

v tipografii II Otdeleniia Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskago Kantseliarii.

Zapiski imperatorskago Odesskago obshchestva istorii i drevnostei

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Sleeping With the Enemy: Exogamous Marriage in the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi¹

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The¹ *Shahnameh* has been viewed as an epic paean to the Persian state from the time of its conception. The Persian nationalism derived from this text largely springs from the conflict between Iran, Turan, and Tus in what is referred to as the mythical period. Dick Davis writes that "as with most epics, the celebrated are defined as being in conflict with

their neighbors with whom they do not share ethnicity" (1992: xv). However, in this paper I explore how Iran and her neighbors do share bloodlines throughout the mythical section of the epic and how marriage ties with the enemy affect relations at home in Iran. In contrast to the stories in prominent newspapers about Central Asian men stealing brides, at the heart of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi are stories of brides kidnapping husbands.

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When one takes into account the anthropological belief that in less complex societies, defined as being non-urban and pre-industrial, "kin ties are of utmost importance and indeed may form the basis for the organization of a society" (Aceves 1974: 120), the fact that the Iranian royalty in the *Shahnameh* persists in not only sleeping with the enemy, but in marrying the enemy, becomes quite significant. Without defined kinship or lineage a bride's role in a foreign culture is also undefined. In the *Shahnameh* the Iranian husband's family is not willing to be related to the family of the non-Iranian bride because "Where there exists a strongly unilineal system with minimal recognition of secondary lines of descent, the spouse's kin-group are, prior to the marriage, not kin of any sort and, therefore, may be regarded as politically or symbolically dangerous" (Aceves 1974: 139). Partially because of this, despite sharing historical and mythical bloodlines, the Iranians and the "other" do not view each other as family but as enemies.

Feraydun is the fourth king in the *Shahnameh* and with his story begins the divergence from what Michael Fischer has termed the "meiotic" or undifferentiated period of lineage (Fischer 2004: 76). Feraydun is the son of Abtin, a descendant of the great Jamshid and Faranak, a foreign woman who falls in love with Jamshid when he visits her family's court. Feraydun won his crown by overthrowing the evil Arab Zahhak, an outsider. Instead of choosing Persian brides for his sons and cementing his ties to Iran, Feraydun chooses brides from Arabian Yemen for them. The Yemeni princesses are given new Persian names, effectively turning them into Persians.

The three sons of Feraydun all prove to be unsatisfactory in various ways, cementing the hatred of, yet longing for, the people in the lands bordering Iran. This is not due to their maternal ancestry, as most of the kings in the *Shahnameh* prove to be unsatisfactory. While some scholars argue that the bad princes and kings are unsatisfactory due to their foreign blood, I argue that many of the good ones are also of partial foreign descent. Feraydun divides his kingdom into three sections; Rum and the west were given to Salm, China and Turkestan to Tur, and Iran and Arabia to Iraj. Feraydun makes these choices because he "wanted the world to remain a place of joy and civilized order, and I divided it between my three sons" (Ferdowsi 2000: 61). The older brothers wage war against the younger, splitting the realm and ending Feraydun's hoped-for time of joy and peace, causing Feraydun to swear

vengeance on the foreign neighbors, his sons. In this episode the furthest a bride is sought is Yemen, but from this time forth all brides are sought in the areas of Tus, the land east of Iran, and Turan, the land north of Iran, from what are enemies but can now also be considered extended family.

Zal, a champion of the Persian royal family, marries Rudabeh, a descendant of the evil Zahhak. Zal strays into Kabul on an extended hunting trip, Rudabeh schemes to meet Zal, and they swear eternal love. The one stumbling block is Rudabeh's ancestors. Rudabeh does not understand why a distant ancestor should come between the two lovers: "If Zahhak was unjust, how is this my sin?" (Ferdowsi 2000: 97), introducing a common refrain of the foreign wives in the *Shahnameh*. Sam, the father of Zal, wonders "How can two lineages as disparate as fire and water be mingled?" (Ferdowsi 2000: 100), a metaphor for the joining of two lands and two historically warring families. However, priests tell Sam that the child of Zal and Rudabeh, Rostam, will be the pride and salvation of Iran: "Before his name, inscribed on every seal, / Iran and Rum and India will kneel" (Ferdowsi 2000: 101). The marriage hinges upon the offspring ruling all three lands, Iran, Rum and India, and the subjugation of Kabul. After the wedding Rudabeh and her mother move to Zabolistan, effectively removing the offspring of Mehrab, Rudabeh's father and the King of Kabul, and the woman who had produced the continuation of the line of Mehrab, to Iran. The dubious bloodlines of the women cannot be erased, but they can be cleansed by living in the land of Iran.

Rostam is the overarching hero of the *Shahnameh*. He is famous for being stubborn, wayward, and slow to obey the kings of Iran. This is referred to as Rostam's *az* and *bishi*, his pride and excess. Dick Davis, in *Epic and Sedition*, writes that the *az* and *bishi* "come, I believe, from Rostam's maternal ancestry; if on the one hand he is the son of Zal, and is thus born to serve the Iranian monarchy, he is also the son of Rudabeh, a direct descendant of Zahhak" (Davis 1992: 57). Rostam feels obliged to serve the monarchy due to his paternal bloodlines, but due to his maternal bloodlines he feels justified to do so in any way he sees fit. The mix of demon and king is for the benefit of Iran, as Rostam recognizes evil and is therefore the first to rush in and vanquish it.

Rostam echoes his own conception in the story of Tahmineh, the mother of Sohrab. Rostam, like his father, wanders too far while hunting in the land of

Turan. Tahmineh of Semengan, a princess in her own right, knows that Rostam is the enemy, and that he has feasted under her roof and should therefore be inviolate, but Tahmineh never asks Sohrab to marry her, and only requests that she bear the child of the great Persian warrior. In this case, the mixed bloodline leads to the death of the offspring, as Sohrab dies at Rostam's hand while attacking Iran under the battle flag of Turan, in an attempt to find and join forces with his unknown father. It can be hypothesized that Sohrab's tragic death, compared to the less tragic deaths of others of mixed lineage, is because the Persian Rostam does not seek Sohrab's birth and because Sohrab is not raised in Iran by Iranians.

Kavus is the only king to actively pursue his own bride outside of his own land, instead of the foreign bride pursuing her chosen spouse. Kavus is also depicted as one of the most ineffectual kings in the *Shahnameh*. He demands the hand of Sudabeh of Yemen after conquering her father who refused to pay him homage, an extreme form of war reparations. Now that Sudabeh is married to a Persian she is also a Persian. Due to this change of nationality through marriage Sudabeh's loyalties also change and she warns Kavus of her father's evil intentions. Marriage is seen by both sides as the ultimate form of conquest, as both kings fight for Sudabeh. Sudabeh views her marriage, even though it is to the man who destroyed her country, as stronger than ties of blood to her own family.

The majority of the marriages between two Iranians are not referred to as marriages. The description of the relations between the parents of Zal are typical of this type of union: "At last a beautiful woman of his entourage became pregnant by him" (Ferdowsi 2000: 85). Only twice does Ferdowsi place emphasis on a marriage or marriage attempt between an Iranian man and woman. One, the incestuous marriage between Bahman and Homai, leads to Bahman's death and civil unrest, and the other leads to the death of the hero Seyavash. Seyavash is the son of Kavus and the stepson of Sudabeh. Sudabeh falls in love with Seyavash and attempts to marry him to a Persian woman of her entourage, but Seyavash says no to the marriage because he was "thinking that it would be wrong to choose a wife from among his enemies" (Ferdowsi 1998: 20). Rather than marry a woman whose loyalties lie towards Sudabeh, who is still considered by the Persians to be an outsider, Seyavash leaves Iran for the land of his enemies. In Turkestan Seyavash marries Farigis, a daughter of

Persia's enemy Afrasyab, and chooses a new father, effectively becoming a Turanian: "When he crosses over into Turan and is welcomed by Piran we are told, 'Seyavash becomes a son and Piran a father'" (Davis 1992: 112). Afrasyab initially says no to the union, because "A child that comes from Kavus and Afrasyab will mingle fire and flood; how can I know whether he will look kindly on Turan?" (Ferdowsi 1998: 55). When Afrasyab chooses to believe that Seyavash is plotting against him, Farigis fights for her husband by saying that in choosing to marry her he chose Turan over Iran: "Seyavash abandoned Iran and, with all the world to choose from, made his obeisances to you; he renounced his crown and throne and father's goodwill for your sake" (Ferdowsi 1998: 79), and is therefore innocent of any plotting. Seyavash is killed and Iran attacks. The offspring that will destroy Turan is Kay Khosrow, the most benevolent of the Iranian rulers.

It does not matter whether one is guilty: the fact that a person chooses to live outside of his or her homeland, in the cases of Seyavash and Sudabeh, makes their virtue questionable. The person who brings a foreign spouse into the country is not questionable, but the foreigner will always be. Fire does not mix with water. Dick Davis believes that Piran, the wise man of this story, arranges the alliance because he tired of the constant warfare: "his arrangement of Seyavash's marriage to Afrasyab's daughter is made in the specific hope that the alliance will prevent further bloodshed between the two countries" (Davis 1992: 68). The ensuing war between Khosrow and Afrasyab encapsulates the situation between Iran and its enemies, as it is a war between family members:

Between grandfather [i.e., Afrasyab] and
grandson [i.e., Khosrow], two kings,

I do not know why there should be such a
battlefield

Two kings and two such bellicose countries

Two armies brought face to face. (Davis
1992: 68)

However, despite his ongoing desire to become part of the family of Afrasyab, Seyavash foretells his own death at the hand of Afrasyab. Even during his greatest triumph, Seyavash believes that fire and water cannot mix.

Marriage to the enemy is successful in the story of Bizhan, but only after extreme hardship and retirement from political life. Bizhan finds Manizheh

in Erman, between Turan and Iran. He meets her for two reasons; he is protecting his homeland from a foreign threat, and because the evil Gorgin is plotting to harm Bizhan by introducing him to the beautiful Turanian, Manizheh. Manizheh, the daughter of Afrasyab, sees Bizhan, falls in love with him, and modestly leaves her. This is similar to the stories of Rudabeh and Tahmineh, both of which also end with the woman achieving her goal after propositioning the hero. The lovers spend three days together, but when Bizhan attempts to leave, Manizheh drugs him and kidnaps him. Afrasyab, the father, is particularly angry to find that a Persian has enjoyed the hospitality of his home and puts Bizhan in a pit to humiliate the Persians, making Manizheh his jailer. The lovers have nothing; she is an exile in her own land, and he is in forced exile from his land. After rescue and ensuing battle they return to Iran where the marriage is welcomed, and Khosrow tells him to adore Manizheh and treat her well. Manizheh had placed a prince of Iran higher in importance than her own land. I question if the romance of Bizhan and Manizheh might have followed the same unfortunate lines of the story of Sudabeh if it were not for the fact that Bizhan effectively retires from the story and politics at this point, avoiding the further vicissitudes of life.

The bride might end in lamenting her circumstances in her new society, but Pavry writes that it is through action and not passive spectating that the foreign brides prove that they are worthy of Persian husbands. They are "examples of women not content to remain passive spectators in the armed struggles and rebellions which surround them" (Pavry 1930: 104), a fine match for husbands who ride off to battle evil and injustice. Strong rulers will come from these unions.

Marriages in the Shahnameh between Iranians and the enemy have hope, so long as they are sought by the man, and are between an Iranian man and a foreign woman who is willing to give up her homeland. Dick Davis believes that much of the Shahnameh dances around the highly coded system of manners present in Iranian society: "Such niceties of course loom large in such a delicately coded society as that recorded in the Shahnameh" (Davis 1992: 154). Much of the play of power in the story revolves around who is following the correct path of protocol and why, as an outsider is unlikely to know the correct manners to follow. When a marriage occurs between two cultures at odds, there is bound to be contention. In the Shahnameh, so long as the

Persian is the one with power, he can do as he pleases. Seyavash is the best example of what will fail; he leaves Iran as an exile, marries in order to leave his family behind, and never returns to Iran. He dies alone. When diverse populations are in close proximity and have literally become blood relations, knowledge of social mores is necessary to avert conflict. Dick Davis relates the story of Seyavash to that of the nation of Iran at the time of its writing: "It is almost as if Ferdowsi wishes to present the Turks in the best possible light while still seeing them as Iran's natural enemies and the destroyers of a national hero" (Davis 1992: 179).

The Shahnameh was written about Persian domination of Central Asia, but the marriages in the Shahnameh have long been used in an attempt to reduce or at least comprehend the conflict when Iran itself is ruled by an outsider. According to Michael Fischer, Juvaini himself used the intermarriages and mixed bloodlines as a diplomatic allusion when speaking to his Turkic rulers about how Iran could be justly and generously ruled by outsiders (Fischer 2004: 75). Hating the enemy is not a simple thing when the two cultures have intermarried and live side by side. Rostam and Khosrow are the greatest examples of why the marriages in the Shahnameh work between Iranians and foreigners; the mixed bloodlines produce the epic's greatest heroes and bring a possibility of peace under foreign rule.

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