Eastern Texts, Western Techniques: European Editorial Theory and the Editing of Classical Persian

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD, Western Europe entered a period of its history, which is commonly called "the Middle Ages" in English. Traditionally the beginning of this period is placed in the summer of 410 AD when Alaric the Visigoth sacked the city of Rome, although the Vandal conquest of 455 was a more devastating event.[1] Be that as it may, by the middle of the 5th century AD, Western Europe had entered a period of what the Oxford historian R. H. C. Davis (1918 – 1991) has called a gradual and complex period of "Barbarization"[2], when, according to Saint Jerome (347 – 420):

> The whole world perished in one city. … Who would believe that Rome, built up by the conquest of the whole world, has collapsed? That the mother of nations has also become their tomb?[3]

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[1] Although medievalists believe that the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410 was not as devastating as originally thought, and that most of the murder and mayhem was committed by slaves who "got even" with their owners, the Vandals' conquest of Rome in 455 was a completely different affair. According to James Westfall Thompson (1864 – 1941):

> The Vandal sack of Rome was a disaster far more terrible than that of 410. Then human life and the Christian churches were spared; now they were not. For fourteen days the city was methodically riffled. The imperial palace, the Temple of Jupiter, churches, and dwellings were gutted. The Vandals even stripped the gilded tiles from the roofs of the temples. The relics brought by Titus from Jerusalem—works of art, plate, and furniture—were carried away, along with thousands of the wretched people who were enslaved. The grand old patrician families were broken up, their wealth dissipated. The political glory of Rome departed.

See J. W. Thompson, *The Middle Ages, 300 – 1500*, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1972 (originally published in 1932), p.101.

[2] The great Oxford historian, R. H. C. Davis (1918 – 1991) puts the matter quite nicely:

> It would, in short, be a great mistake to consider the barbarian invasions as a cataclysmic event. "Barbarization" was a very gradual and a very complex development, and it is impossible to say when the Roman empire came to an end, for from a strictly legal point of view it continued to exist at Constantinople until 1453. The battle of Adrianople (378 AD) and the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth (410 AD) were, like the deposition of Romulus Augustus, single events that were important not to smuch for their own sakes as for their symbolic value. They were like milestones marking the distance that had already been covered on the road to the new Europe.

See his *A History of Medieval Europe From Constantine to Saint Louis*, New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1971, p.26.

It was not until the Renaissance, when Europe finally emerged from her "Dark Ages."[4] The Renaissance humanists, especially Petrarch (1304 – 1374), used the term Middle Age to refer to the vast period that separated his generation from the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome. According to Anthony Grafton, the Renaissance humanist, believed:

> Human culture had reached its zenith in the ancient world, and had collapsed, like the Roman Empire, with the onset of Christianity and barbarism, and had only revived in [the renaissance].[5]

The barbarous cultural circumstances of western Europe during the Middle Ages were so dreadful that the word "medieval" has gained the sense of backward, wild, cruel, and generally uncouth in many European languages. The point is that the tripartite division of history into: Classical, Medieval, and renaissance, with all of its cultural and intellectual implications is strictly a western European phenomenon. As the American medievalist Joseph Reese Strayer (1904 – 1987) puts it, in the Middle Ages:

> We are dealing with a civilization which, in its complete form, covers *only Western Europe*. It has little influence on Eastern Europe and even less on Western Asia and Northern Africa.[6]

Strayer's view is echoed by W. F. H. Nicolaisen, who in his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, observed:

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[3] See Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the *City of God*," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, edited by Eugene F. Rice Jr. Ithaca/New York; Cornell University Press, 1959, p.266. This paper originally appeared in *Journald of the History of Ideas* 12(1951):346 – 374.

[4] Though many Western medievalists of note have spent a great deal of time and energy in an effort to rehabilitate medieval Europe and have produced an admirable body of scholarship that challenges the prejudicial notions of the Middle Ages that were inherited from the Renaissance humanists, the fact remains that compared to the Muslim civilization of the seventh through the thirteenth centuries, Europe as no more than a backward and primitive place. For challenges to the old ideas about medieval Europe see: Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927; Sir Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953; and J. R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970 among others. The ideas come to the forth best in the debate about the Renaissance. For a summary of different medievalists' views on this issue see Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought; Five Centuries of Interpretation,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948.

[5] See Anthony Grafton's essay on "Middle Ages" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, general editor Joseph R. Strayer, New York: Scribner, 1982 – 1989

[6] Joseph R. Strayer, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages, A Short History*, 2nd edition, Englewood Cliffs,New Jersey: Prentice – Hall, Inc., 1974, p.4.

> The notion of a chronological Middle Age, with its concomitant epithet medieval, is, in its hint at a tripartite temporal division, essentially European in origin and application. Any exercise insisting on a double vision in matters concerning oral tradition in a medieval setting … is consequently almost by definition, predestined to concentrate on and perhaps even to deal exclusively with, the European scene.[7]

Most scholarship in medieval Europe was religious in nature, and literary activity of the kind that flourished in classical Islam was almost non-existent. Medieval European libraries were accordingly small and primarily devotional.[8] What's more, these collections were viewed as tools of disputation with non-believers rather than means to acquire learning. This is exemplified in a letter addressed to Peter Mangot, a monk of Baugercy in the diocese of Tours, by Geoffrey, the sub-prior of S. Barbe in Normandy, in the year 1170:

> A monastrery (*claustrum*) without a library (*sine armario*) is like a castle (*castrum*) without a library (*sine armamentatio*). Our library is our armory. Thence it is that we bring forth the sentences of the Divine Law like sharp arrow to attack the enemy. Thence we take the armour of rightiousness, the helmet of salvation, the shile of faith, and the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God.[9]

In contrast to the medieval Europe, the Middle East embarked upon its most vibrant and productive cultural phase following the Arab conquest. Europe and the Middle East therefore, experienced

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[7] W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Introduction," in *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages*, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, ed. Binghamton NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1955, pp.1 – 6.

This argument that tries to apply the European model to the Persian scene by drawing an analogy between Ferdowsi's artistic activity and that of Geoffrey of Monmouth was put forth by Dick Davis in his picculiar paper, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources," *JAOS*, 116(1996): 48 – 57. I have assessed and refuted some of Davis' views in M. Omidsalar, "Could al-Thaᶜālibi have used the Shāhnāma as a Source?" *Der Islam* 76(1998): 163 – 171.

[8] Thomas Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain Before 1850*. London: The Library Association, 1966, p.13.

[9] G. H. Putnam, *Books and Their Makers During the Middle Ages*, 2 volumes, New York: Hillary House Publishers LTD, 1962 (this is a reprint of the 1896 – 1897 edition), vol.1, p. 133. The original and full context of the letter is found in the report of the correspondence between Geoffry, John the abbot, and Peter, which is reported in greater detail in Rev. Samuel R. Maitland, *The Dark Ages: A Series of Essays Intended to Illustrate the State of Religion and Literature in the Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Centuries*, London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1844, pp.199 – 201.

exactly opposite outcomes after the invasions that changed their cultures. The Muslim invasion of Iran for instance, resulted in an unprecedented period of intellectual and cultural growth, which climaxed in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. Thus the assumption that because Muslim intellectuals and artists of the 10th century Middle East were contemporaries of the "medieval" Europeans, they could be considered "medieval," in any sense of the word is factually flawed. By the same token, just because Iran's national poet, Ferdowsi, was born in 329/940, began work on the Shāhnāma in 370/981, and died in 411/1020, he may not be considered a "medieval author," nor may any inferences drawn from lives or works of medieval European authors be applied to him or to any of his peers.

In spite of these facts, most western Shāhnāma scholarship persists in drawing fatuous analogies between Ferdowsi's purely literary composition and medieval European troubadourish or bardic lays. Dick Davis, for instance, sees Ferdowsi's soul mate in Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1158), and along with Olga Davidson suggests that editing the Shāhnāma can benefit from editorial techniques that have been developed for establishing texts of medieval French Songs of the troubadour prince, Jaufré Rudel (d. c. 1147) and others. For instance, concerning the manuscripts of Iran's national poem, Davis writes:

> The manuscripts of the poem vary enormously, especially in its most famous passages. *The situation is much more like that of, say, the corpus of medieval French narrative poems than it is like that of the Homeric text* [my italics]. An obvious way forward would be to accept that the poem is irreducibly multitextual.[10]

Similarly, Davidson observes that "the variant readings of different manuscripts of Ferdowsi's Shāhnāma result from a system of formulaic variation typical of oral poetics."[11] Drawing on scholarship on medieval French, Homeric Greek, and pre-Islamic Arabic poetry rather than on Shāhnāma manuscript studies, Davidson finds that:

> … we cannot reconstruct with any absolute certainty the original composition of Ferdowsi, because of its susceptibility to recomposition with each new performance [of any of its parts] in a living oral tradition. All we can say about the original is that, if it is capable of being recomposed, it too must be a product of oral composition. And the continual recomposition on the level of form was

[10] Davis's review of *Shāhnāma: The Visual Languae of the Persian "Book of Kings."* In *Speculum* 81(2006)3:862.

[11] Olga Davidson, "The Text of Ferdowsi's Shāhnāma and the Burden of the Past," in *JAOS*, vol.118, 1998, No.1, p.63.

> matched by recomposition on the level of content, leading to new accretions that are anachronistic to the patterns of earlier layers.[12]

Ferdowsi's poem is thus linked with the kind of orality which informed much of medieval European narrative prose and poetry with no concerns whatsoever, for cultural context or intellectual milieu.

One unfortunate result of this ahistorical and non-contextual approach to Iran's national poem has been to suggest that editorial techniques that have been developed for medieval European texts may and should be applied to the Shāhnāma. Both Davidson and Davis seem to believe that what is called *Mouvance* in medieval French scholarship is relevant to Shāhnāma editing, and that editorial techniques which grew out of this notion may be yanked out of their medieval French context and be applied to the text of the Shāhnāma. But I must first take a few moments to explain what *Mouvance* is for those who may not be familiar with the latest academic fads.

The term *mouvance* is a neologism that denotes "the propensity for change characteristic of any medieval work."[13] In 1955 Rychner had already used the word *mouvant*, in order to "describe the instability of oral epic texts subject to continual improvisation by performer-composers."[14] Four years later in 1959, Martín de Riquer referred to "moving state of the texts of the *chanson de gestes*".[15] In 1960 Rychner revived the archaic word *muance*, which in Old French meant "change, variation," in a similar sense.[16] But the task of formulating *mouvance* as a theoretical concept with implications for textual editing was left to the Swiss medievalist, Paul Zumthor (1915 – 1995). Zumthor tackled the question in a number of influential works, the most famous of which, *Essai de Poétique Mediéval* (1972), was translated into English as *Toward a Medieval Poetics* (1992). Writing about medieval French literature, Zumthor writes:

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[12] Olga M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994, p.66.

[13] Mary B. Speer, "Wrestling with Change: Old French Textual Criticism and Mouvance," *Olifant* 7(1980)4:311-27, especially p. 317; also see her comments in "Textual Criticism Redivivus," *L'Esprit Créateur* 23(1983)1:43-44; and cf. her discussion of the concept in her "Old French Literature," in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, ed. D. C. Greetham (New York: MLA, 1995):402-405.

[14] Jean Rychner, *La Chanson de geste: essai sur l'art épique de jongleurs*, PRF (Geneva: Droz, 1955), 29,32, 33, 48; cited in Speer, "Wrestling", 317

[15] Speer, "Wrestling with Change", 317, n.14

[16] Speer, "Wrestling with Change", 317, and see Jean Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux: variantes, remaniements, dégradations* (Neuchâtel: Faculté des Lettres, 1960), I, 131

> The text can be considered as a spoken word during its production phase, but, once produced, it assumes for us the nature of a fully formed language, a matrix of limitless possibilities. The medieval text lies ambivalently between these two poles. Some medieval texts, for example many romances, are very close to the modern notion of a "work"; others, such as epic poems, are closer to folklore, while a whole range of fabliaux and exempla can hardly be distinguished from folk material.[17]

He further elucidates his notion of the inherent change or variation in medieval French texts in a chapter entitled: "The Poet and the Text" in which he writes:

> Thus conceived the work is dynamic by definition. It grows, changes, and decays. The multiplicity and diversity of texts that bear witness to it [i.e. its manuscripts] are like special effects within the system. What we see in each of the written utterances to which the poetry can be reduced by analysis is less something complete in itself than the text still in the process of creation; not an essence, but something coming into being; rather a constantly renewed attempt to get at meaning than a meaning finally fixed; not a structure, but a phase in the structuring process.][18]

In a series of lucid and brilliant papers and reviews, Mary Speer points out a number of important details in Zumthor's conception of the term *mouvance* as it applies to textual criticism: first, that Zumthor makes an implicit distinction in his definition between a medieval composition as "*l'oeuvre*", that is, "an abstraction comparable to the Saussurian *langue*, and yet occasionally reminiscent of the Lachmannian Original", and its physical trace, that he calls the "*texte concret,*" namely, the written document.[19] The fundamental difference in approach between the Lachmannian stemmatics and the followers of the *mouvance* school is that whereas the Lachmannians ally themselves with the author and strive to reconstruct the archetype of the surviving witnesses by a process of elimination of errors, *mouvance* unites itself with the scribes, performers, and revisers, and purports to stress the creativity of each successive mutation of the text during the process of its transmission. In this scheme, although the chronological priority of some form of

[17] Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, translated by Ph. Bennett, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 53 – 54.

[18] Zumthor, *Tward a Medieval Poetics*, p.48.

[19] Speer, "Wrestling with Change", 317

"*l'ouvre*" is implicitly assumed, none is given "esthetic priority."[20] The work of art is thus detached from its original creator whose individuality and genius disappears in a crowd of faceless performers and revisers and whose voice is lost amid a "cacophony of scribal voices".

What is crucial in all this for our purposes is that the concept of *mouvance* was developed based on evidence from medieval French poetry and for that very reason it is inapplicable and irrelevant to the Shāhnāma. In spite of this, western Shāhnāma studies insists on injecting it into every discussion of the Shāhnāma (see above). However, as I hope to have shown by now, neither Ferdowsi nor or his poem were "medieval;" and notions applicable to medieval European literature are not applicable to them because applying editing techniques which are influenced by Zumthor's concept of *mouvance* to Iran's national poem amounts to imposing Zumthor upon Zabol, which is neither fair to Zumthor nor to Zabolestan.

The entire concept of *mouvance* hangs on the presumption of some sign of orality either in the work to which the concept is applied or in the circumstances of its production and transmission. The concept may be justifiably applied to a manuscript tradition when that tradition displays such vast textual variations that a single author or a fixed text behind it may be reasonably ruled out. In other words, extensive textual differences in a manuscript tradition may imply different "performances" or diverse artistic "re-creations," which may in turn justify the application of editorial techniques implied in *mouvance*. By contrast, if a manuscript tradition's variations are either small or may be explained in terms of usual scribal practices, then there is no need to invoke either orality or *mouvance* with regard to it. Statistical features of the manuscript tradition of the Shāhnāma prove that this tradition is so conservative as to be practically immobile, let alone "*mouvant*".

Let us consider the statistical fluctuations in the number of verses of the story of Kaykhosrow in six manuscripts of the poem. This is a large sample, nearly 12,000 distiches (24,000 lines). It is even larger than either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* alone, and only slightly smaller than the two Greek poems combined. Moreover, it amounts to approximately 24% of the entire Shāhnāma, and may therefore be considered representative of the whole poem.

I focus on quantitative fluctuation of verses only because these results may be better quantified. I will compare the numbers generated from Shāhnāma manuscripts with similar data about the quantitative

[20] "Wrestling with Change", 317-18

fluctuation of verses that Albert Lord reports about performances of genuinely oral epic songs in order to show how vastly different the oral performance data can be from what is found in Shāhnāma manuscripts.

Let me anticipate two objections to my method. The first is to say that two manuscripts, although quantitatively similar, may show vast qualitative variation in the wordings of their texts. My answer to this objection is that the majority of textual differences in Shāhnāma manuscripts are of the kind that Sir Walter Wilson Greg (1875 – 1959) called "accidentals." They comprise spelling variations, insertions of unimportant prepositions and the like. The rest are variants that may best be explained in terms of usual scribal practices. The second objection is that comparing manuscript evidence with actual "oral performance" of living bards is comparing apples and oranges, and therefore, this study is logically flawed from the outset. Although I absolutely agree that one should not compare evidence from a Persian literary work of the 10th century AD, with oral evidence obtained from fieldwork among the illiterate Yugoslavian bards of the 20th century, the die is cast because that is precisely what the proponents of Shāhnāma's "orality" do in the name of "comparativism." For instance, Davidson writes:

> My previous work and the present book rely on the actual language of Ferdowsi's poetry as internal evidence for formulaic composition, which can be shown to be typical of oral poetry *on the basis of comparative evidence collected from recordings of living traditions* [my italics].[21]

All I am doing here is to merely use the arguments of the devotees of Harvard's tribal religion of Oral Formularism, to respond to their baseless claims about Shāhnāma manuscripts and the editing of this purely literary work of art.

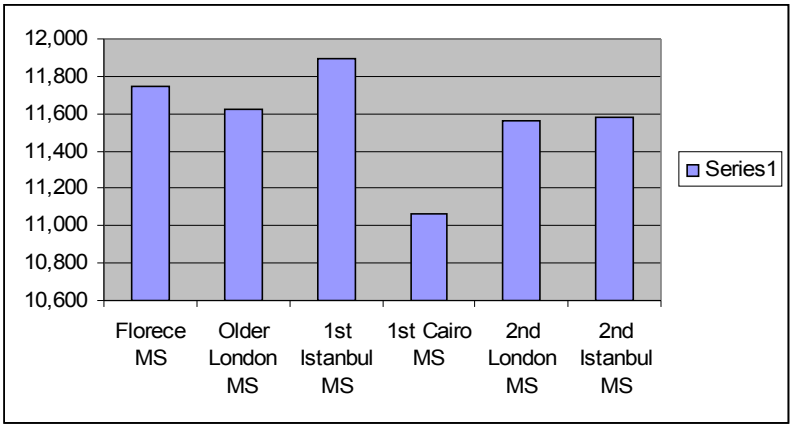
Quantitative Fluctuations in Six Manuscripts of the Shāhnāma:

The story of Kaykhosrow's rule in Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition has 11,618 verses. The number of verses devoted to this episode in six of the poem's MSS may be represented in the following charts:[22]

[21] Olga M. Davidson, *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*, Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2000, p.7.

[22] The numbers following the manuscripts are two sets of dates. The first is a *hejir* date, which is separated from the Gregorian date by a slash.

Manuscripts	Number of Verses in the Sample
Florence of 614/1217	11,749
London of 675/1276	11,622
Istanbul of 731/1330	11,899
Cairo of 741/1341	11,060
London of 891/1486	11,560
Istanbul of 903/1498	11,577



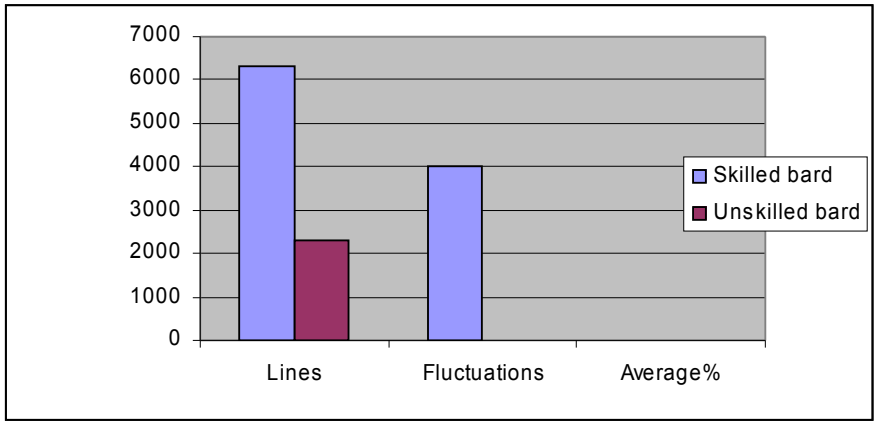
The bulkiest of our codices, the Istanbul MS of 731/1330, has only 839 verses more than the smallest of them, the Cairo codex of 741/1341. The quantitative difference between these MSS is between 7.1% to 7.6% for an average fluctuation of only 7.35%. In the case of the manuscripts that are closest in bulk, namely the London MS of 891/1486 and the Istanbul MS of 903/1498, the difference is only 17 verses, or only 0.2%. The average quantitative difference for these two extremes is only 3.77%.

Now, if manuscript variance in the Shāhnāma represents a "poetic oral traditional," behind the epic at some stage of its development, then the numbers generated from our manuscript sample should be roughly similar to comparable data from genuinely oral performances. However, since a sung poetic oral tradition in New Persian does not exist, nor has it ever existed[23], we must rely on Albert Lord's data from his *The Singer of Tales* (1960; henceforth ST), which has become something of a holy writ in America.[24]

[23] M. Omidsalar and T. P. Omidsalar, "Narrating Epics in Iran," in *Traditional Storytelling Today: An International Sourcebook,* ed. Margaret Read MacDonald. Chichago/London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999, pp.326 – 340.
[24] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge/Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981 (originally published in 1960).

Lord found notable quantitative fluctuation in oral songs' different performances. For instance, an experienced singer's performance of a song at 6313 lines is almost three time the size of a less skilled bard's performance of the same song at 2294 lines.[25] The quantitative fluctuation between the two performances at 4019 lines is greater than the total length of the unskilled bard's song (2294 lines). The upper and lower percentile fluctuations for these two performers are 175% and 64% for an average fluctuation of 119%.

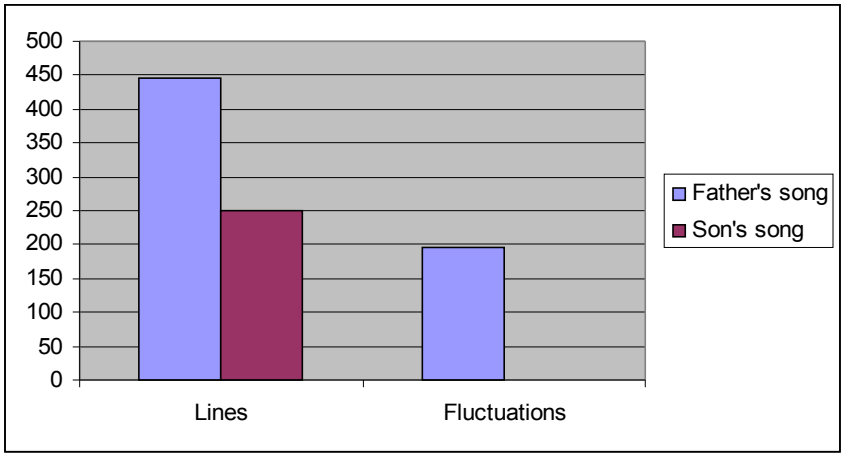
Oral Performances			
Performances	**Lines**	**Fluctuations**	**Average%**
Skilled bard	6313	4019	119.50%
Unskilled bard	2294		



A father's version of a song at 445 lines, was nearly twice the length of his young son's performance of the same song at 249 lines. The percentage of the quantitative change between these two performances averages to 61.5% (from an upper limit of 78.8% to the lower boundary of 44.1%).

Oral Performances			
Performances	**Lines**	**Fluctuations**	**Average%**
Father's song	445	196	61.50%
Son's song	249		

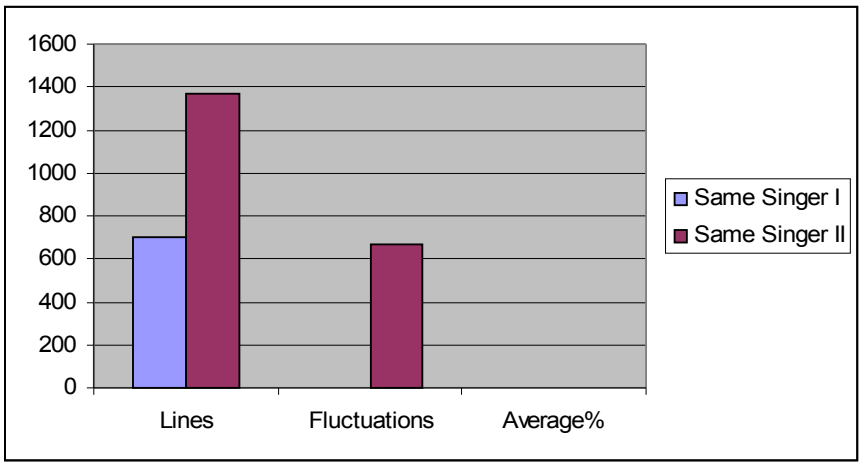
[25] ST, p. 103, and compare the contrast between the length of a song book version of a tale (11 lines) and the much longer performance of it by a skilled singer (ST, pp.107-108)



Lord also found that a singer may double the size of his own song in performances that are only one year apart. One singer increased the length of his own song from 154 to 279 lines. The upper and lower limits of percentile change in this example are 81.2% and 44.8% respectively, for an average fluctuation of 63%.[26]

Oral Performances			
Performances	**Lines**	**Fluctuations**	**Average%**
Same Singer I	698		
Same Singer II	1369	671	72.5%

[26] Lord presents evidence of great discrepancy in a song performed by the same singer in two performances, which were separated by some 16 years. The older singing, recorded by Parry in the spring of 1935, was 464 lines; the younger one, recorded by Lord himself in June of 1950, had no more than 209 lines. (ST, pp.115-116). The range of variance for this song is between 55% and 122% for an average of 88.5%. However, since in his 1950 performance, the singer "was in a hurry to finish and depart", his performance was rushed, and this evidence may not be fairly utilized for our purposes.



These numbers and charts are self-explanatory. They show that compared to the changes in different performances of the oral traditional epic songs quantitative changes in Shāhnāma manuscripts do not so much as hint at an oral tradition behind the text or for that matter anywhere near its history.[27]

But if this is so, then why is Western Shāhnāma studies so fixated on the idea that perfectly understandable textual variations in Shāhnāma manuscripts reflect an "oral tradition of formulaic composition?"

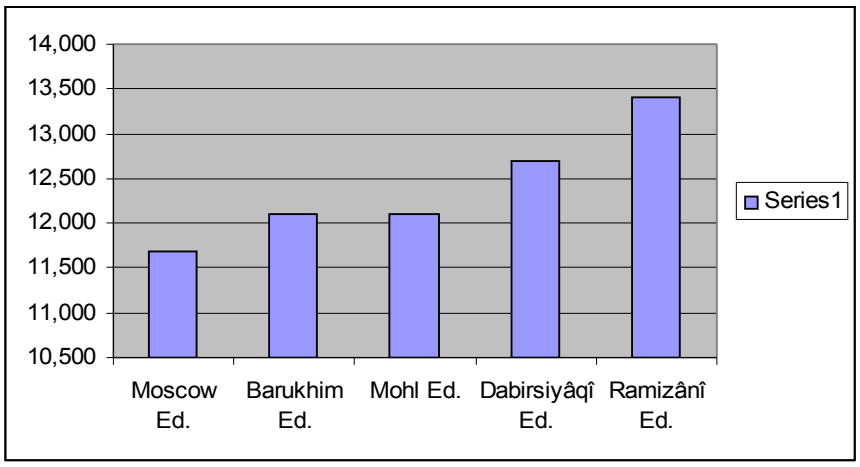
Tow reasons may be suggested for this obstinacy. First, because the "Formularists" draw their data exclusively from printed editions rather than from actual manuscripts, and for this reason, they are bound to confuse the issues. I can show this by means of the following date taken from five Shāhnāma editions for the same part of the epic that we used in our manuscript sample.[28] As far as the story of Kaykhosrow is concerned, the quantitative discrepancy between the largest and the smallest editions for of the Shāhnāma is 1720 verses for an average fluctuation of 13.85% (=(14.8% +12.9%) ÷2). This discrepancy is

[27] The same may be said of variant readings of verses and individual words of the epic, almost all of which may be readily explained in standard paleographic terms.

[28] The data for the comparison of the various editions of the Shâhnâma is quoted from Siyavash Rūzbihân, "*kayfiyyat-i afzâyish va kâhish-i rivâyât va abyât-i Shâhnâma* [The Quidity of the Fluctuation in Shâhnâma Verses and Episodes]," *Sīmurgh [The Journal of the Shâhnâma Foundation]*, 3 (2535/1976): 73-84. I have had to adjust Rūzbihân's results downward. Mr. Rūzbihân subtracts the verses of the Moscow edition from those of the bulky Ramizânī text (8452-7025=1427). He then calculates a percentage using this number and the smaller Moscow edition (142700÷7025= 20.4%). I have used both the Moscow edition and the more voluminous Ramizânī text to compute my percentages (16.9% and 20.4% respectively), for which I have calculated an average percentile difference (16.9+20.4=18.7%). In that respect my results are more conservative.

nowhere near as vast as what we have seen in the case of oral performances. However, it is considerably larger than the quantitative difference between our samples of different manuscripts.

Edition	Number of Verses
Moscow	11,6800
Barukhim	12,100
Mohl	12,100
Dabirsiyaqi	12,700
Ramezani	13,400



Therefore, those who exclusively rely on published editions of the Shāhnāma will see greater quantitative fluctuations among these editions as well as among samples taken from them, and may, as a result, be misled into thinking that the manuscripts of the epic show greater fluctuation than they actually do. The fact however, is that data taken from printed editions may not be used to make generalizations about the manuscript tradition of the poem. Davidson does not seem to understand this simple fact:

> The "readings of the Moscow edition" are readings of the manuscript tradition of the Shāhnāma, as sorted out by the Moscow editors. Confronted with two or more variant manuscript readings, the Moscow editors will choose one of them as the "right" one and reject the others as "wrong." The basic method of Khaleghi-Motlagh edition is no different.[29]

This is simply not true. Critical editions may be good or bad, dependable or undependable, but they are not manuscripts. Davidson fails to see that printed editions are generally a conflation of the readings of the

[29] Davidson, "The Text of Ferdowsi's Shāhnāma and the Burden of the Past," p.67.

witnesses that were used in preparing that edition, and as such, they do not belong to, nor can they be ascribed to any of the existing manuscript families of the work.

Those who make generalizations about Shāhnāma's manuscript tradition based on the evidence *exclusively* drawn from printed editions of the epic are trying to extract orange juice from apples. In his erudite essay on "The Use of Dictation in Ancient Book – Production," T. C. Skeat (1907 – 2003), who served as the Keeper of Manuscripts and Egerton Librarian from 1961 to 1972 at the British Library, advised that inferences about manuscripts should be drawn from "painstaking collection and classification of the evidence of manuscripts themselves."[30] This is excellent advice. Printed editions have their own *variae lectiones* that creep into their texts by way of their editors' misreadings, their typesetters' daydreamings, and other such troublesome conduits. Therefore, neither evidence that is taken from the Moscow edition of the Shāhnāma, nor that obtained from Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition of the poem may be passed off as "manuscript evidence" *per se*. Printed editions are not manuscripts. They are merely their editor(s) interpretations and conflations of the texts of a number of manuscripts into a hybrid text that purports to be closer to the archetype of the manuscripts collated in preparation of that edition. In one sense the editor(s) of these editions are in reality scribes of varying competence who produce their copies of the poem by interpreting and conflating the texts of the manuscripts to which they have access. Given this circumstance, scholars who are concerned with manuscript evidence cannot claim that "the readings of the Moscow edition are readings of the manuscript tradition of the Shāhnāma, as sorted out by the Moscow editors" as does Davidson. For instance, it is objectively demonstrable that the Moscow editors did not always record the readings of their manuscripts accurately or even faithfully. The most glaring evidence of the Muscovites' carelessness is that they inexplicably omit all of the story headings of the epic, which are present in every known manuscript of the Shāhnāma.

The more enthusiastic Shāhnāma editors, even those who worked from one "best" manuscript often filled the "gaps" in the narrative of their *optimus codex*, with verses culled from other manuscripts in order to bring the epic's verses to the legendary number, 60,000. One of the earliest editors of the poem, Mostowfi of Qazvin (c. 680 – 744 AH/1281 – 1343 AD), writes that although he had it on good authority

[30] T. C. Skeat, "The Use of Dictation in Ancient Book-Production," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol.42, 1956, pp.179 – 208. Skeat's paper grew out of two lectures that he delivered in the University of London in March of 1956, as the Special University Lecturer in Palaeography.

that the epic is 60,000 distiches long, he could not find a single manuscript of the poem that actually had 60,000 distiches. Most had only around 50,000 verses. He therefore gathered a large number of codices and by a process of conflation, produced a Shāhnāma in 60,000 verses.

Be that as it may, one must conclude from all of this that the quantitative difference among the Shāhnāma manuscripts does not justify linking the poem with oral performance in any way. The performance of the Shāhnāma tales by coffee-house storytellers (*naqqāli*) is *neither* in verse *nor* does it constitute a "poetic oral tradition."[31]

What, to my mind, puts the idea that the Shāhnāma is either orally based or orally derived, and the suggestion that its narrative was at some time "sung" by the so-called *gosān* (the class of storytellers that flourished during the Parthian period in 238 BC – 226 AD) beyond the realm of possibilities is the fact that although the words *gosān* and *dehqān* are metric equivalents and also rhyme, and in spite of the fact that wherever Ferdowsi wrote in the Shāhnāma that he took his story from a *dehqān* he could have substituted the word *gosān* without harming either the meter or the rhyme of his poem, the word *gosān* does not occur even once in any one of the many thousands of Shāhnāma manuscripts and manuscript fragments. This fact alone should give pause to any level-headed student of the epic as far as the question of the poem's "orality" is concerned.

I pointed out that there may be two reasons why the "Formularists," all of whom are Western, continue to insist on the Shāhnāma's "orality" in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The first reason, we said, is that they confuse printed editions and manuscripts, and rely exclusively on data from printed editions in order to generalize about the poem's manuscript tradition. The second reason has to do with the fact that scholarship, like all other human endeavors, takes place in a cultural and historical context. Scholars tend to reflect the *Zeitgeist* under which they live and labor. In other words, the reasons behind the West's insistence that the Shāhnāma is oral or orally derived are neither scholarly nor textual. They are ideological. Western Shāhnāma studies tends to make what is Muslim or Iranian subservient to what is "Western" by means of inappropriate analogies. The subjugation that can no longer be achieved by political and military means is obliquely attempted in the intellectual domain, and is camouflaged as "comparativism." The purely Western concepts of "medieval" and "poetic oral tradition" for which no

[31] For a detailed discussion of the topic of epic story telling in Iran, see Omidsalar and Omidsalar's "Narrating Epics in Iran."

shred of evidence in Persian culture exists are forced upon Iran's exclusively literary national epic in the name of bringing it into the arena of the international "comparative epic" scholarship. Thus the nearly 50,000 distiches of the Shāhnāma are subjected to the tyranny of concepts that have been developed from scholarship on a small body of classical or medieval European epics. The thinly disguised implications of such an act of expropriation are difficult to miss. Westerners proclaim that "all standards must be Western" and all literature must be measured against Western literature in order to be validated. It is no accident that not a single Iranian scholar of the Shāhnāma—Khaleghi, Khatibi, Roshan, Revaqi, and others including myself (and I have formal training in folklore theory); has ever argued in favor of Shāhnāma's "orality" nor has he failed to argue against it. What the Western Shāhnāma scholarship should understand is that putting Ferdowsi's eyes out does not turn him into Homer. Shāhnāma is a very different thing from the West's classical or medieval epics that are orally derived.

But there is an even more nefarious aspect to the "orality" craze. Given the transformation of all Muslim peoples into "bad-guys," and "savages" in the Western imagination, and given the fact that since the onset of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has assumed the role of the West's arch nemesis and "chief savage", the Western obsession with ascribing "orality" to Iran's highest literary and national icon is understandable.

The subtext of the fanatical Western insistence on Shāhnāma's alleged "orality" is the association of the word "oral" with "pre-literate", with "illiterate" and in turn, with the idea of "savagery." In other words, the subtext of the Westerners' persistence in calling the highest product of Persia's literary genius "oral" is the following perhaps unconscious chain of association:

Oral □Pre-literate □Illiterate □Savage (medieval)

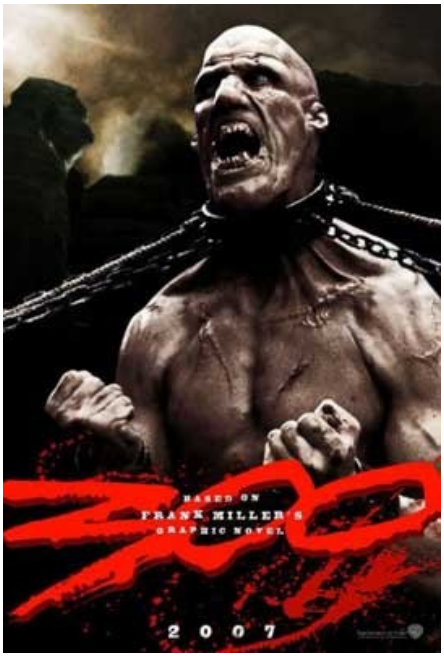
Savages can't have literature, they have folklore instead.

This idea is reinforced in Western iconography and folk-culture. For instance, the recent movie the "300" in which the democratically inspired Spartans—of all people—held back the onslaught of Persian "savages" is a good example of the manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* to which I referred before. The Persian emperor, Xerxes is transformed from a typical ruler of the ancient Middle East, who looked like this:

To a monstrous figure reminiscent of those that people post apocalyptic films:

While Persian soldiers of ancient Iran are transformed from these:

To this:



The blatantly religious nature of the confrontation between Western powers and the Muslim world is iconographically represented in depicting the fallen Spartan king in an unmistakably Christ like pose as though he were nailed to the cross by Persian arrows:

Scholarship, even manuscript scholarship, has a cultural context; and scholars tend to reflect their culture's *Zeitgeist* more often than they would like to admit. Those who promote the idea that editorial techniques suited for editing medieval European troubadourish texts are also suitable for editing Iran's purely literary national epic, argue neither from evidence nor learning. They are driven by Eurocentric habits of mind and the aggressive impulses of the cultural moment in which they find themselves. By denying the incontestable fact that the most iconic text in classical Persian, i.e., Iran's national epic is a literary text composed by a highly learned poet from a purely literary prose archetype, they insinuate that the text which defines who Iranians are is orally derived, is illiterate, is savage, and is "medieval." In doing so, they recreate Iranian national and cultural identities in terms of their cultures' dominant Zeitgeist.

Referring to human soul's union with the divine essence, Coleridge (1772 – 1834) writes in his peculiar language, that this union takes place

> Whene'er the mist, which stands 'twixt God and thee
> Defecates to a pure transparency

Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888) in turn, alludes to Coleridge's statement in his essay on translating Homer, in the following words:

> And so, too, it may be said of that union of the translator with his original, which alone can produce a good translation, that it takes place when the mist which stands between them—the mist of alien modes of thinking, and feeling on the translators' part—"defecates to a pure transparency," and disappears.

Some of the bizarre arguments of the "oralist" school of Shāhnāma studies leave no doubt that "the mist of alien modes of thinking and feeling" 'twixt Ferdowsi and his Western critics has certainly defecated, but alas, not to a pure transparency.

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