

The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: The Survival of Ancient Iranian Ethical Concepts in Persian Popular Narratives of the Islamic Period

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In the chapter on 'soufys' in his travel report about his 'three years in Asia', French author Arthur Comte de Gobineau, author of *Les Pléiades* (1816–82), tells an entertaining story about one of the sons of the Qajar monarch Fath-'Ali Shāh.¹ This Qajar prince apparently had a strong inclination for the occult sciences. A particular obsession of his was the search for the philosopher's stone, the alchemist's most powerful requisite whose particular capacity is thought to be the effortless production of gold. In connection with his interests, the prince held a high respect for specialists of occult and mystical knowledge, in particular wandering dervishes. One day, the Comte de Gobineau narrates, the prince was visited by an Indian dervish who – after demonstrating his superior knowledge – informed him in private that he had travelled all the way from Kashmir to Tehran at the command of a supreme being whose orders he was powerless to resist. This person was none other than a *parizādeh*, in other words: one of the daughters of the king of the *paris*. While the prince was not at all surprised to hear about a human's contact with a being from the realm of the *jinn*, he was amazed and, in fact, fascinated to learn that the *pari* had fallen immortally in love with him and, realizing that she could not resist her passion, wished to unite with him. Meanwhile, the dervish warned the prince that he would have to take special precautions to meet the *pari* since this supreme being was used to being treated with particular delicacy. In fact, her affection might easily turn into wrath if he acted in any way that might offend her. Having no reason to doubt the dervish's report, and being further excited by an exchange of ardent letters expressing their mutual love, the prince, on the advice of the dervish, then went through a full month of fasting and purification. At the end of this period he was to unite with the *pari* in the secluded atmosphere of a private garden pavilion outside the city boundaries.

This garden pavilion had been adorned for the special occasion – as the report says – with magnificent carpets, precious golden and silver vessels, jewellery, costly furniture and beautiful chinaware. Since the meeting was scheduled to take place an hour after sunset, the prince went to prepare himself by taking a bath where, being exhausted, he inadvertently fell asleep. Waking up only when the night had well progressed, he was afraid to have hurt the *pari*'s feelings, who must have left without notifying him. Wandering about the garden compound in despair, he found, however, that not only was the *pari* not there, but also the dervish had left, and with him all the precious goods had disappeared too. Only when some farmers on the way to the city's market found him in the morning did it slowly dawn upon him that he had been deceived by a clever trickster. The story ends by mentioning that Fath-'Ali Shāh was so annoyed about the ridicule that bazaar gossip henceforth attached to his son's adventure that in the end he exiled the prince.

The Comte de Gobineau, nowadays probably best remembered for his infamous essay on the inequality of the human races (1853–5)², visited Tehran at the orders of Napoleon III in 1855, and so the mentioned report had already been lingering on in the mind of the people for more than two decades since Fath-'Ali Shāh had died in 1834. The author himself presents the narrative with a certain tone of mockery, taking particular delight in the prince's gullibility. In his general assessment of the events, he moreover makes special mention of what he calls the 'spirit of the Persian nation' as being imbued with an inclination for the marvellous and the fantastic.³ Additional data from the Qajar period, in particular the high esteem accorded to popular literature, appears to support this impression. For instance, we know that Fath-'Ali Shāh's grandson, the Qajar monarch Nāser al-Din, had a special liking for the fantastic stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* from his childhood onwards.⁴ This monarch's fascination eventually resulted in what has unanimously been termed the last outstanding specimen of the art of the book in the Qajar period: the magnificent Persian manuscript translation of the *Nights* in six exuberantly illustrated volumes that is today preserved in the Golestān Palace.⁵ And for no other period of Iranian history do we find such a wealth of imaginative and fantastic narrative literature drawing on traditional themes and topics, an output that to a certain extent profited from the introduction of printing, notably lithographic printing, to Iran.⁶

Whether or not de Gobineau's general assessment of the 'spirit of the Persian nation' is correct, the story of the Qajar prince anticipating his marriage with a *pari* indicates that at the dawn of modernity, ancient Iranian concepts – such as the concept of *pari* – reigned supremely in popular belief and, needless to say, to a certain extent persist today. Besides popular belief and practice, often conveniently termed 'superstition' (Persian *khoraḡāt*), ancient Iranian characters such as the *pari* also make their appearance in a fair number of popular narratives of the Islamic period, from the Persian national epic,

Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeḥ*, and related secondary epics, via the romantic epics of the Safavid period and the popular literature of the Qajar period up to folk-tales and fairy tales, such as those documented from oral tradition in nineteenth and twentieth-century Iran. Deriving from an ancient Iranian tradition, the concept of what a *pari* is supposed to be has undergone considerable developments over time.⁷ As for the *pari*'s image in the popular literature of the Islamic period, its closest analogue is the European fairy, a concept to which it is probably more closely connected than the standard disregard of such a connection in etymological dictionaries suggests. In the popular literature of the Islamic period, the *pari* is a non-human character living in a universe parallel to that inhabited by human beings. The *pari* is endowed with immortality and magical powers, including the ability to fly. Usually, but not necessarily, imagined as a female being, the *pari* is above all the acme of beauty. Given her erotic appeal, nothing could be more desirable for a mortal man than to marry a *pari*, even though *paris* are also known for a certain obsessiveness, quickly changing temper and jealousy – all of these traits of character well known to the Qajar prince.

In this chapter, I therefore propose to take a closer look at some of the Iranian narratives of the Islamic period involving characters that relate to ethical concepts ultimately deriving from pre-Islamic tradition. Rather than enumerating the universe of supernatural creatures that was assessed in Arthur Christensen's 1941 essay on Iranian demonology,⁸ my particular interest lies with those characters from popular tradition that metaphorically exemplify the pivotal ethical values of the Good, the Bad and the Beautiful. The allusion of the title of my chapter to Sergio Leone's 1966 spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is probably a little presumptuous. Yet it serves well to outline the main motivating forces for the genesis of a large variety of Persian folk-tales, in particular the epics and modern tales of magic. But before beginning a more detailed discussion of these concepts, allow me to introduce further my topic by presenting a few remarks on the position of story-telling in pre-Islamic Iran.

The art of story-telling is firmly rooted in pre-Islamic Iranian tradition. Ebn al-Nadim, the Baghdad bookseller whose inventory of books available at the end of the tenth century constitutes an invaluable mine of information, informs us – albeit from his Arabic perspective – that the first one who consciously employed narratives was Alexander, the Macedonian emperor who was incorporated into Iranian tradition as an offspring of the Achaemenid dynasty.⁹ Alexander is said to have hired professional story-tellers to entertain him at night – probably less as a simple distraction than to keep him alert during periods of recreation. Stories of the heroes of ancient Iran were immortalized in the pre-Islamic chronicle *Khwadāy-nāmag* from which the Persian national epic derives. That these stories were also current in oral tradition prior to the compilation of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* by Ferdowsi is documented by an often quoted

anecdote reported by Ebn Ishāq (died 767), the Prophet Mohammad's biographer.¹⁰ Ebn Ishāq tells us of a certain al-Nadr b. al-Hārith, one of the unbelievers of the Qoraysh, who apparently had commercial relations with Iran. The Prophet had once held a meeting admonishing his listeners and warning the people of what had happened to bygone generations as a result of God's vengeance, after which al-Nadr is said to have claimed that he knew better stories than that, proceeding to tell the people about the kings of ancient Iran, of Rostam and Esfandiyār. As late as the tenth century, Persian poet Monjik Tirmidhi claims to have heard and read 'a thousand times' versions of the tales of the Seven Trials (*haft khān*) and of the Brass Fortress (*dezh-e ru'in*), obviously alluding to the exploits of Esfandiyār.¹¹ In a similar vein, the verse of the early eleventh-century Persian poet Farrokhi alludes to the tales of Rostam, the quintessential hero of the Iranian epic tradition.¹²

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the passages quoted from the Persian poets refer to the epic tales as being incorporated in the Persian book *Hazār afsān*, a book that by virtue of the testimonies of both Ebn al-Nadim and the tenth-century Arab historian al-Mas'udi is unanimously accepted as the ultimate source of the collection of stories nowadays known as *The Thousand and One Nights*.¹³ This collection, moreover, serves as an additional argument for the high esteem story-telling enjoyed in pre-Islamic Iran. The collection's well-known frame-story is already outlined by both Ebn al-Nadim and al-Mas'udi with reference to King Shahriyār and the story-teller Shahrazād, two characters who undoubtedly bear Persian names. The frame-story in which Shahrazād tells stories to Shahriyār for a thousand nights apparently did not change much in the course of time. Yet the stories originally contained within that frame might well have been quite different from what they came to be after the work's translation into Arabic. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to a short mention of the *Hazār afsān* in an Arabic book on secretaries compiled by a certain Abdallāh b. Abd al-Aziz, where the collection's translation into Arabic is attributed to Abdallāh b. al-Moqaffa'.¹⁴ This author, who was apparently a Manichaean convert to Islam originally bearing the name of Ruzbeh, is credited with an Arabic rendering of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* which, though lost, served as the principal source from which Muslim historians drew their knowledge of pre-Islamic Iran. He is most famed for his Arabic translation of another monument of transnational narrative tradition, the collection of fables known as *Kalila wa Demna*, whose lost Middle Persian version was an augmented rendering of the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* that is attributed to the physician Borzūy during the reign of Sasanian emperor Khosraw Anushirvān (531–79).¹⁵ While the Iranian origin of the book *Hazār afsān* is beyond doubt, the extent to which the contents of its presently known version, *The Thousand and One Nights*, are representative of the Iranian original is a matter of dispute. *The Thousand and One Nights*, as we know them today, mainly comprise three genres: tales of wonder and magic, short entertaining anecdotes of a pseudo-

historical or edifying character and a few long epics.¹⁶ The original work, in comparison, might have focused on fables and other didactic tales, as is suggested by the attribution of the book's translation to Abdallāh b. al-Moqaffa', the translator of *Kalila wa Demna*. Or, then again, the original Persian version of the *Nights* might also have consisted of tales about the heroes of ancient Iran. According to the testimony of the quoted Persian poets of the tenth and early eleventh century, Ebn al-Moqaffa' was also well versed in the history of ancient Iran. A definitive solution to this question will have to await the discovery of additional information. Meanwhile, the great narrative collections prevalent in early Islamic Iran – *Kalila wa Demna*, *Hazār afsān* and also the *Sendbādnāmeḥ*, a mirror for princes that in later world literature became known as *The Book of the Seven Sages* – leave no doubt as to the continuity of the pivotal values of pre-Islamic Iran: model behaviour was exemplified by the heroes of ancient Iranian tradition and model moral precepts were propagated by the protagonists of fables and other didactic narratives as well as wisdom literature. Incidentally, the 'Persian versions of animal tales' have been discussed by the French scholar Henri Massé in his contribution to the 1951 collected volume on 'The Spirit of Iran'¹⁷ and the position of Arabic wisdom literature *vis-à-vis* the Persian sources has recently been discussed in Mohsen Zakeri's rich study, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb*.¹⁸ At any rate, the continuity of ancient Iranian values might also, to a certain extent, account for the fact that the Arabic version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, with its apparently newly integrated tales of magic and its lack of appreciation for the history and values of ancient Iran, did not meet with great approval in later Iranian tradition, where the tales were only translated much later on account of their enthusiastic reception in the West.

To return to my main topic, we might have a quick glance at the only tale of *The Thousand and One Nights* in which a Persian *pari* makes a major appearance, namely the tale of *Ahmad and Pari Bānu*. In structural terms, this tale is a combination of two originally separate stories.¹⁹ The first story is about three brothers, one of whom is the eponymous hero Ahmad, competing for a princess bride. While the brothers manage to cure the ailing princess with the combined help of the magical objects each of them has acquired during their quests, none of them manages to win her hand. The subsequent task of shooting an arrow leads into the tale's second part, in which Prince Ahmad meets the beautiful Pari Bānu, the daughter of the king of the *jinn*, who, being in love with him, has lured him to her abode. They marry and for some time enjoy a pleasant life in her land. The main action of the second part, however, deals with a set of difficult tasks the hero is asked to perform for the malicious king and that he manages to perform with the help of his fairy wife. The tasks set by the king eventually lead to his destruction, with Ahmad becoming his successor.

Both the character of the *pari*/fairy and the term 'Bānu' as a respectful term of address for a woman might be taken as pointing to the tale's Iranian origin. It is, however, important to note that the tale owes its introduction into the European corpus of the *Nights* to the Syrian Maronite story-teller Hannā Diyāb, whose oral performance Antoine Galland, the French translator of the *Nights*, later reworked by elaborating the rudimentary notes he had taken during the performance. Considering the tale's Arabic origin, its fairy character is probably less indicative of an Iranian background, showing rather that the early eighteenth-century Syrian Christian story-teller perceived Iran as the realm of wonder, magic and all kinds of fantastic creatures and events. This perception is also apparent in other stories of the *Nights* that derive from different sources, most prominently the tale of As'ad and Amjad in which a group of magicians makes its appearance.²⁰

Leaving detailed philological speculations about the ultimate origin or 'Iranianness' of specific tales or collections aside, we should tackle the main theme of this chapter, namely the question to what extent the character of the *pari* and other exemplary supernatural beings are connected to pre-Islamic concepts that survived in the Islamic period. Not being a specialist in pre-Islamic Iran myself, I admit to having relied heavily on published studies on this topic.

The *pari*, as imagined as the Qajar prince's object of desire, is a vague echo of a supernatural being already known from Zoroastrian scripture.²¹ In the *Avesta*, the *pairikā* is an evil being that in formulaic phrases is often associated with sorcerers and demons. It has, however, been pointed out that this association belongs to the youngest layers of Zoroastrian scripture, with the further implication that the association developed after the older Avestan texts were composed. In a detailed study focusing on the historical development of the concept of *pari*, Bahman Sarkārāti has suggested that the *pairikās* were a class of pre-Zoroastrian goddesses who were concerned with sexuality and were closely connected with sexual festivals and ritual orgies.²² While the sexual connotation lingers on in the character's subsequent development, later texts also elaborate the *pari*'s magical powers. In the Middle Persian *Selections of Zatspram*, for instance, the hero Srit fights with a *pari* in the shape of a dog. Every time he cuts the dog in half, the *pari* multiplies until the hero is finally overcome and killed by the multiplicity of dogs. Incidentally, this episode is mirrored in Goethe's ballad of the sorcerer's apprentice (*Der Zauberlehrling*) who unsuccessfully attempts to destroy the magic broom he has created without knowing how to control its action fully. In classical Persian literature of the early Islamic period, such as the poetry of 'Onsori, Farrokhi, Asadi and Nāser-e Khosraw, the *pari* is imagined as extremely beautiful, invisible and capable of flight. According to the evaluation of Mahmoud Omidsalar, 'it is often a metaphor of spirituality, and stands in opposition to man's baser instincts'.²³ While *paris* make their appearance in the mythological part of the *Shāhnāme*,

fighting in the army of Gayumars and Hushang against the Evil Spirit and his hosts, in the heroic part of the epic the word is used almost exclusively in the sense of 'beautiful', particularly in the compound *pari-chehre*, literally meaning 'with a face like a *pari*', or '*pari*-faced'. Both the secondary epics *Farāmarz-nāmeḥ* and *Sāmnāmeḥ* mention a union between a male human and a female *pari*. The erotic attraction of the female *pari* as well as her magical powers are further elaborated in the Persian prose romantic epics such as *Samak-e ayyār*, *Eskandarnāmeḥ* and *Romuz-e Hamza*, as well as in the *tumār*s used by professional story-tellers. Here, the *pari* to some extent merges with the concept of the swan-maiden, in particular when she disappears in the form of a dove or when the hero summons his *pari* helper by burning a bit of the *pari*'s feather that he has kept for this purpose.²⁴ And, finally, in contemporary Persian folk-tales the *pari* has matured into the acme of both physical and moral perfection, two qualities that ensure her human husband is ultimately inferior to her. As an inevitable outcome of this disparity she is often obliged to leave him since he is incapable of understanding and accepting her rules. The folk-tale of the jeweller Salim, *Salim-e javāheri* – an eighteenth-century romance that is, in terms of content, vaguely related to the travels of Sindbād the sea-faring merchant²⁵ – expresses the *pari*-wife's perfection by allotting the different roles of a man's relation to women to females of three different characters: the human wife bears him offspring, the animal wife (a monkey) is the ideal partner for the joyful execution of sex unburdened by responsibility, and the *pari*-wife is simply superhuman understanding and tolerance. Even so, it is interesting to note that the text of this romance explicitly has the *pari*-wife leave her husband every month for ten consecutive days to visit her father – leaving it open to interpretation whether this absence coincides with her menstruation or her most fertile days.

Popular narratives, as is well known, need conflict to develop a dynamic plot. While the union with a *pari* serves well as a male hero's ultimate goal, the hero must first overcome obstacles, perform difficult tasks and, most important, subdue evil forces or, in other words, vanquish the ultimate Bad. In folk-tales, this ultimate Bad finds its expression in two concepts, both of which, similar to that of the *pari*, are also linked to ancient Iranian tradition: the *div*, or demon, and the *ezhdehā*, or dragon.

The short definition of the *ezhdehā* which introduces a highly detailed exposition in the relevant entry of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* describes them as: 'various kinds of snake-like, mostly gigantic monsters living in the air, on earth, or in the sea... sometimes connected with natural phenomena, especially rain and eclipses.'²⁶ Myths about dragons and heroes slaying them are said to have been 'common among the Indo-European peoples and the Near-Eastern peoples with whom the Iranians came into contact from the first half of the first millennium B.C.'²⁷ While there are several dragon-like characters in the *Avesta*, the most immediate precursor of the *ezhdehā*, as encountered in Persian

literature of the Islamic period, is Azhi Dahaka, a character belonging 'to the realm of mythologized history or historicized mythology'.²⁸ It is, however, not altogether clear 'whether he was originally considered as a human in dragon-shape or a dragon in man-shape'. This dichotomy later gave rise to two separate entities. The evil human character Zakhāk, similar to the Avestan Azhi Dahaka, is imagined as a three-headed creature that, in addition to its human head, has two snake heads on his shoulders. While this character by later tradition was incorporated into mythology and mythical history, the second embodiment of the Avestan concept plays the major role in the popular narrative literature of the Islamic period. This is the animal *ezhdehā* or dragon making its appearance in a large number of Persian legends, including those of dragon-slaying heroes Fereidun, Garshāsp, Rostam, Farāmarz, Borzu, Esfandiyār, Alexander, Bahrām Gur and many others.²⁹ Fighting and slaying a dragon is a hero's most valiant task. In fact, a warrior has to slay at least one dragon to be constituted as a true hero. In the later religious epics of the Islamic era this feature is epitomized by the episode of Ali, the Shi'i equivalent of the national Iranian hero Rostam, who rips a dragon apart when still an infant in the cradle.³⁰ Slaying a dragon is, moreover, not only a demonstration of prowess. In Iranian mythology, the dragon is a symbol of drought, often preventing the people's access to water. In the Iranian versions of a folk-tale that is widespread in Indo-Iranian tradition, a dragon occupies a country's well or spring and thus its indispensable source of life.³¹ In addition, it also threatens human reproduction by demanding the sacrifice of a virgin (and, ultimately, the princess) in exchange for allowing the people to fetch water. Quite obviously, the people's choice is for the bad or the worse, and so the dragon-slaying hero's interference is their only chance of survival. As the standard reward for his valiant deed, the hero is promised marriage with the princess. In passing, it might be mentioned that the future union of princess and hero constitutes a good choice, not only from the latter's perspective. Even if the ancient story-tellers probably did not think of the union in these modern terms, by uniting the ruler's daughter with the hero who had secured their survival, the people could profit from the hero's genetic potential for the procreation of the country's future rulers. Out of the characters discussed in the present survey, the *ezhdehā* is the one elaborated in most detail in pre-Islamic sources and also in both the elite and popular literatures of the Islamic period.

While the *ezhdehā* was perceived as an evil character from the very beginning, the *div*, as the second impersonation of the quintessential Bad in Persian literature of the Islamic period, apparently relates to a class of gods from the Indo-Iranian period.³² It is extremely difficult to determine the various stages of this development, but undoubtedly at some stage the Avestan *daivas* were demonized. In the Gathas, the *daivas* still 'constituted a distinct category of quite genuine gods, who had, however, been rejected' due to the fact that they were 'incapable of proper divine discernment'. Though the existing

evidence is said to be 'full of gaps and ambiguities', it has been suggested that *daivas* should be regarded as beings who, similar to humans, have been endowed with the freedom of choice but have not put their freedom to proper use. Their religion is false, and humanity's main weapon to defend itself against them is the proper observance of ritual and liturgy. In later Zoroastrian ritual and theology, the concept of the *dēv* is central and in Zoroastrian religious books they serve as the stereotypical personifications of every imaginable evil. This image is mirrored throughout their appearance as *div* in the Persian literature of the Islamic period.³³ *Divs* are often imagined as hideous creatures, sometimes black and furry, with long teeth, black lips and claws on their hands. Some *divs* have several heads, while others have monstrous ears or gigantic teeth. The land of Māzandarān mentioned in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* even depicts a land of *divs* whose organization resembles that of the human world. Here, 'they have a king, with all the trappings of kingship, including armies, demon generals, cities, fortresses, farms, herds, etc.' While the *div* has thus become the ultimate representative of evil forces hostile to humanity, attributes derived from its ancient Iranian roots have also mingled with, and to certain extent incorporated, additional features originally pertaining to demons of Arabic tradition, such as the *ghul*, the *jinn* or the *ifrit*.

Within the numerous details characterizing the *div* in the Persian epics as well as later popular literature, several peculiar traits are of particular interest. One curious characteristic is the *div*'s tendency to do the opposite of what it is asked to do. This is the reason why Rostam, when carried through the air by the *div* Akvān, asks to be thrown down to the earth: he is certain that Akvān will then throw him into the sea.³⁴ Another peculiarity is that when fighting a *div*, the hero must strike the *div* only once, since a second stroke will restore the *div*'s powers.³⁵ Consequently, when the *div* asks to be struck a second time, the informed hero will normally respond: 'My mother only bore me once, and so I will not strike again...', thus delivering the *div* to final annihilation. As a third peculiar point, we might mention that a *div* can also, even if it does so rarely, enter into sexual union with a human being. Mostly, though not exclusively, imagined as a male creature, the *div* could thus sire offspring with a human woman. A fairly recent instance of such a union is encountered in the narrative of *Khosraw-e divzād*, in folklorist terms a version of the popular tale of the faithless sister.³⁶ In this tale, a royal brother and his sister are driven away from their home. Unnoticed by her brother, the young woman falls in love with a *div*, becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. Due to the qualities inherited from his demon father, the son possesses supernatural strength, whereas in terms of ethics he is firmly committed to human (though not necessarily his mother's) standards. Consequently, when his uncle has been mortally wounded by his mother's *div*-lover, he saves his uncle from imminent death or even resuscitates him by procuring the water of life before going on to slay his demon father.

The final point to be addressed in the present survey is the impersonation of Good. As might well be imagined, this feature is stereotypically impersonated by the hero. But whereas the forces of evil are pure and unambiguous in their determination to destroy humanity, the hero of Iranian legend and epic does not manifest positive characteristics alone. As a telling example, we might remember Rostam's fight with his son Sohrāb. When Rostam has been overcome by Sohrāb and the latter has already drawn a dagger to sever the hero's head, Rostam resorts to trickery to save his life.³⁷ He tells Sohrāb that, according to the laws of his land, a hero may not strike a fatal blow the first time he vanquishes his enemy, but only when he has overcome him twice. Sohrāb trusts Rostam's words and lets him go. Having been alerted to the folly of his action by a third party, he soon returns to fight Rostam again. This time, however, Rostam seizes him by the shoulders and forces him to the ground. Knowing the young man will not lie there for long, Rostam plunges his dagger into the young man's chest – only to find out soon afterwards that he has unwittingly killed his own son. Incidentally, Rostam's trick mirrors the above-mentioned rule that a hero should never attempt to strike a *div* twice lest he restores his enemy's power.

In order to avoid tragedies like Rostam's, the hero character in Persian epics of the Islamic period is often split up into two distinct characters, leaving an unambiguous positive role to the main hero. In particular, the Persian romantic epics relegate the more dubious activities of a warrior to a separate character, the *ayyār*.³⁸ The *ayyār*, who is best perceived of as the hero's *alter ego*, is absolutely loyal to the hero. Yet, while the hero challenges his foes directly, to further the hero's ultimate success the *ayyār* is permitted to lie and spy, to drug and abduct the enemy and to perform all kinds of ethically questionable activities that would spoil the image of the pure hero. Interestingly, both the valiant hero and the tricky *ayyār* share a common pre-Islamic origin in being related to the prototypical ideal of *javānmardi* (Arabic *futuwwa*) as exemplified by members of the Sasanian cavalry who were bound together by a code of honour.³⁹ Thus the hero character of much of the Persian literature of the Islamic period also relates directly to a pre-Islamic concept. Abstracting the role of the hero even further, one is tempted to interpret most of the action in Persian epics, legends and folk-tales as exemplifying and elaborating the quintessential basics of a pre-Islamic world-view that sees human existence as being governed by the constant battle between the forces of Good and Bad. At this point, however, the analogy becomes so generally applicable that it appears hardly profitable to develop it any further.

In conclusion, I would like to mention two theoretical assumptions underlying this chapter, even though I have not voiced them explicitly. First, it is a commonly acknowledged paradox that detailed knowledge of events, characters and concepts multiplies in inverted proportion to their historical proximity. In other words, numerous historical events and other features of

history are with time relegated to oblivion or all but disappear. Conversely, those that persist in tradition are often embellished and adorned with numerous additional traits so as to develop an attractive and convincing image of how posterity imagines them to have been. This process is particularly evident in the phenomenon of *'Kristallisationsgestalt'*, a term denoting certain characters from historical or pseudo-historical tradition that have the capacity of attracting and adding to their own repertoire all kinds of traits and narratives that might or might not originally have been attached to other characters.⁴⁰ As a folklorist I am rather less concerned with the question of historical truth, particularly since the concepts of truth or reality are not as unambiguous as we would hope them to be. Studying the survival of ancient concepts, my focus is rather on meaning. Seen from this perspective, the features I have discussed demonstrate their meaningful position in Iranian tradition not only by their longevity but also by their characteristics as articulated in the Persian literature of the Islamic period. In addition, it is significant that the features discussed unquestionably relate to pre-Islamic tradition and that their present shape is an imaginative and often fanciful transformation of ancient models. We should, however, be extremely diligent not to hypothesize pure and uncontaminated origins, nor to presume direct and unbroken chains of tradition. From their inception, or at least from the earliest sources we can fathom today, the underlying concepts were subjected to a variety of influences arising from the differing ethnic and religious backgrounds with which they came into contact. Consequently, and not only from the point of view of popular literature, my 'Idea of Iran' is not that of a pure nation whose pivotal values might or might not have been contaminated by later developments. Rather, I see it essentially as a hybrid entity that over the thousands of years of its existence has successfully managed to incorporate a plethora of elements of varying origins. Seen against this theoretical backdrop, the enduring power of the 'Idea of Iran' would thus not arise from a nostalgic adherence to values of times that have irretrievably gone by. Rather its powerful potential relates to its constant ability to preserve a limited array of core values while adapting them to the exigencies of constantly changing circumstances.

Notes:

1. Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, *Trois ans en Asie (de 1855 à 1858)*. vols 1–2 (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1922), vol. 2, 54–66.
2. Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: Belfond, 1967); Arthur de Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races* (New York: Fertig, 1915 [1999]); see Janine Buenzod, *La Formation de la pensée de Gobineau et l'essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: Nizet, 1967); Günther Deschner, 'Gobineau und Deutschland. Der Einfluß von J. A. de Gobineaus "Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines" auf die deutsche Geistesgeschichte 1853–1917', unpublished PhD dissertation Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1967; Jean Boissel, *Gobineau. Biographie, mythes et réalité* (Paris: Berg, 1993).
3. de Gobineau, *Trois ans en Asie*, 66: 'l'esprit de la nation est porté au merveilleux'.
4. Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 49–50, 66; see Ulrich Marzolph, 'The Persian "Nights": Links between the "Arabian Nights" and Iranian Culture' in *The 'Arabian Nights' in Transnational Perspective*, ed. by Ulrich Marzolph (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 221–43 (231).
5. Marzolph, 'The Persian "Nights"', 231–2.
6. Ulrich Marzolph, *Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), particularly 26–7.
7. Bahman Sarkārāti, 'Pari. Tahqiqi dar hāshiya-ye ostura-shenāsi-ye tatbiqi', *Nashriya-ye Dāneshkada-ye adabiyāt va 'olum-e ensāni-ye Tabriz*, 23 (1350 / 1971), 1–32; Mehrān Afshāri, 'Pari' in *Dāneshnāma-ye jahān-e eslām*, vol. 5. Tehran 1379 / 2000, 593–7; Mahmoud Omidsalar, 'Pari (Pari)' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 10 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), cols 743–6.
8. Arthur Christensen, *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne* (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1941).
9. *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: a Tenth-century Survey of Muslim Culture*, vols. 1–2, trans. and ed. by Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), vol. 2, 714.
10. The wording of the following passage relies to some extent on the last published discussion of this anecdote in Mohsen Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb*. 'Alī b. 'Ubayda al-Rayhānī (D. 219/834) and his 'Jawāhir al-kilam wa-farā'id al-hikam', vols 1–2 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), vol. 1, 129–30; see also Charles Pellat, 'al-Nadr b. al-Hārith' in *Et* 7 (1993), 872–3; Mahmoud and Teresa Omidsalar, 'Narrating Epics in Iran' in *Traditional Storytelling Today: An International Sourcebook*, ed. by Margaret Read Macdonald (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers Inc., 1999), 326–40, (329).
11. Omidsalar, 'Narrating Epics in Iran', 329; Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb*, vol. 1, 129.
12. *Ibid.*, 329.
13. Marzolph, 'The Persian "Nights"', 222–5; Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vols 1–2 (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2004), vol. 2, 588–9; Aboubakr Chraïbi, *Les Mille et une nuits. Histoire du texte et classification des contes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 24–45.
14. Dominique Sourdrel, 'Le "Livre des secrétaires"' de 'Abdallāh al-Baghdādī', *Bulletin d'études orientales* 12 (1947–8), 115–53; Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Gard*, vol. 1, 128; Chraïbi, *Les Mille et une nuits*, 24–6.

15. François de Blois, *Burzôy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalīlah wa Dimnah* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1990); see also Heinz and Sophia Grotzfeld and Ulrich Marzolph, 'Kalīla und Dimna' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 7 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), cols 888–95.
16. Chraïbi, *Les Mille et une nuits*.
17. Henri Massé, 'Les versions persanes des contes d'animaux' in *L'Âme de l'Iran* by Georges Contenau et al. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1951), 129–49.
18. Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb*.
19. Marzolph and van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, 80–82.
20. Ibid., vol. 1, 343; see Jean-Louis Laveille, *Le Thème du voyage dans Les Mille et une Nuits: Du Maghreb à la Chine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 189; Marzolph, 'The Persian "Nights"', 225–7.
21. The following passage draws from Mahmoud Omidasalar's unpublished original English version of the encyclopaedic entry 'Parī' whose edited German version is published in Omidasalar, 'Peri (Pari)'. I would like to thank my colleague for kindly granting permission to quote his work. Passages in quotation marks are his wording.
22. Sankārāti, 'Pari'.
23. Omidasalar, 'Peri (Pari)'.
24. Jörg Bäcker, 'Schwanjungfrau' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 13 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), cols 311–8; see also Christine Goldberg, 'Pars pro toto' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 10 (2002), cols 590–95.
25. Ulrich Marzolph, 'Social Values in the Persian Popular Romance "Salīm-i Javāhīrī" *Edebiyat*, New Series 51 (1994), 77–98, also in Ulrich Marzolph, *Ex Oriente Fabula. Exploring the Narrative Culture of the Islamic Near and Middle East*, vol. 2 (Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2006), 29–56; Mohammad Ja'fari (Qanavāti), *Do revāyat az 'Salim-e Javāheri'* (Tehran: Māzyār 1387 / 2008).
26. 'Aẓdahā', *Enclr* 3 (1989), 191.
27. P.O. Skjærvø, 'Aẓdahā. 1. In Old and Middle Iranian' in *Enclr* 3 (1989), 191–9, quotations at 191, 194; see also Ali Hasuri, 'Ezhdehā' in *Dāneshnāme-ye Irān*, vol. 2 (Tehran 1386/2007), 777–86.
28. Skjærvø, 'Aẓdahā. 1. In Old and Middle Iranian'.
29. J. Khaleghi-Motlagh, 'Aẓdahā. 2: In Persian Literature' in *Enclr* 3 (1989), 199–202; M. Omidasalar, 'Aẓdahā. 3: In Iranian Folktales' in *Enclr* 3 (1989), 203–4.
30. Marzolph, *Narrative Illustration*, 77, fig. 13.4; for Ali as the equivalent of Rostam see Sorour Soroudi, 'Islamization of the Iranian National Hero Rustam as Reflected in Persian Folktales', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980), 365–83.
31. Ulrich Marzolph, *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens* (Beirut: Orient-institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1984), 62–4, tale type *302 B; see also Lutz Röhrich, 'Drache, Drachenkampf, Drachentöter' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 3. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), cols 787–820, particularly cols 792–3.
32. Clarisse Herrenschmidt and Jean Kellens, '*Daiva' in *Enclr* 6 (1993), 599–602, quotations at 599.
33. Mahmoud Omidasalar, 'Dīv' in *Enclr* 7 (1996), 428–31, quotation on 428–9; see also Msia Čačava, 'Dev' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 3 (1981), cols 569–73.
34. Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāma. The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. by Dick Davis (New York: Viking, 2006), 301–2.
35. Fritz Meier, 'Orientalische belege für das motiv, nur einmal zuschlagen' in *Mélanges d'Islamologie. Volume dédié à la mémoire d'Armand Abel*, vol. 1, ed. by Pierre Salmon (Leiden: Brill 1974), 207–23.

36. *Wenn der Esel singt, tanzt das Kamel. Persische Märchen und Schwänke*, narrated by Maschdi Galin Chanom, collected by L.P. Elwell-Sutton, trans. and ed. by Ulrich Marzolph (Munich: Diederichs, 1994), 112–27; *Qessahā-ye Mashdī Galīn Khānom. 110 qessa-ye āmiyāna-ye irāni. Gerd-āvarda-ye L.P. Elwell-Sutton*, ed. by Ulrich Marzolph, Azar Amirhosseini-Nithammer, Ahmad Vakiliyān (Tehran: Markaz, 5th edn 1386/2007), no. 80; see also Christine Shojaei Kawan, ‘Schwester: Die treulose S. (AaTh/ATU 315)’ in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 12 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), cols 434–439 (col. 435).
37. Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāma. The Persian Book of Kings*, 208.
38. William L. Hanaway, ‘Ayyār. 2: ‘Ayyār in Persian Sources’ in *Enclr 2* (1987), 161–3; Marina Gaillard, *Le Livre de Samak-e ‘ayyār. Idéologie et structure du roman persan médiéval* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), 27–42.
39. Mohsen Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society. The Origins of ‘Ayyārān and Futuwwa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995).
40. Ines Köhler-Zülch, ‘Kristallisationsgestalten’ in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), cols 460–66.