic passages, dim allusions, and obscure motifs which could have been filled out and made comprehensible by reference to extra-narrative reality, namely, the tradition shared by the storyteller and his addressee. Although some parts of the tradition, being oral, have been irreversibly lost to research, in certain cases the gaps can still be reconstructed by mining extant written materials, mostly of epic character. As an example, let us look at the following passage from the Dārāb-nāma, alluding to certain events from Iranian epic-heroic history: ‘Gushtāsp put his son [= Isfandiyār] in chains, so that they captured and killed Luhrāsp and took his (i. e., Gushtāsp’s) daughters to Turkistān, till with the help of a thousand tricks he (i. e., Gushtāsp) came back, and removed Isfandiyār’s chains, so that he (i. e., Isfandiyār) went

⁶⁸ The irrelevance of prefatory writing to the very essence of the dāstān genre is pertinently reflected in the curious case of Samak-i Ayyār. There we encounter an addition, a kind of preface, in which the author/compiler describes his work and elaborates on various themes the dāstān is going to deal with (Khānlari 1959–67: IV, 3–5). However, the addition is awkwardly located at the beginning of the third volume of the MS, equivalent to the beginning of the fourth volume of the printed edition, i. e., at the very core of the narration. Provided the addition is authentic and not a later interpolation (Minuvi 1958: 335), it loses its structural function of text delimitation as well as its import as a means for the author to secure a certain interpretive approach on the part of his addressee.
and brought his sisters back [...]. (Šafā 1965–68: I, 448). The passage features a highly compressed style, implying the addressee’s acquaintance with the *dramatis personae* mentioned. The conciseness is coupled with the constant switching of the referents for personal pronouns (supplied in brackets in the above passage), creating an ambiguity which can be removed only by recourse to the traditional reservoir of epic themes, as they appear, for instance, in the *Shāh-nāma*.69

Another type of filling gaps with the help of traditional knowledge is associated with the deciphering of allusions. For example, while experiencing hardships and arduous toil, the future king Darius consoles himself by pondering: ‘I am not nobler than my grandfather Gushtāsp. The same happened to him. Now, I shall suffer adversities, in order not to get conceited [about being a king]’ (Šafā 1965–68: I, 289). The allusion refers to epic stories of King Gushtāsp who, in disguise, was a manual labourer in Rūm before ascending the throne of Iran (Khāliqi–Mūtlaq 1988–2008: V, 14–18). The addressee’s acquaintance with the epic tradition allows him not only to restore the elliptic passage on the surface level, but to retrace the ‘deep’ meaning of the whole episode in the *Dārāb-nāma* as well. Indeed, by way of traditional referentiality, the allusion to Gushtāsp’s tale seems to evoke the archetypical paradigm of a hero undergoing ordeals before attaining power, an initiation motif, well-known in world as well as in Iranian folklore. The tale of Darius’ trials, rather than representing an autonomous and individual plot, is joined to parallel plots and motifs in the epic tradition and thus metonymically anticipates the development of the narrative (namely, Darius’ forthcoming ascent to the throne), which at the same time agrees with the listener’s expectations.

To illustrate the mechanism of traditional referentiality working in the case of a more obscure motif, I shall adduce the motif of Alexander covering his hair when going in the guise of an ambassador to various rulers (Afshār 1964: 59, 108). The explanation for the curious act is not given in the narrative; it can be understood, however, due to the traditional knowledge of Alexander as ‘Two-Horned’ (*Dhū al-Qarnayn*), that is having two plaits in the form of horns which should be concealed lest the king be recognized. The decoded motif in turn activates a deeper meaning that entails the concept of Alexander in the Arabo-Persian tradition as the champion of Islam conquering the world and converting peoples to the true faith.70

(c) *Chronological inconsistency in the narrative.* The phenomenon is manifested in deviations from the logical temporal development of the plot, when an episode, an event or a character trait are mentioned in the narration as if already occurred and known, before they have actually been reported. Thus, for example, Būrāndukh, the female protagonist of the *Dārāb-nāma*, laments the absence of a weapon which would have enabled her to engage the foe as she had done on Mahkūy Island (Šafā 1965–68: II, 257); this combat, however, is described only much later in the plot (Šafā 1965–68: II, 416–19). In another case the same heroine is being warned by the Indian sage not to attack the enemy army on account of ‘that (ān) dream’ which she had had and which foretold calamities,

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69 Khāliqi–Mūtlaq 1988–2008: V, 146–69; 178–85; 188–98; 264–66. Instructive in this respect is the translation of the *Dārāb-nāma* into Russian (Kondyreva 2000), where imperfect knowledge of the epic tradition significantly obstructed the correct comprehension of the text, leading to blunders on the part of the translator (see Rubanovich 2002).

70 For more examples see Rubanovich 2004: 249–54.
but her dreaming and the contents of the dream actually follow the warning, instead of preceding it (Ṣafā 1965–68: II, 157–58). Similarly, in the dāštāns devoted to his adventures, from the very beginning of the narrative Alexander is represented as ‘the King of the Universe’ (shāh-jahān) (Ṣafā 1965–68: I, 551); ‘the King of the East and the West’ (pād-shāh-i mashriq-u maghrib) (Afshār 1964: 165, 433, 510 etc.); ‘the King of Seven Climes’ (pādshāh-i haft iqlīm), these qualifiers coming much earlier than Alexander’s factual conquest of the world.⁷ The recurrent descriptions of Alexander as the Ruler of the Universe while ignoring the chronological consistency of the narrative are designed not so much to portray the hero as to set off the theme which is central to the traditional perception of Alexander and thus echoic of the Alexander tale as a whole.⁷²

It is a peculiarity of dāštāns that traditional knowledge does not seem to be restricted to the storyteller and his addressee, but is shared by the characters in the plot; hence, for example, the description of Alexander by various personages as ‘King of the East and the West’, or Darius’ allusion to his ancestor Gushtāsp, carry the same referential import for the extra-narrative storyteller and his listeners as they do for the fictional characters. This, as well as the utterances of the dramatis personae supporting the storyteller’s claim to reward from his real audience in Samak-i Ayyār, or the Iskandar-nāmā’s parallel composition within the plot and in the extra-textual reality (see above, pp. 25–28 and 14, respectively), evince the blurring of boundaries between the fictional world of the plot and the extra-narrative world of actual storytellers and their listeners. Indeed, in the course of performance, the storyteller can enact roles, minimizing the narrative distance between himself and the characters. At the same time, by means of direct addresses to the listeners, both by storyteller and by characters within the plot, the audience gets involved – emotionally and sometimes even physically – in the fictional narrative world. A model of dynamic relationships between all the actors is established which implies considerable involvement (versus detachment) and maximum cooperation of all the sides in the communicative act and essentially contradicts the unidirectional relation of ‘text → addressee’.

The impact of orality is palpable in all aspects of dāštān production, transmission, reception, and subject-matter. Considered from the point of view of medial orality, the delivery and reception of dāštāns were distinguished by medium shift, i.e., switches between graphic signs (silent reading/reading aloud) and phonetic signs (speaking/hearing).⁷³ In delivery the oral mode of transmission (and aural reception) prevailed, actua-

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⁷² Compare the description of Odysseus in the Iliad as ‘much-suffering’ before he was subjected to any sufferings in the narrative time of the epic; see Nagy 1990: 23.
⁷³ See Oesterreicher 1997: 190–93; Koch 1997. – It should be noted that in medieval Persian literature the medium shift could have accompanied other types of text as well, such as epistolary compositions, which in addition to being read silently might have been transmitted by reading aloud (see Luther 1990: 94). However, oral/aural transmission and reception did not serve as a primary medium of such texts; they were designed to be received by a private reader and structured accordingly. In fact, their ‘vocality’ dimension – or vocalité, to use the term coined by P. Zumthor (1987: 21 ff.) – functioned in a purely rhetoric way, as a ritual discourse of sorts, a good example being the formal ceremonial recitation of epistles in an assembly. For a related situation in medieval Arabic adab literature, see Sadan 1998: 4.
lized in a gamut of performative situations: from reading aloud to utilizing a written text as a prop to performing a text memorized by rote with various degrees of improvisation. The performance-oriented character of dāstāns was one of the factors determining their high degree of ‘conceptional orality’ (Oesterreicher 1997: 193–95), and introducing the pragmatic constraints that shaped the narrative. These include the patterning of narration by means of the storytelling formula; a substantial ‘narrator-addressee’ interactivity, the reconstruction of the oral storytelling mode within the narrative; and lingual-stylistic features typical of oral discourse. Besides the modalities of performance, dāstāns’ high degree of conceptional orality ensues from their essentially traditional nature, when the knowledge of the narrative epic tradition common to the storyteller and his audience becomes a prerequisite for successful communication and comprehension. Dāstāns are context-embedded; their seeming chronological inconsistency and excess of ellipticity, the significance of which eludes the outsider, appear perfectly coherent to the insider steeped in the tradition.

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