

Chapter 5

THE PETRIFICATION OF ROSTAM: THOMAS HERBERT'S RE-VISION OF PERSIA IN *A RELATION OF SOME YEARES TRAVAILE*

NEDDA MEHDIZADEH

ABSTRACT

In his travel account of his journey to Safavid Persia in 1626, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, Thomas Herbert includes a summary of a heartbreaking episode from Abolqasem Ferdowsi's medieval epic poem, *Shahnameh*. This poetic meditation on the legends and histories of Iran was circulated orally by way of the performances of poetic orators called *naqqals* in the early modern period, a tradition meant to engender unity within an empire fragmented by conquest. Not only did these performances act as cultural reminders for natives but they also served as sources of entertainment for locals and travellers alike, particularly within the vibrant, metropolitan Safavid capital of Isfahan. It is likely during his visit to this capital city that Herbert would have encountered stories about the *Shahnameh*'s most beloved, most valiant, and most famous warrior, Rostam. But of all the stories about his life—both his successes and his heartbreaks—Herbert only retells the story of his death. Mehdizadeh's essay explores the reasons for this inclusion, arguing that Herbert seeks to disempower a national symbol of resilience and strength by turning Rostam—a metonymy of Iran—into a fossil. But even as he attempts to contain this symbol of nationhood into something dead and unmoving, Herbert discovers the figure's power to move him.

Keywords: Persia, Iran, Safavid, Shah Abbas I, England, English East India Company, *Shahnameh*, Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Rostam, naqqal, Naqsh-e Rostam, Naqsh-e Jahan, Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, Achaemenid, Alexander the Great, Isfahan, Persepolis

The crocodile, the lion, the elephant
Are one with the mosquito and the ant
Within the grip of Death: no beast or man
Lives longer than his life's allotted span.

—*Shahnameh*¹

¹ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 2006), 427.

FOLLOWING A GREAT feast hosted by the king of Kabul, the mighty warrior Rostam is invited to hunt within the ruler's expansive domains. He is unaware, however, that this invitation is part of a plot concocted by his host and his half-brother, Shaghad, to lure him into a forest prepared with freshly dug pits strategically filled with spears and pikes. With the final moments of his life upon him, Rostam enthusiastically accepts the invitation and offers a final reflection about the inevitability of death. He tells us that in death all living things are equal, as "no beast or man / Lives longer than his life's allotted span." His words are equally poignant and painful for the reader who already knows what awaits this most beloved figure of Abolqasem Ferdowsi's medieval epic poem, *Shahnameh*, *The Persian Book of Kings*.² Rostam has inadvertently enfolded himself within his rumination on the indiscriminate finality of life, and as he embarks upon the hunt, he does so without knowing that he has become the prey.

The final, heartbreaking moments of Rostam's life epitomize the narrative's exploration of the cycle of kingship, the value of honour and fidelity, and the preservation of culture.³ Over the course of 40,000–60,000 rhyming couplets,⁴ Ferdowsi weaves together the fragments of history and legend that circulated among Iranians orally for centuries into a timeless tapestry meant to preserve cultural narrative.⁵ His mission to do so was

2 The earliest extant *Shahnameh* is dated 1217, though it is most likely that the text was composed and produced earlier than this date. For more information, see Sheila R. Canby, *The "Shahnama" of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 11–12.

3 In this article, I will be utilizing both "Persia" and "Iran" to represent different understandings of the geographical space that is the subject of this project. Deriving from *Pars*, the name of a region in south-western Iran bordering the Persian Gulf and the site of the ancient Persian capital, "Persia" was a Greek misattribution that replaced one part of Iran for the entire country—a misattribution that would linger for centuries to come. "Iran," on the other hand, is derived from the Old Persian *ariyanam* (*ariya*, "noble, lordly"), and is the name that has always been used to refer to the country by native Iranians (*Irooni*). Greek historians would later refer to it as *Persis*, which would, over time, become Persia. It was not until 1934 that Reza Shah Pahlavi instituted a decree asking all foreign nations to refer to his country by its appropriate assignation, Iran. I will refer to the country and its people as "Iran" and "Iranians" in this essay when discussing Iranian history and literature. However, I will use "Persia" and "Persians" when referring to early modern sources in order to maintain fidelity to the manner in which these English writers envisioned and understood the country.

4 As Dick Davis discusses, the poem "is some 50,000 lines long, and they are very long lines at that, each approximately equivalent in length to two lines of standard English iambic pentameter verse." For more information about the structure of the *Shahnameh*, see Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), xv. For more information about the scope and effects of the *Shahnameh*, see Canby, *The "Shahnama" of Shah Tahmasp*, 11–17.

5 Begun by the poet Daqiqi and completed by Ferdowsi following Daqiqi's death, the *Shahnameh* preserves an ancient past that was in danger of being lost. Ferdowsi's tome preserves what scholars agree are various mythical and historical narratives native to ancient Iran. Despite this agreement, there is still obscurity surrounding which sources the poet turned to in order to set the stories to a cohesive, written document. While it remains unclear how Ferdowsi brought these fragments together, it is generally agreed that his objective to create a written document had to do with ownership over the national epic. For more information, see Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1–20.

largely motivated by witnessing the effects of the Arab invasion in the seventh century; the country's conquerors had attempted to erase Iranian language, religion, and tradition as well as replace Iranian history and mythology with their own written version of the stories of the *Shahnameh* in order to serve their imperialist agendas. Ferdowsi responded to these moves by setting the oral histories of Iran into poetry, but doing so in a way that would honour those ancient traditions. Taking his readers to a time that predates Iran's introduction to Islam—from its prehistoric beginnings to the end of the Sasanian dynasty—Ferdowsi writes the *Shahnameh* predominantly utilizing “pure” Persian as opposed to the Arabized version that had begun taking shape in Iran and developing a lyrical, poetic style that mimicked its deep, oral traditions of storytelling.⁶

Ferdowsi's preservation of historical and mythical tradition in Iranian culture would prove to have a lasting effect for centuries to come. Indeed, the *Shahnameh* is far-reaching and considered one of the most important works of literature ever produced by an Iranian writer. Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, quite aptly describes the relationship between politics and poetry, culture and literature, and nationhood and legacy within Iranian culture in her foreword to Dick Davis's translation of Ferdowsi's poem. She narrates an anecdote describing the lessons she learned about her heritage from her father—himself an author who published a version of the *Shahnameh* geared toward a youthful audience. Nafisi remembers her father teaching her and her brother about the importance of the classic work, saying:

My father always insisted that Persians basically did not have a home, except in their literature, especially their poetry. This country, our country, he would say, has been attacked and invaded numerous times, and each time, when Persians had lost their sense of their own history, culture and language, they found their poets as the true guardians of their true home [...] my father would say, We have no other home but this, pointing to the invisible book, this, he would repeat is our home, always, for you and your brother, and your children and your children's children.⁷

As Nafisi describes, given the epic's production during a moment of cultural uncertainty, the *Shahnameh* has become a cultural treasure acting as a compass that points Iranians back toward the foundation of their true values. Through its discussion of themes such as kingship, inheritance, and most importantly honour and love of country, the poem takes readers through intertwining episodes that demonstrate a continuity of its guiding themes and the inevitability of connection between these themes to future generations. As a result, pivotal moments in Iran's history are often understood and shaped through this national epic.

The narrative fragments that make up the *Shahnameh* helped piece Iran together following one of the most devastating conquests of the country led by Timur I—or Tamburlaine the Great—who reigned from 1370 to 1495. Already weakened by Mongol

⁶ Canby, *The “Shahnama” of Shah Tahmasp*, 11.

⁷ Azar Nafisi, foreword to *Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings*, by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 2006), ix.

invasions from 1256 to 1260, Iran was “unable to offer united opposition against Timur’s invasions. The brutality of Timur in Iran was legendary, evidenced by, for example, the erection of a gruesome pyramid from the skulls of 70,000 inhabitants of Isfahan who dared to resist him.”⁸ The effects of this devastating invasion was long lasting, and it would take approximately 120 years after these events that the first Safavid shah, Shah Ismail I, would be “face[d] with the task of ‘reconquering’ his own country.”⁹ In order to do so, the new emperor enforced a common faith in Shi’i Islam as a way to unify Persians and separate them from their non-Muslim and Sunni neighbours.¹⁰ He was largely successful in these efforts, beginning with reclaiming the contested region of Tabriz in northern Persia. His predecessors, however, were largely unsuccessful in maintaining those lands won, illuminating the timeless lessons about the importance of good leadership and honourable kingship so apparent in the *Shahnameh*.

It would be 100 years after Shah Ismail I’s rule before Persia would again see tremendous progress and reunification under his great-grandson and the fifth king of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Abbas I. In 1598–1599, this young ruler was able to recover some territories in the northeast by defeating the Uzbeks—a major victory for the Persians. He was also responsible for establishing a burgeoning national economy that blossomed with the move of the Persian capital from Qazvin to Isfahan which welcomed travellers and traders from all over the world.¹¹ Not only was this rebuilding of Persia through trade and diplomacy significant in itself, but it also breathed new life into an image of Persia as a revered culture situated within a long classical, biblical, and historical tradition—a tradition well known by Persians and Europeans alike, and reinforced with a renewed commitment to arts and culture.¹²

The roadmap that offered directives for Safavid rule to reclaim lands, rebuild kingdoms, and rediscover a place within a global exchange in many ways came directly from the pages of the *Shahnameh*. As Safavid shahs attempted to piece their country back together, they each turned to the *Shahnameh* for guidance. It was not long before the beginning of his reign, for example, that Shah Ismail I ordered the creation of an elaborate illuminated manuscript in the early sixteenth century that was later to be completed

⁸ For more information about Mongol and Timurid invasions, see Kaveh Farrokh, *Iran at War: 1500–1988* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), 9.

⁹ Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 74.

¹⁰ For information on the structural and ideological differences between Shi’i and Sunni Islam, see Chibli Mallat, *Introduction to Middle Eastern Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ For information on the history of the Safavid dynasty, see Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 13–24.

¹² Persia’s place in Judeo-Christian history is generally favorable. For example, Cyrus the Great is famous for having freed the Jews during the Babylonian Exile. Herbert himself visits the ancient site of Persepolis during his 1626 journey to Persia, and imagines it still stands in its all its splendour even as “Age and Warres” during his have reduced the palace to rubble. And in Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, the pinnacle of the title character’s victory is parading through Persepolis: “Your majesty shall shortly have your wish / And ride in triumph through Persepolis” (2.5.48–49).

under the rule of his son, Shah Tahmasp I.¹³ With 258 illustrations, 759 folios, and gilded leather binding, this manuscript depicts detailed and ornate images representing scenes from the epic poem, honouring the tradition of the *Shahnameh* for courtly practices of the Safavid dynasty.

Even Shah Abbas I continued the tradition by instituting a more performative version of the *Shahnameh*. Under his reign, and following the move of the capital from Qazvin to Isfahan, the emperor encouraged the recitation of episodes from the *Shahnameh* by storytellers known as *naqqals*.¹⁴ These performances often occurred in coffee houses, which “brought together individuals from different social backgrounds and professions, from kings and nobles, through poets and artists, to merchants and craftsmen who worked in bazaars.”¹⁵ These community spaces became important social centres not just for natives but also Iran’s foreign guests—a place for drinking, smoking, socializing, and enjoying such performances. The *naqqals* would recount well-known stories by memory using expressive tones and elongated vowel sounds that connected each line in one continuous utterance—a specific manner of poetic reading that still exists today. These *naqqals* reinvigorated the tradition of oral storytelling, making poetry like Ferdowsi’s accessible to a wider audience.

Within their poetic arsenal, the *naqqals* would often recount stories about the most famous, and arguably most beloved, character of the *Shahnameh*: Rostam. Their performances often transported audiences to the famous *haftkhan*, or the seven trials Rostam was entrusted to overcome, the relentlessness with which he defends Iranian kings, and even the heart-wrenching moment Rostam kills his son in a battle before realizing who his opponent truly is. For all of his successes and heartbreaks, readers of the *Shahnameh* see the story of Rostam as the story of Iran itself. He is “the epitome of magnanimity, manliness, heroism, and loyalty to the Persian throne,” states translator and scholar Dick Davis, whose introduction to *Rostam: Tales of Love and War from the Shahnameh*, explains that “[t]here is something anarchic about [Rostam] [...] Much of the glamour of Rostam’s legend lies in the tension between this fierce independence, which places him outside of authority, and his seemingly inexhaustible (until it is in fact exhausted) service to the Persian monarchy and the country it controls.”¹⁶

Rostam is characterized by the qualities of most heroic figures—on the one hand, deep loyalty and strength guide his actions, but on the other he must resist what is expected in order to fulfill his duties as hero. Indeed, not only does Rostam sit “outside

13 The *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp I was produced in stages by multiple artists beginning in 1522 and largely completed in 1537, with two more paintings included in 1540 (Canby, *The “Shahnama” of Shah Tahmasp*, 14).

14 While Shah Ismail I utilized *naqqals* to promote Shi’i Islam, Shah Abbas I utilized these performers for the recitation of poetry in coffee houses. For more information about the history of *naqqals*, see Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics*, 20.

15 Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics*, 21.

16 Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Rostam: Tales of Love and War from the Shahnameh*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin, 2009), ix–xi.

of authority,” he seemingly sits outside of a rigid sense of Iranianness—as the son of Rudابه, the princess of Kabul and Zal, an impressive Iranian warrior raised by a mythical bird, he is the embodiment of the multicultural milieu that has shaped the country itself. Every move he makes, every decision he weighs is always done for the betterment of Iran, and as a result becomes a national hero for those within the *Shahnameh* as well as those who read the *Shahnameh*. To hear Rostam’s story is to hear Iran’s story of triumph over adversity, of nationhood in the face of complex histories, of resilience in the face of danger. His story persists as a story of the continuation of honour even after the deceit that leads to his death.

Shaghad’s betrayal of Rostam is particularly troubling for English traveller Sir Thomas Herbert who, with the help of his translators, most likely encountered the *Shahnameh* during his journey into Persia in 1626. The embassy to Persia—an embassy sanctioned by King James I and the English East India Company—was meant as a diplomatic and fact-finding mission, and Herbert joined this embassy as a gentleman attendant to English ambassador Sir Dodemore Cotton.¹⁷ Despite the expedition’s intention, Herbert’s travelogue, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, exposes a deeper interest in Persia’s ancient past than in its rather lively present. While Herbert follows generic travel writing tropes that include the topography and customs of the destination, his travel narrative focuses much more attention on the empire’s ancient and classical history. He is unlike contemporary travel writers who tend to draw more attention to interesting ceremonies, troublesome rulers, or exotic objects. Instead, his travel narrative combines first-hand observation with an intimate knowledge of classical writers that paints an image of Persia with competing temporalities: one of its antique, fallen past under the Achaemenid dynasty and the other of its thriving, cosmopolitan present under Safavid rule. This temporal exchange is one that he returns to consistently within his narrative, whether visiting ancient, historical sites or vibrant, cosmopolitan city centres.

Herbert’s curiosity about a multi-temporal Persia even exists within a vibrant, metropolitan city like the Safavid capital of Isfahan. Though he briefly mentions the multiculturalism of the city by noting the presence of “English, Dutch, Portugals, Arabians, Turkes, Lewes, Armenians, Muscouians, and Indians,” he is more interested in the architectural details of the buildings within the *maydan*, or city square.¹⁸ Interestingly, this discussion is reminiscent of his account of the ancient ruins of Persepolis, a place that also seems void of life and where he likewise offers details about the structure’s measurements and materials. While I offer a more comprehensive discussion of these sections of Herbert’s travelogue in the third section of this essay, what is important to note from the outset is Herbert’s fascination with what is immovable. Despite being surrounded by fellow travellers, locals, and even timeless stories that are perpetually re-circulated by the fluidity of poetic expression through the city’s *naqqals*, Herbert insists on petrifying Persia into a lifeless, inanimate object.

¹⁷ For more information about the embassy to Persia, see D. W. Davies, *Elizabethans Errant: The Strange Fortunes of Sir Thomas Sherley and His Three Sons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

¹⁸ Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (London, 1634), M3v.

Much of *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* depends on biblical and classical foundations, a clear expression of Herbert's interest and knowledge of Persia's past. This is an empire whose time had ended centuries ago—at least, this theory is what Herbert had learned through his studies of classical texts like Xenophon's *Cyropedia* and Herodotus' *Histories*—two Greek-language texts that had become popular in England with nearly contemporary English-language translations—and the biblical stories about the transfer of empire from the Book of Daniel. With this understanding engrained in his mind prior to his journey, Herbert might have become confused by the life and vibrancy he actually witnessed when arriving in Persia in 1626, and his travelogue becomes an exercise to make sense of what he had encountered. Indeed, his fascination with the complexity of his experience is one he continues to write and re-write through a series of extensive revisions of this travelogue over the course of a fifty-year period.

Though Herbert calls upon faded memories and his knowledge of classical materials in order to further develop his popular narrative for a loyal readership, it is important to note that his section on "Isfahan" is almost forgotten in his revision process. This section experiences no change structurally and modest expansions narratively, and Isfahan's general architectural layout remains the main focus of the section rather than the people he presumably meets. In this section readers also discover his account of Rostam—both his retelling of Rostam's death as well as a description of a tomb named in his honour. Because of Herbert's tendency to construct an imagined, multi-temporal Persia throughout his travel narrative, and because he likely encountered stories of the *Shahnameh* while in Isfahan, his inclusion of Rostam in this section is unsurprising. What is puzzling, however, is how uninterested he is in the warrior's life.

It is my contention that Herbert seeks to turn Rostam—as a metonymy of Iran—into a fossil in an effort to disempower a national symbol of resilience and strength. By setting Rostam's story—specifically the story of his death—to writing, Herbert attempts to contain the fluidity of the poetic performances of the *naqqals*, the fluidity that keeps Rostam's story alive and in circulation. Their narratives about Rostam and other figures from Ferdowsi's national epic breathed new life into a burgeoning imperial capital, and the circulation of these stories reinvigorated unity and direction for the Safavids. As a result, Herbert attempts to supersede this constant movement through an act of writing (and compulsive acts of revision). The reason, I argue, for Herbert's rhetorical petrification is to counteract the vibrancy he encountered within Persia, to reduce it back into the fallen, dead past that does not seem to want to stay dead. In this essay, I put Herbert's text into direct conversation with Ferdowsi's poem; by centring Rostam and his story, I demonstrate that Herbert's reduction of this figure attempts to obscure his intentions. Through this discussion we will see that travel literature offers more complex understandings of encounter that move unexpectedly and untidily across boundaries of space and time, destabilizing a pervasive presumption of travel as unidirectional, beginning in Europe and ending in Eastern empires like Safavid Persia, Ottoman Turkey, or Mughal India. Even as Herbert tries to contain and petrify symbols of nationhood, honour, and greatness like Rostam through his writing and revision process, he resurrects the Persia he tries to contain with each revision of his text.

The Wonder of a Nation

This is the song of Rostam, who's been given
 Few days of happiness by Fate or heaven.
 He fights in every war, in every land;
 His bed's a hillside, or the desert sand.
 Demons and dragons are his daily prey,
 Devils and deserts block his weary way.
 Fate sees to it that perfumed flowers, and wine,
 And pleasant vistas, are but rarely mine—
 I'm always grappling with an enemy,
 Some ghoul or leopard's always fighting me.¹⁹

Rostam enters the *Shahnameh* through a description of his birth. Coming into the world as the warrior he would become, his mother's long and arduous labour astounds those who stood in attendance: "all who saw this mammoth baby gazed / In wonder at him, murmuring and amazed."²⁰ From the start, Ferdowsi sets Rostam apart from all others. His greatness in size as an infant is prophetic, marking him for greatness in spirit and strength as an adult. This figure would fulfill his promise as a champion of Iran, having the opportunity to prove himself at a young age. With the many invasions Iran would face—invasions Azar Nafisi's father warns her about when she is a child—Rostam appears at the right time. A hero who represents strength and honour, however, must have a trusted companion, and Rostam finds one in a saffron-coloured foal named Raksh who exhibits the same stamina and power as his new owner. As the only horse who can withstand his weight and might, Raksh becomes not only Rostam's true and steady companion for the duration of his life, but his mirror image as well.

During the early years of Rostam's life, Iran's leadership fluctuates between good, honourable rulers to bad, ineffective ones to good and honourable ones again in a recurring cycle true to the transition of power. When a new king, Kai Kavus, assumes the throne, Rostam assumes responsibility to support him for the protection of Iran.²¹ This king, however, would prove to bring havoc to the country. His arrogant desires lead him to plans for conquering a mystical land in Mazandaran, the country ruled by sorcerer kings (*divs*). The expedition is unsuccessful, and Kai Kavus is captured. Rostam—to free his sovereign in order to protect Iran from outside invaders—sets out on a journey known as the *haftkhan* (or, seven trials). From slaying dragons to defeating demons to freeing captured kings, Rostam fulfills every trial that tests his strength, his honour, and his leadership, and it is through these events that Rostam solidifies his reputation as the greatest, most formidable warrior of Iran.

Before Rostam can complete his final trial, he must liberate the imprisoned Kai Kavus by defeating the most potent *div*, the King of Mazandaran; this *div*, however, fearful of

¹⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 156.

²⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 105.

²¹ *Kai* means "king" in Persian.

a battle with a famous warrior; attempts to escape using sorcery to transform into a “mountainous crag”²² at the sight of his unconquerable adversary. The Iranian people refuse to permit this cowardly disappearance, and try to manipulate the rock in order to expel the sorcerer king, failing with every attempt. Rostam, however, experiences no difficulty:

Then Rostam opened his arms, and without testing its weight, lifted the rock, while the army looked on in wonder. He walked with the craggy mass, while a crowd of men followed him, calling down blessings on him, and scattering gold coins and jewels over him. He carried it to the space in front of the king’s pavilion, where he flung it down and placed it at the Persians’ disposal.²³

Literally unmatched, Rostam is able to do what no other warrior can. He easily manoeuvres the massive, magical rock from its place, demonstrating his unprecedented strength and ability. His connection to Iran—a power that transcends physicality—gives him the ability to carry the weight of Iran on his shoulders, and to dismantle threats against it. His bravery and his otherworldly strength elicits love and respect from his companions as they watch the act with the same “wonder” inspired by his birth and “follow” him as they shower him with blessings, coins, and jewels.

It is perhaps because of this deep love for Rostam that the hearts of all his followers break upon learning that he inadvertently kills his own son, Sohrab. While in Samangan for a subsequent battle, he meets the beautiful Tahmineh, the king of Samangan’s daughter. After they spend the night together, Rostam leaves her with a special trinket: a clasp that, if Tahmineh bears a daughter, must be woven in the child’s hair, and if a son, placed around his arm. Nine months later, Tahmineh gives birth to a son, Sohrab, and when he turns ten years of age, she reveals his father’s identity. Elated that he descends from a long line of strong warriors—his father the most prominent among them—Sohrab vows to fight all of Rostam’s enemies in order to place him on the throne which he believes is his father’s rightful place. Though his mother warns against such aspirations, Sohrab’s lineage becomes common knowledge through his own triumphs, giving their enemies the leverage they need to enact the worst fate between this father and son.

The news travels, and finds its way to Afrasyab—an enemy king who for decades had been vying for the Persian throne and is one of Rostam’s greatest adversaries. Hoping to take advantage of a weak reign by Kai Kavus—a king who had led his people and Iran toward troubling times—Afrasyab plans an attack. Having learned of Sohrab’s identity, Afrasyab sends word to the young fighter encouraging his skills and offering support for his military ambitions. Sohrab—whose plans to place his father onto the throne of Iran included one day besting Afrasyab but not before bringing down the impotent Kai Kavus—takes the opportunity, wondering if he will meet his father during the war. With Rostam’s clasp tucked away beneath his armour, Sohrab encounters his father, never knowing with whom he is battling. As they fight, Sohrab emulates Rostam in both

²² Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 170.

²³ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 171.

strength and strategy. But even after the arduous combat, Rostam successfully delivers the fatal blow, plunging a dagger into his son's chest. Sohrab, who had devoted his life to reuniting with his father, reveals his identity:

I brought this on myself, this is from me,
 And Fate has merely handed you the key
 To my brief life: not you but heaven's vault—
 Which raised me and then killed me— is at fault.
 Love for my father led me here to die [...]
 One from this noble band will take this sign
 To Rostam's hands, and tell him it was mine,
 And say I sought him always, far and wide,
 And that, at last, in seeking him, I died.²⁴

Sohrab still does not know his killer is his father, but Rostam finally learns the painful truth: the young warrior who had almost bested him in their battle is indeed his son. Making the moment even more painful is the knowledge that Sohrab's entire life has been devoted to emulating, locating, and honouring his father only to die as his identity is revealed. He threatens his killer, indicating that "this sign"—the clasp—will alert Rostam to his son's fate, inspiring wrath within the famous hero who will undoubtedly avenge his child. Sohrab's words are not entirely misdirected; realization dawns on Rostam, devastating him. "When Rostam heard the warrior's words, his head whirled and the earth turned dark before his eyes, and when he came back to himself, he roared in an agony of anguish."²⁵ The emotional turmoil he faces breaks Rostam down at the news. He honours his son's last wish: to bid Kai Kavus "[h]ave no rancor in [his] heart against" the warriors he fought alongside him.²⁶

In some ways, Sohrab's story must end because of his ambitions to ensure that his father sit on the throne to rule Iran. What we know of Rostam's character, however, is that he is meant to serve Iran through other means. His role is meant to restore order, rather than to represent it. This responsibility is one his character both achieves throughout his lifetime as well as inspires in others long after he dies. Not only does he do so within the *Shahnameh*, but as we have seen with the developments within the Safavid dynasty, he inspires such order for kingdoms to come. As a figure who acts as a metonymy for Iran itself, any other connections—filial or otherwise—have no place in the narrative. His true connection is his connection to Iran, and it is he who must restore order in times of trouble, dooming his character to heartbreak.

While it is true that Rostam is loved so deeply by characters from the *Shahnameh* as well as its readers, he is a complicated and flawed character; though he devotes his life to using his formidable strength to protect Iran from unrest, invasion, and bad leadership, his path is not always honourable. As Dick Davis has discussed in his book *Epic and*

²⁴ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 209.

²⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 210.

²⁶ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 213.

Sedition, even Ferdowsi betrays his frustration with his beloved hero in moments when Rostam exercises poor judgement. Rostam's failing as a father, Davis argues, "lies partly in his generally excessive temperament (which resulted in the boy's conception, and to which Ferdowsi refers during the course of the combat [with Sohrab])" and that this temperament can indeed be "seen as precipitating the tragedy."²⁷ But as Davis reminds us, when compared to other moments of filicide in the text, Rostam's killing of Sohrab is the only instance where the father does not know he is killing his son. This realization makes Rostam human in the eyes of the readers (and other characters) rather than contemptible. Though flawed, Rostam's heartbreak resonates timelessly, and conjures sympathy within the *Shahnameh's* readers.

When the reader finally reaches the moment Rostam enters the plot against his life, we do so after we have witnessed his "wonder[ous]" birth and his "wonder[ous]" life, with all of its complicated devotion to honour. But, as Rostam's prophetic words about death reveal, no matter one's size or greatness, "no beast or man / Lives longer than his life's allotted span." While readers know that this hero—like all others—will reach his death eventually, it is painful to see it occur not on the battlefield against a worthy adversary but at the hands of deceitful enemies who trick him and take advantage of his compromised position.

Trapped with Raksh beneath the earth in the treacherous pits, Rostam watches as Shaghad taunts him from above. But he uses his gift for strategy to fight this last battle. He tells his traitorous brother to string his bow with two arrows for him in the event a lion comes to attack; Shaghad who is "filled with joy at the thought of his brother's death," fulfills his request.²⁸ Shaghad's joy, however, turns to fear immediately when he realizes that the tables have turned:

Rostam picked up the bow, and notched an arrow to the string. His brother was filled with fear at the sight of the arrow, and to shield himself he went behind a huge, ancient plane tree, the trunk of which was hollow, although it still bore leaves. Rostam watched him go, and then, summoning his last strength, he drew back the bowstring and released the arrow. The shaft pierced the tree and his brother [...] Shahghad cried out with the pain of his wound, but Rostam soon put him out of his misery.²⁹

Though Rostam's death is heart-wrenching—in its brutality and its deceit—readers witness his last fight with relief. His enemies hoped to contain his greatness, to put an end to the life he lived; while they succeeded in bringing him to his last breath, they were unable to quench the life of his legacy. His greatness would only extend beyond Ferdowsi's rhyming couplets, and enter a world of immortality that would touch not only Iranians but readers from every corner of the world across time.

²⁷ Davis, *Epic and Sedition*, 107.

²⁸ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 429.

²⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 429.

Re-vision of Time

All things are the more, most things the better for Addition. In honour and wealth no fault is found with encrease; full meales & full pleasures too; brim-full have no guard upon them. The fuller the better: If the husbandry bestowed upon this Book hath improv'd the soile, since you view'd it last, the Lyme was yours and charge of bringing; the spreading only belongs to mee as your day labourer.³⁰

Due to the ephemeral nature of oral transmission, it is impossible to know the exact series of stories from the *Shahnameh* Herbert would have encountered while in Isfahan. But with no extant translations of the *Shahnameh* in any European language at the time, it is likely that the English traveller would have encountered these narratives within the public, social spaces of Isfahan, and the story he is most likely to have encountered would have been from the most popular series: those about Rostam, especially the battle between him and his son, Sohrab. Given that Iranian culture was often defined by its orality—a tradition Iranians still hold onto today—the *naqqals* were in many ways the gatekeepers of history and literature, and became an important medium through which locals and travellers would have gained access to the complex poetic material of Ferdowsi's medieval poem. Through these orations, Herbert learns about Rostam, revealing his acknowledgement of the figure as beloved and his intolerance for Rostam's manner of death:

In his time this Champion *Rustan* liued and was of great account with his Master, whose loue a while protected him from domestique Aduersaries, other-whiles his owne valour was his safeguard. By which two he enioyed great dignities and reports, till old age ouertook him, which kild him not, but his traiterous brother *Shawgad*, out of no other cause then pale Enuie, sought his destruction, and effected it; by digging pits, couered with boughes, which seeming harmelesse, gaue him miserable ruine, into one of which as he was in chase; he fell, and calling out for helpe, his deuillish brother affoorded it; with death-bringing-darts, basely destroying a valiant Champion, and one who most of all others, gaue glory to him and his owne Family, who notwithstanding ere hee died with two arrowes shot out of the pit, slue his trayterous brother and his father in Law.³¹

The opening of this passage highlights Rostam's character. Herbert explains that "this Champion" lived under the protection of his "Master"—presumably, the rulers he served—as well as "his owne valour." His account of Rostam, here, complements the most well-known stories of the figure outlined in the second section of this essay. But even as he acknowledges Rostam's characterization as a beloved and valorous "Champion," Herbert's retelling of his life and successes is reduced to one labyrinthine sentence. The

30 Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travels* (London, 1638), B1r.

31 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), M4v–N1r.

focus of the passage quickly turns to Rostam's death, suggesting to his readers that the importance of this story lies in the warrior's final moments.

This message becomes even more evident with each subsequent edition of Herbert's travelogue. Spanning a fifty-year period and culminating in a total of three additional volumes published in 1638, 1664, and 1677, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* undergoes extensive revisions each time Herbert revisits his travels. In most cases, these revisions rely on faded memories and expanded discussions of the classical and biblical material he had only touched upon in previous iterations of his work. These expansions make the moments where Herbert chooses *not* to revise even more important, and peculiarly, his discussion of Rostam's life and death remains largely the same across editions. Given his predilection for classical and ancient Persian accounts, one might expect an expanded discussion of a story situated deeply within Iran's historical and mythical past, not least because the composition of it would permit Herbert an extended stay within a different time and place—a tendency his narrative exposes about him. Rather, Herbert, attempts to contain Rostam's story deliberately, seemingly crystallizing his narrative into an immovable sediment set within a bygone era.

Herbert discusses his motivation for expanding his original travel text in the first place by offering a note to his readers in the 1638 publication of *Some Yeares Travels*.³² Excerpted in the epigraph to this section, he explains that "[a]ll things are the more, most things the better for Addition." The logic behind his approach is that the very notion of "addition" or increasing something—really, anything—is to improve it. In matters of wealth and honour, in consumption (such as with food or pleasure), "brim-full have no guard upon them." And he credits the encouragement of this perspective to his avid readers, those who made the new editions a possibility by virtue of their desire for more. "If the husbandry bestowed upon this Book hath improv'd the soile, since you view'd it last, the Lyme was yours and charge of bringing; the spreading only belongs to mee as your day labourer." The readers, Herbert explains, are also responsible for the growth and care of the book, and it is because of their insatiable appetites that he is able to visit Persia again and again—not through additional expeditions but through his writing.

The acts of revision Herbert undergoes allow him to maintain Persia as an object of desire; he keeps Persia on the horizon through a rhetorical return. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), "revise" comes from the Latin root *revīsere* "to pay another visit (to), to go back and see, to go and see again, to revisit, to take another look at" (*OED*, "revise," v.). His revision of the text, then, translates into a re-vision of Persia that manifests differently within each version of his narrative, resulting in a new, imagined encounter between England and Persia every time the next edition is published. Herbert speaks to this process in an unusual interjection delivered in Latin within the author's note in the 1638 edition: "Turpe mihi abire domo, vacuum[.] redire est" (It is shameful to me to leave home and return empty(handed)).³³ Herbert bestows *Some Yeares Travels*

³² The initial title of the 1634 publication of Herbert's travelogue, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, undergoes a slight change to *Some Yeares Travels* in the subsequent editions.

³³ Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travels* (1638), B1r.

as a “souvenir”—a tangible memory and an idea—in an act of translation situated within his Latin invocation. Herbert revises his work in much the same way a translator might make a text legible and accessible to a wider audience; his readership expands as he attempts to make Persian culture—and, with the Rostam narrative, literature—legible and accessible to readers who would otherwise never encounter Ferdowsi’s poem.

Herbert’s interest in providing access for a reader to a hitherto unexplored area of Iranian history and literature has its limits, however. While he seems taken with the story about Rostam’s death, he has no significant interest in revisiting it. The absence of meaningful revision for this excerpt—and for the section on “Isfahan” where it appears—becomes even more apparent when compared to other areas of the travelogue that do see significant changes, such as his description of his encounter with the ruins of Persepolis. When Herbert encounters the ruins of the ancient palace, he is immediately transported to ancient Persia even as he sifts through the stones that remain. His section meticulously details the materials and measurements of the remaining structure, but he devotes an equal amount of time to discussing the effect that his contact with Persia’s past has on him. And with each subsequent edition, Herbert’s account of this encounter becomes fuller, more vivid, more classically situated, and in some cases his expression becomes more effusive.

Persepolis, for Herbert, is far from an inert, ancient site; while its ruins stand frozen within the moment of its destruction, it remains a formidable presence in the present. Herbert finds himself caught between two temporalities from the outset, and begins the section on “Persepolis” with the moment of conquest when Alexander the Great “more easily gaue a Period to this glorious Citie, by one blaze, at the whoorish councill of the *Athenian Thais*, so that, through his riot and her villany, this Imperiall Citie felt the flames of Warre, which *Alexander* afterwards deplored with teares, but helpless.”³⁴ In a passage characteristic of Herbert’s narrative style, we see that his language echoes the multitemporality characteristic of the site:

[...] the wals are rarely engrauen with Images of huge stature, and haue beene illustrated with Gold, which in some places is visible, the stones in many parts so well polisht, that they equall for brightnesse a steele mirrour: this Chamber has its wals of best lustre. But Age and Warres, two great consumers of rare monuments, has turned topsie-turue, this, as many other things, and left nought but wals to testifie the greatnesse of that glory and triumph it has enioyed.³⁵

The Persia Herbert shows us is one he imagines before its destruction: the engraved walls have not yet eroded, their images have not yet the absence of their illustrious gold, and the marble of which the palace is made has not yet lost its lustre. Persepolis is a site that, though historically devastated by Alexander’s conquest, refuses to yield to its destruction. In fact, even Alexander, according to Herbert, “deplored” his act “with teares, but helpless.”

34 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), H4v.

35 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), I2r.

Herbert imagines this moment as though it is unfolding before him, a moment he is brought to by the power of an encounter with Persia's past. That this passage reads in the present tense further underscores Herbert's insistence on remembering a moment in history as though he is present during its time of greatness. In fact, he literally remembers himself as he describes seeing his reflection in the marble that makes up the palace: "composed of hard Marble (no strange thing, all the mountaine being the best black Marble in the World, in many of which polisht stones I could see my face)."³⁶ Or, as he describes in more detail in 1638, "[t]he walls are very eminent in this chamber, of black shining Marble, in many places so bright and jetty, as we could easily view our reflex, no steel mirror comparing with it."³⁷ Herbert cannot help but see himself within this revered time even as he invokes the conjunction "but" to remind himself and his readers that "Age and Warres, two great consumers of rare monuments, has turned topsie-turue, this, as many other things," rhetorically rerouting us safely back to the rubble representative of what the great empire has now become.

Not only does his narrative grow in this section with deeper accounts of dead Persian kings and ancient Persian customs, he even includes an etching of Persepolis with an expanded, birds-eye view created by Wenceslas Hollar in 1663, a contrast to William Marshall's three-quarter-page engraving of the crumbling pillars based on Herbert's sketches found in the 1634 and 1638 editions.³⁸ Hollar's depiction literally fills the gaps of the ruins by putting some of the structure back together again, just as Herbert attempts to do with his own writing. Fulfilling his goal to improve his account—"the better for Addition"—as he promises in his note to his readers, Herbert indulges in his own desire to inhabit a different, more glorious time so long as he can rhetorically manoeuvre back out of it.

Herbert's desire for time travel and intimacy with ancient Persia in his account of Persepolis contrasts with his unwillingness to rhetorically revisit Rostam's narrative in the "Isfahan" section. When Herbert confronts the ruins of its past, he sees ancient Persia as a fallen site that he can resurrect through his writing; Isfahan, on the other hand, represents the very notion that Persia is in fact not dead and gone, that it has not yielded to its destruction centuries ago. This revival under the Safavids, therefore, seems to discomfort Herbert, and so we see him use his writing to renegotiate what he encounters. His description of Isfahan and the impressive *maydan*—or Isfahan's vast city square flanked by the king's palace, a mosque, and other structures—is reminiscent of his discussion of the ruins of Persepolis. He offers detailed descriptions of the structures, the materials used to create them, and measurements to offer the reader a sense of their grandness. But because the cosmopolitan city gives Herbert no opportunity to anchor these descriptions to a fallen past, he turns to a digression about a legendary warrior betrayed and killed by his half-brother.

³⁶ Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), 11r.

³⁷ Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travels* (1638), V1v.

³⁸ For more information see John Carswell, "A Young Man Abroad: Sir Thomas Herbert's Travels to Persia in 1626 A.D.," in *The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, ed. Carole Hillenbrand (Boston: Brill, 1999), 19–41.

Embedded in his survey of Isfahan's architecture is his discussion of Rostam's death—as we have seen. Herbert seems uncomfortable with Shaghad's betrayal, referring to him as Rostam's "deuillish brother," accusing him of "pale Enuie," and charging him with "destroying a valiant Champion"; his tone here mirrors the same regret he expresses at the thought of Alexander destroying Persepolis. But even as he reveals this regret, we also see the same relief he experienced while in Persepolis with the reminders of the empire's fall. Like he does with the ancient site, Herbert hunts for monuments on which he can fixate within "Isfahan" as a way to anchor it to its past, and finds one honouring Rostam himself. In this section, Herbert describes seeing a monument "[a] little further, vpon a high imperious mountaine is *Rustans* Tombe, more eminent for height and perspicuitie, then beautie or admiration, his Image is cut very artificially vpon a blacke shining marble mountaine neere *Persae-polis*, called *Nogdi-rustan*."³⁹ The site Herbert presumably refers to in this passage is known as Naqsh-e Rostam, or "the image of Rostam," an ancient burial site for four Achaemenid kings located near Persepolis (just outside the city of Shiraz), roughly 250 miles (over 400 km) away from Isfahan, where Herbert claims he can see it just "[a] little further, vpon a high imperious mountaine."

Approximately 2 miles (4 km) away from Persepolis is a mountain called Hussain Kuh, upon which engravings of mythological heroes are carved and the remains of Darius the Great, Xerxes, Ardashir I, and Darius II reside. While these remains were initially attributed to Jamshid and Kianid Kings, "since these stonemasonries show the victory of Iranian heroes over the enemies, such sculptures were attributed to Rostam-e Zal and called this place as Naqsh-e Rostam."⁴⁰ It was later discovered, however, that they in fact belonged to the four kings of the Achaemenid period, while the etchings were created in the Sasanid period (224–651 CE). These tombs, therefore, were not erected in memory of Rostam nor is "his Image [...] cut very artificially vpon a black shining marble mountaine"; rather, Rostam—because of his legacy—was etched into the tombs in order to suggest the greatness of Iran's Achaemenid rulers. Herbert's reference to this site makes his relationship to the figure of Rostam even more puzzling. While it is possible he was just misinformed about Naqsh-e Rostam, or even misunderstood what he had been told, this confusion does not explain the implication that the site is visible from Isfahan, just one paragraph away from his account of Rostam's death.

Interestingly, however, it is this discussion about Rostam's so-called monument that exhibits the most meaningful revision in the section on "Isfahan." In the 1638 edition, Herbert's tone shifts as he seems disappointed with Isfahan's dearth of monuments. He explains

Monuments should come now to our description: but I found few to feed my eyes vpon. *Rustans* Tomb must be one (two miles from *Spahawn*) behind

39 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (1634), M4v.

40 A. Shapur Shahbazi, *The Authoritative Guide to Naqsh-e Rostam* (Tehran: Safiran, 1393/2014), 12. Zal is Rostam's father; Rostam-e Zal is a manner of addressing Rostam as the son of Zal.

the Garden wee last spoke of [...] To see it, wee foot it to the very top of an Imperious Mount, where is only a hollow Cave, whether cut by Art or Nature scarce discernable.⁴¹

In 1664, Herbert adds to this description stating that it is “[a] Tomb scarce to be discerned by reason of its ruine.”⁴² Not only does Herbert geographically relocate Naqsh-e Rostam in his description drawing it closer to Isfahan—not to mention incorrectly name this monument as the figure’s final resting place—but he also underscores the “ruine” associated with this tomb, further aligning it with other structures or monuments that have “turned topsie-turvie” over time. Rather than expanding these revisions “the better for Addition,” Herbert delivers misinformation about the tomb in order to fulfill his project to cement Rostam’s identity to a dead and immovable past. His narrative does not account for the life and vibrancy of Rostam, and by virtue of this petrification, isolates the life and vibrancy of Isfahan.

Through his writing and revision of his Persian travels, Herbert attempts to renegotiate the temporal boundaries of the Safavid Empire. By reminding himself and his readers of Persia’s fallen, ancient past, he contains the constant revival of an empire that refuses to remain dead. But even as Herbert attempts to manipulate time to control the nonlinear movements of Persia’s histories, he does not succeed in assuming the authority he seeks. What Herbert neglects to account for is the unwieldy way time moves, and the surprising ways it moves him. Much like the ephemerality of the oral tradition of storytelling, time moves unexpectedly and refuses to be pinned down. Though Herbert tries to contain Persia—to freeze its progress and to deter its insistence on turning the *Shahnameh* into a roadmap for success—he fails. As a result of Herbert’s attempt to petrify symbols of nationhood, honour, and greatness like Rostam through his revision process, he continually resurrects Persia’s glorious past within its thriving present. Indeed, Persia continues to work on him, challenging his desires and sense of self, revealing how it is more alive and vibrant than he ever expected.

41 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travels* (London, 1638), X4r.

42 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travels* (London, 1664), Z3v.

