

## **Love Gone Wrong, Then Right Again: Male/Female Dynamics in the Bahrām Gūr-Slave Girl Story.**

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines male/female dynamics in three versions of the classical story of the Sassanian prince Bahrām Gūr and his lyre-playing slave girl: that of the Shāhnāma of Firdawsī, the Haft Paykar of Nizāmī Ganjavī, and the Hasht Bihisht of Amīr Khusraw. It argues that each version provides progressively more positive depictions of intergender dynamics, ones that are contingent upon more egalitarian understandings of the male/female dichotomy. The later authors destabilize the categories of “male” and “female,” equalizing and even uniting the dichotomous pairs, so that men and women draw nearer to each other in qualities rather than remaining in their usual polarized positions. In the Hasht Bihisht, moreover, we witness a reversal of hierarchies in which traditionally feminine qualities receive preference over masculine virtues—an act that suggests fresh possibilities for harmonious interactions between the sexes.

**Keywords:** Islamic studies | gender studies | male/female dynamics | gender identity | Islamic literature | intergender dynamics | Hasht Bihisht | Amir Khusraw

### **Article:**

Hardly any story in the Shāhnāma of Firdawsī (d. 1020 or 1025 CE) is as replete with provocative ingredients as that of the Sassanian prince Bahrām Gūr and his lyre-playing slave girl, Āzāda. The prince's sallying forth on the hunt, his bringing along of his concubine for companionship, and his brutal trampling of her under his camel after she lets slip a critical remark about his shooting of two deer, all tend to excite the consternation and even horror of the contemporary reader. Earlier audiences, we can assume, reacted with similar dismay. That the poets Nizāmī Ganjavī (d. circa 1209 CE) and Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325 CE) chose to include the story in their versions of the legend of Bahrām Gūr and that both materially transformed it, adorning it with a happy ending, constitutes a reworking of an episode too disturbing to be left to stand as is. The changes, many scholars note, serve to exemplify the metamorphosis of the heroic epic, with its emphasis on manly valor, into the romantic epic, with its stress on love as a source of individual growth.<sup>1</sup> This article will further elaborate on this theme, arguing that the three

versions mentioned above—so notable for their portrayal of conflict between the sexes—also provide progressively more positive depictions of intergender dynamics, ones that are contingent upon more egalitarian understandings of the male/female dichotomy. In a manner that is exciting to watch, the later authors destabilize the categories of “male” and “female,” equalizing and even uniting them, so that men and women draw nearer to each other in qualities rather than remaining in their usual polarized positions. In Khusraw's version of the story, moreover, we witness, among other actions, the reversal of hierarchies necessary for what Derrida described as the “irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime.”<sup>2</sup> In this case that concept is love.

### Firdawsī: The Construction of Heroic Masculinity

In Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma*, the story begins when the prince, then eighteen, asks his guardian, the Yemeni King Munzir, to provide him with female companionship. Association with women, he observes, yields many benefits:

Whether he is a king or a hero

a young man acquires comfort through a woman.

Likewise it is through woman that religion is maintained—

she guides young men to virtue.<sup>3</sup>

Of 40 beautiful Greek slave girls proffered to him, Bahrām Gūr chooses two, one of whom—named, ironically, *Āzāda*, or “free” (the word can also mean free-born or noble, and may carry a connotation of willfulness)—plays the lyre.<sup>4</sup> Bahrām falls in love with her: “She was the comfort of his heart and their desires were the same./Always upon his lips was her name (dīlārām-i ū būd va hamkām-i ūy/hamīsha bilab dāshtī nām-i ūy).”<sup>5</sup>

One day, the prince takes *Āzāda*, accompanied by her lyre, on a shooting expedition. When a pair of deer approaches, he asks her, smiling, which animal he should shoot, the male or the female. *Āzāda*'s answer is charged with an acute awareness of gender roles and a complicated attitude toward them. “O lion-man,” she responds, “men of battle do not kill [lit., seek] deer.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, he should convert the female into a male by implanting arrows into her head that would resemble antlers, and the male into a female by shooting off his antlers. Then, as the deer try to escape, he should shoot a pebble at the ear of one deer, causing it to lift its hoof to its shoulder. Finally, with an arrow, the king should “stitch together its head, foot and ear, if you wish me to call you the world-illuminator.”<sup>7</sup>

Bahrām Gūr successfully completes the task, but when he turns to *Āzāda* for praise, he finds none. Rather, she feels pity for the animals and weeps for them. When the prince queries the reason for her sorrow, she responds, “This is not manliness; you are not a man [or, in one variant, ‘you have turned away from manhood’]; you have a demon's spirit.” Furious, Bahrām Gūr

throws her off his camel and drives the animal over her, drenching her breast, arms, and harp with her blood. He castigates her for trying to ensnare him, calling her a “foolish harpist,” and avers that if his aim had gone astray, “my lineage would have been disgraced from this blow (az-īn zakhm nangī shudī gawhar-am).” The story concludes: “When he had trampled her under the feet of his camel,/from then on he never took a slave girl hunting.”<sup>8</sup>

Apart from its brutality, the story is notable for the oppositions it sets up between men and women and the tragedy that ensues when characters transgress or subvert their gender roles. The narrator arrogates all authority and power to men—in this case, Bahrām Gūr. Associated primarily with the hunt and with the qualities of skill, speed, and aggression, he dominates those around him and ultimately controls their destinies, whether they are animals or Āzāda.

As a female, Āzāda occupies a far different category. She has no power; as designated by her slave-status, she is merely an object of exchange in a manner that brings to mind structural anthropologists' constructions of “woman.” Her primary characteristics are her physical beauty and her skill at the lyre; she also personifies the medieval stereotype of the woman who is foolish, ruled by her emotions, and unable to hold her tongue. These qualities are evident in her attitude toward the king's pursuit of the deer. By counseling Bahrām Gūr that it is beneath him to kill deer, and by later despising the trick that she herself had proposed, she demonstrates both her fickleness and her ignorance (or willful disregard) of the actions by which kings earn their fame and prove their manliness—that is, hunting and sport.

But compassion also emerges as a principal defining characteristic, for it was Āzāda's softheartedness that caused her both to persuade Bahrām Gūr not to kill deer, and to weep at their pain when he strikes them. Firdawsī portrays this compassion ambiguously—one could argue, indeed, that he represents it as a flaw rather than a virtue—but it is present nonetheless.

Thus, Firdawsī establishes a dichotomy between the categories of male and female that ends in the trampling of the female—that is, the compassionate instinct. Indeed, the entire episode can be seen as an assertion of male power over female in a manner symbolized by the hunt itself. Āzāda's death, for example, in which her breast is reddened by her own blood, echoes the reddening of the female deer's breast after antlers are implanted in its head.<sup>9</sup>

The fateful sex-changing trick symbolizes the intrinsic and seemingly inevitable polarization of the sexes set forth by Firdawsī. Here, an attempt to break down the barriers between male and female (or, in postmodernist parlance, to deconstruct these structures)—by “changing” the female into a male, and vice versa—ends in tragedy. One of the themes emerging from the episode is, therefore, that one should avoid blurring the boundaries between male and female. Men should avoid taking on compassionate, “feminine” qualities or otherwise risk allowing themselves to be emasculated, as Bahrām Gūr fears would have happened had he failed to execute the trick (this fear is even tacitly implied in the injury he worries would have come to his gawhar—birth, lineage, race, or stock—by missing the shot—az-īn zakhm nangī shudī gawhar-

am). Nor should women assume assertive, “masculine” qualities, as Āzāda did in joining the hunt, or even in challenging Bahrām Gūr and therefore attempting—symbolically—to castrate him. The narrator's approving assertion that the prince never again took a girl hunting with him supports this notion.

In its response to the episode's underlying question, “What is manliness?”—an issue raised at least twice by Āzāda, first when she informs Bahrām Gūr that “men of battle do not kill deer,” and again when she accuses him of unmanliness—the story affirms that men are aggressive hunters who have license to prevail over women and crush them if they interfere with their masculine duty and honor. This implicit affirmation of Bahrām Gūr's behavior manifests in the narratorial stance toward him. The narrator in no way condemns Bahrām Gūr for his behavior toward Āzāda or even indicates that he was unusually cruel.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the framing of the episode displays implicit support for the prince or, at the very least, an equating of women with chattel. In the section immediately preceding that involving Āzāda, Bahrām Gūr asks for horses to be brought to him in order that he may acquire an appropriate means of conveyance. He chooses two horses in a way that foreshadows his choosing of the two women, Āzāda and the other Greek slave girl, to be his companions.<sup>11</sup> The juxtaposition of these acts symbolically links the women to the animals.

Moreover, immediately following the slave girl sequence, the narrator admiringly describes Bahrām Gūr's shooting of a lion attacking an onager and pinning both the lion's back and the heart of the prey with one arrow. In the very next story, the narrator expounds upon the prince's display of his fabulous skill at hunting ostriches before a group of Arab chiefs. Subsequently, Mundhir, the prince's guardian, orders the finest artists in Yemen to paint pictures of his charge in order to publicize his skill. The story therefore seems to support the notion that Bahrām Gūr admirably fulfills the requirements of being a good hunter—and a good man. Āzāda is wrong in declaring that Bahrām Gūr is no man. In fact, he defines masculinity, and he adheres closely to the heroic values which, above all, require preserving one's honor.<sup>12</sup>

It would be mistaken, however, to say that Firdawsī portrays women in an unmitigatedly negative fashion in the *Shāhnāma*, or even that a prohibition against crossing gender lines exists throughout. Many women appear in a sympathetic light in the work, and the narrator frequently gestures toward the notion that women are entities capable of helping men to mature spiritually. Gurdiya, the sister of Bahrām Chūbīna, appears as an eloquent and just woman considerably wiser than her brother; she is both beautiful and intrepid, slaying her enemies fearlessly.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, characters such as Gurd Āfarīd demonstrate heroic, traditionally “masculine” characteristics such as valor in battle without incurring any shame for their actions. Indeed, they often merit praise.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, love and association with women appear in many episodes as a means of providing comfort to men (not to mention producing heirs), perhaps the most famous example being the introduction to the story of Bīzhan and Manīzha, in which the narrator, beset by insomnia and terror of the night, receives inspiration and amusement from his loving wife, who brings him wine and fruit, plays music for him, and tells him a captivating tale.

On the other hand, in keeping with the genre of the heroic epic, the poem is preoccupied with masculine values, and women and traditionally feminine qualities or talents receive decidedly inferior ranking in it. It is notable, and a sign of the work's prevailing heroic values, that horses often take a more central role in it than do women. Rustam spends far more time with his horse, Rakhsh, than the single night he devotes to Tahmīna, the mother of his child. A typical perception of women is that expressed by the character Siyāvash, who asks his father, the king Kay Kāvus: “What will I learn in the king's harem?/Since when do women lead the way to knowledge?” That the most admirable characteristic of a woman is pliancy to her husband's will becomes clear when yet another of Bahrām Gūr's wives tells her husband, “The best women of the world are those/who cause their husbands to smile continually/If my pure soul turns away from your will/it's better that you look on me with disgust.”<sup>15</sup>

According to the prevailing values set forth in the work, then, successful love depends on an unequal relationship between the sexes and on a woman's obedience to her mate. Within those parameters, it can benefit a man. But it lacks critical importance to the life of a hero and can be easily swept aside for reasons of a woman's disobedience or if it otherwise disrupts the discharging of heroic duties. The epic's ethos assigns far greater significance to the skills of combat than to those of love, a value system epitomized by the Bahrām Gūr–slave girl episode.<sup>16</sup>

Nizāmī: The Reseating of Fitna

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Nizāmī: The Reseating of Fitna

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If Firdawsī's work represents an exemplification of the heroic ethos, Nizāmī's symbolizes that of romance. Generally seen as developing out of the heroic epic, but with an emphasis on love rather than war, the romantic epic's emergence in both the East and the West in the early medieval period derived in part from the “development of a new human image” and an “increased emphasis on the individual and on the importance of self-knowledge, together with a corresponding interest in personal relationships.”<sup>17</sup> These characteristics are abundantly evident in Nizāmī's *Haft Paykar*, the renowned *masnavī* completed in 1197. The manner in which the poet transforms Firdawsī's version in this work signifies his determination to topple the values set forth by Firdawsī and to substitute for them a more complex and egalitarian set.

When the slave girl story in the *Haft Paykar* begins, Bahrām Gūr has already acceded to the throne of Iran—a role he acquires, memorably, by taking part in a contest that involves seizing a crown from between two lions. Like Āzāda, Fitna is a beautiful slave girl and musician whom

Bahrām Gūr adores. Rather than simply noting Fitna's beauty and then devoting most of the attention to the hunt, however, Nizāmī waxes eloquent about her musical skills: “She played and sang with elegance,/and was quick-footed at the dance./When to the lute she joined her song,/the birds from air to ground would throng.” In fact, unlike Firdawsī, Nizāmī draws a clear parallel between the slave girl's skill and that of Bahrām: “The harp her weapon, the king's the bow/She struck up tunes, he game laid low.”<sup>18</sup> In a sense, then, both are hunters of game, only she hunts both animals and men (Bahrām Gūr is, indeed, Fitna's quarry—at one point, the narrator writes: “Before the king could hunt or slay/His victim made the king her prey”), and he, animals.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Nizāmī establishes greater equality between the characters and distributes similar characteristics to both.<sup>20</sup>

The “trick” Bahrām Gūr performs on the hunting expedition involves, significantly, an onager rather than a pair of deer, and is a stripped-down version of that of the Shāhnāma. Noticing that Fitna is silent with regard to his prowess, the king asks her how he should shoot the next wild ass.

The sweet-lipped maid, as was her wont—

a woman she, and idle-tongued—

Said, “If you'd kindle praise, then join

its hoof to head, with arrow bound.”<sup>21</sup>

After he executes the trick perfectly, the king asks Fitna for her opinion. She responds that his act is unworthy of praise because it resulted from practice, not physical power: “The prince is quite well versed/in this; what's hard that's oft rehearsed? ... Your royal bolt the hoof transfixed/through practice, not by strength unmixed.” Bahrām Gūr flies into a rage, but he restrains himself from trampling her, reflecting (in words that echo those of Āzāda to Bahrām Gūr in the Shāhnāma when she advises him not to kill the deer): “For lion-brave warriors do not slay/weak women; they're unequal prey.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, he orders his officer to undertake the execution. Acquiescing to Fitna's pleadings for her life, the officer does not carry out the act immediately but instead conceals her in a palace estate, where she undertakes the daily task of carrying a calf on her shoulders up a sixty-step tower. By dint of practice, six years later she is still able to bear the animal, now a full-grown ox, to the top. Longing for Bahrām, Fitna asks the officer to invite the king to the tower for a feast. Once Bahrām Gūr arrives, the slave girl—her face veiled from sight—performs her remarkable feat. He is amazed, but quickly stifles his astonishment. When she demands praise for her strength, he only says:

... “This is no power;

you've practiced this feat long before,

And, year on year and bit by bit,

though constant striving, mastered it:

Till now, without apparent stress,  
you balance in your scales this beast.”

With that,

The beauty, silver-limb'd, bowed low,  
with salutations as were due,

And said, “The king a great debt owes:

‘practice’ the ox—not the wild ass?

Am I, who to the roof have borne

an ox, for ‘practice’ to be known?

Why, when you shoot a wild ass small

should no one your deed “practice” call?”<sup>23</sup>

At that moment the king recognizes her, lifts her veil, embraces her, and begs her forgiveness for his rashness and anger: “If I, headstrong, kindled a fire,/’twas I was burned; you have survived.” For her part, Fitna attributes the earlier trouble to her “loving nature,” saying that the king's enormous skill in hunting caused him to be vulnerable to the Evil Eye: “For what man's eye has worthy found,/the harmful Eye is sure to wound.” Hence, she protected him by refraining from praising him. Her words so move the king that, arrow-like, “they pierced/his soul as they shot through his heart.” He repays the officer and marries Fitna, living with her “in love and ease,/until a long, long time had passed.”<sup>24</sup>

By eliminating much of the violence of Firdawsī's version of the story, Nizāmī creates what is arguably a more humanitarian scenario. Rather than being trampled under the feet of a camel, Fitna survives (albeit only through her quick-witted ingenuity) and acquires an impressive skill. She and Bahrām Gūr are even reconciled and married. As Bürgel observes, it is significant that “a king acknowledges his fault and asks the pardon of a female slave.” Indeed, in portraying such an event, Nizāmī “has replaced royal brutality and irrevocable fate by successful human endeavor to overcome evil.”<sup>25</sup> The changes made to the earlier story, in fact, constitute a telling commentary on its values, for in making them the poet implies that the earlier story demonstrated “not prowess, but lack of justice, and its underlying cause: the absence of love.”<sup>26</sup>

Nizāmī's largely positive portrayal of Fitna underscores the more sympathetic tenor of the poem. Rather than appearing as the embodiment of fickleness and foolishness, she is associated with the pearl, a beautiful but fragile symbol of wisdom, whereas Bahrām Gūr is the “stone” that

might have shattered the pearl had not the officer protected it.<sup>27</sup> Scholars such as Meisami have, indeed, emphasized the guiding influence that Fitna plays in the king's life, a role brought out by her association with the onager. This association—made evident through passages that describe both the animal and Fitna as “bright-faced” (*tāza-rūī*) and characterized by “beauty, grace, and intelligence”—reveals her function as an instructive influence in the prince's life, for throughout the *Haft Paykar* the onager acts as a guide for the king, whose name, *Gūr*, means both “onager” and “grave.”<sup>28</sup>

The identification of the slave girl with the onager serves to emphasize another important aspect of the story: Nizāmī's blurring of the usual distinctions between men and women. As has been noted, the king and the slave girl are more alike than they are different; both hunters, they speak rashly at times but are essentially kindhearted and loving. (“King Bahrām is by nature kind;/of gentle habit, noble mind ...” Fitna remarks of him.)<sup>29</sup> This union of supposedly opposite categories is perhaps best symbolized by Nizāmī's selection of motifs for the hunting scene. By replacing Firdawsī's pair of deer, their genders clearly marked out by antlers or the lack thereof, with a single onager, its gender indistinguishable, Nizāmī undoes the male/female dichotomy of the *Shāhnāma* and blends the opposites into one androgynous whole. This act resonates in the poem's portrayal of Fitna, who by the end of the episode essentially transforms into an androgynous figure, one who exhibits virtues associated with both men and women. Not only is she graceful, beautiful, and adept at music, but she grows sufficiently strong and muscular to carry a full-grown ox up a tall tower.

Yet the poem's sympathetic portrayal of the slave girl as an androgynous, educative force is neither unequivocal nor constant. As Meisami notes, Nizāmī's decision to name the slave girl Fitna once again ties her to a stereotypical vision of women and introduces a great deal of ambiguity into the story, for in comparison to *Āzāda*, the name Fitna

carries a far wider range of connotations, derived from the root meaning of the verb (to put to the test, to tempt) and ranging from physical charm, seductiveness, and sexual temptation, to the more general sense of inciting morally reprehensible actions, encompassing civil war and sedition, and strongly associated with the supernatural, with magic and possession.<sup>30</sup>

Although Meisami sees the name as ultimately emphasizing the slave girl's “alluring seductiveness” and suggests that the shape the narration takes decides against the name's implication of troublemaking and “moral disorder” (qualities seen as extremely maleficent in Islamic civilization), the negative impression lingers, reinforced by the mention of the slave girl's “unbridled tongue,” also directly associated with her femininity. And even after Fitna has demonstrated her skill in carrying the ox, Bahrām *Gūr* causes the slave girl to take a seat in the palace with a phrase that can also mean “to put down sedition.”<sup>31</sup> Dangerous femininity that demands some form of suppression therefore remains an element of the poem, even though the brute trampling required in Firdawsī's version no longer applies.



Amīr Khusraw: The Lion-Capturing Deer

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Amīr Khusraw's version of the story, occurring in his long poem the *Hasht Bihisht*, a *masnavī* modeled on the *Haft Paykar* and completed in 1301/2, further manipulates the categories of male/female to set forth a new image of love. Along with the blurring of gender distinctions evident in the *Haft Paykar*, one also sees a concomitant and clear valorizing of traditionally feminine characteristics—an act that suggests fresh possibilities for the creation of harmonious interactions between men and women.

As in Nizāmī's version, the charming ways of the slave girl—here a Chinese woman named *Dilārām* (meaning heart-soothing—and, significantly, the same word that Firdawsī used to describe *Āzāda*: *dilārām-i ū būd*)—are described at some length. She appears as the ultimate enchantress, seducing and overthrowing all who come her way with just a glance. Although the metaphors used to portray her beauty are often clichéd—like many a female protagonist in Persian poetry, she possesses narcissus eyes, ruby lips, musky hair, and a rose-like face—there are some rather innovative conceits as well. For example, the veins that show through her translucent skin are “just like threads within the pearl of Aden”; her blood, held inside skin like fine silk, is “like wine in a Syrian glass.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike the earlier versions, *Dilārām* is not yet a musician at the beginning of the story. She is, however, described as a “lion-capturing deer” (*āhū-yī shīrgīr*) a sobriquet whose significance becomes increasingly apparent as the story unfolds, and which once again places the slave girl in the king-like role of hunter.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, *Bahrām* exemplifies masculine valor and skill in hunting. He had “dug the graves of 100 lions with his arrows”; he “slew so many onagers in zeal/The mounds became like onager domes.”<sup>34</sup> His shooting is so precise that he can separate the hair of a deer from its shoulder; he is so quick and strong that he can catch onagers with his bare hands. Yet compassion already tempers his aggressiveness. Early in the episode, the king decides that he is tired of killing. The contrast with the bellicose *Bahrām* of Firdawsī's version could not be more acute:

When his mind had grown weary of slaying

He ordered his heart thus, from that day on,

Whether in the thicket or on the plain

he would not spill the blood of those dumb beasts.

When he would see a herd of onagers  
he would not scratch with arrows their livers.  
He would take them alive with his arm's strength,  
he would weigh them in his own scale, and then  
He'd give them the ornament of a name  
the brand of Bahrām on the thigh of each.

When with his own sign he had made them his  
from trouble's lasso, he would set them free.

From then on, he kills far fewer, and especially spares the young.<sup>35</sup> But the martial spirit lingers. On the fateful day of the hunt, he and Dilārām set out together and ride until they reach the hunting ground, where they commence to shoot animals. Suddenly several deer approach the king and his companion. The slave girl—described here as the “lion-felling gazelle” (ghazāl-i shīrandāz)—tells the king to shoot each one as she demands, for, she claims, even though his arrow is full of skill, command of that skill also belongs to another. Angered by her impudence, he replies testily, “How could the lion hesitate to laugh/When the deer puts the lion to the test?”<sup>36</sup> Since his specialty is the bow and arrow, however, he agrees to carry out her instructions. As in the Shāhnāma, she commands him to convert a female deer into a male, and a male into a female. He complies, driving a blow at a male's head that shears off its antlers so neatly and quickly that the animal fails to notice it has been hit. When that task is completed, he attaches two arrows and lets them fly toward the female deer, planting them in her head so that they resemble two antlers.

When the king demands justice from Dilārām, however, she replies that his success derived from divine power. It was magic, not skill, that allowed him to execute the trick. “The point of your arrow did that, really/That one cannot do with thinking.” She warns him to keep his insight sharp, for someone else may surpass him.<sup>37</sup>

Unsurprisingly, her words infuriate the king, whose cheeks turn yellow with rage, and whose insides boil with bitter bile. He pours out poison in a sarcastic laugh, telling her that she is deserving of oppression and tyranny: “Don't be impudent [lit., don't try to catch lions], because in your hunt,/You're now a deer by the cruel lion caught.”<sup>38</sup> No one could possibly surpass him—but if anyone does, he says sarcastically, “Go to him; like me there are plenty.” With that, he stamps his foot in anger, throws her from her saddle and takes her horse.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the narrators of the Shāhnāma and even the Haft Paykar, the narrator of the Hasht Bihisht puts a clear moral spin on the incident:

The king left, and the frail girl stayed in pain  
The dragon passed on, the treasure remained.  
With kings, one must not say a word against  
their wishes, even though it be the truth.  
Whoever spoke his mind to kings, lopped off  
his own head with the rapier of his tongue.<sup>40</sup>

Abandoned, Dilārām lies unconscious for a while. When she finally rouses, thirsty, tearful, and fatigued, she sets out toward a nearby plain:

So full of ghouls were that plain's halting stops  
she took her own shadow for a demon.  
So full was the road of piercing sharp spears  
her boots became like rough dust-sifting sieves.  
Thorns like arrows passed into her feet's soles  
just as a needle passes through fine silk.  
The foot that hurts from the touch of petals  
what is its fate, when it is met by thorns?  
No companion had she, no guide, except  
her shadow below, and the sun above.<sup>41</sup>

Finally she reaches a remote village where she encounters a learned and virtuous dihqān, or landowner. This prince and artisan knows well the sciences and arts of the age, including music: he is a “rarity at the harp” and a fine singer, whose hand is “like a cloud or lightning on the rūd,” and who can create humorous, sad, or sleep-inducing tunes.<sup>42</sup> When he learns that she is a “gem from the treasury of the king,” he offers to adopt her as his own child. Dilārām, in gratitude, removes a fabulous pearl from her ear and gives it to him; he kisses the ground in thanks. He sets up a room for her, arranging in it candy, fruit, and wine, and, at her own instigation, sets about teaching her his arts:

Since he perceived her nature to be smart  
all of that which he knew, to her he taught.

Of what he'd obtained, from all of the arts  
he poured from his own heart into her heart.  
He made her the master in every field  
especially the scales of flute and harp.<sup>43</sup>

Among the skills he imparts to her is the ability to play music that can magically kill and raise to life again.<sup>44</sup> When she has mastered this art, she desires to leave the shelter of her home (lit., to “fall outside the veil”—*khvāst bīrūn fitad zi parda-yi khvīsh*) and to demonstrate her competency in public.<sup>45</sup> In particular, she wishes “To weaken the argument of the king/and her own righteous claim, to prove correct.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, one day she ties a veil over her face and ventures onto the plain. Lured by her music, the animals gambol forth to “kiss the feet of that young cypress”:

When all of them together she had brought  
upon her harp, a melody she sought.  
Then she played such a soporific tune  
that the deer's eyes closed firmly shut in sleep.  
When in sweet sleep they had lost consciousness  
into their ears, she played another song.  
From that song, they leapt up yet again;  
they were delivered, section by section.  
The news spread far and wide—a magician  
rare and unique, from the world's arisen  
Who calls the deer to her from the plain  
kills them, and raises them to life again.<sup>47</sup>

When Bahrām Gūr hears of the wondrous maiden who can perform this feat, he naturally wishes to observe her. He sets forth one day to the field where she plays and tells her of his desire to see her arts. From behind her veil, the slave girl acquiesces. But first, the two take part in a hunt to flush out animals and lead them astray from their ordinary paths. When the king has killed many deer and onagers, Dilārām begins to play, and “The bashful deer, with sore and wounded hearts/came forward to her on their dancing feet.”<sup>48</sup> But rather than praising her when he sees the magic she is able to perform, the king showers scorn on her, bringing “the buyer's jeering on

the gem.” (He, of course, is the buyer who undermines the value of the treasure he wishes to purchase as a means of ensuring its price is low.) He says:

In the world, there are many of this sort:

everyone has some share of talisman.

No expert exists in a land—but see!

There's someone who is more expert than he.<sup>49</sup>

Dilārām answers sarcastically, saying,

Yes, of all I have done, that's your response.

Everyone is clever in art, yes, but

they are better than us, not than Bahrām!

The king, who can convert female to male,

no one can do that trick better than he!

And she who returns to living, the dead

any person could do better than that.<sup>50</sup>

The verses clearly hark back to the pair's earlier conversation, in which Dilārām had warned the king that someone could surpass him in skill with the arrow and bow. And they mockingly make light of her own skill in raising to life the dead by declaring that this gift is more common than Bahrām's ability to convert female to male. Unsurprisingly, the king at this point recognizes his interlocutor, removes her veil, and embraces her, “giving her longing soul a home.”<sup>51</sup> After apologizing and asking for her forgiveness, he takes her home with great joy. From then on, the king is even more loving toward Dilārām than he had been before. He orders that images of the pair's wondrous tasks be painted on the palace and throne.

In many ways, the changes made by Amīr Khusraw deepen and emphasize those instituted by Nizāmī. As in the *Haft Paykar*, some sharing of characteristics between Bahrām Gūr and the slave girl is evident throughout the poem. Like the king, Dilārām is identified as a hunter, whether she is portrayed as the “lion-capturing deer” or deploying the musical instrument (rather than arrow and bow) to master animals. Conversely, the king shows kindness and sympathy toward animals and spares Dilārām's life. The characters are thus able to assume attributes normally relegated to the opposite sex (symbolized by Khusraw's reinstatement of the sex-changing trick on the hunting ground) without bringing destruction on their heads—a state of affairs evident in the *Haft Paykar* but amplified here.

Yet Khusraw's reinstatement of the deer as prey motif helps to underscore another theme, one that, conversely, draws attention to the differences between the genders and the qualities normally associated with each. Graceful and gentle creatures, deer are often associated with women and feminine qualities in Persian literature. By reintroducing the gender-specific deer on the hunting ground, and by—like Firdawsī—figuring Dilārām as a deer throughout the story, albeit one who emerges triumphant over the lion-like Bahrām, Khusraw supports and affirms Dilārām's “feminine” qualities. She is not compelled to become an androgynous being in order to effect positive change, as in the *Haft Paykar*, but may remain a woman.

The talent acquired by Dilārām in the story exemplifies Khusraw's valorizing of the feminine. Her musical skill (also often associated with women in the Persian tradition) is more subtle than the king's hunting expertise, but more powerful, for rather than catching animals with her bare hands, they come to her of their own accord, and she can raise them back to life after having “killed” them. Eventually, her skill allows her to master not only the animals, but the king as well, for just as the animals come to her, so does he. This mastery reflects that of Fitna in the *Haft Paykar* but takes a more graceful form than that of a woman carrying a huge animal up a flight of stairs on her shoulders.<sup>52</sup> The feminine compassion that was laid low and trampled in the *Shāhnāma* is thus resurrected, and even admired, and to it is added intelligence, a sense of justice, and critical capacity.

Yet another positive transformation enacted by Khusraw involves the relationship between the protective male figure and the slave girl. Such a relationship exists in Nizāmī's version, where the officer rescues Fitna, but Khusraw renders it considerably more complex and pronounced. We have already noted that, unlike in the earlier versions of the story, Dilārām was not yet a musician when she first set out hunting with Bahrām Gūr. This fact is significant, for it provides an opportunity for the poet to depict a woman undergoing education, a singularly fresh theme in Persian literature. The landowner, portrayed as a highly moral, learned, and compassionate man, imparts to Dilārām skills that allow her to have an impact on her environment, to gain control of her life (as well as of nature), and to create beauty. Thus, through the help of a fatherly figure, she evolves from a victim, slave, and weak person into one who is endowed with agency. The portrayal of the landowner–Dilārām relationship thus posits a new version of male/female—and, indeed, human—dynamics that are dominated not by power but instead by generosity and an exchange of knowledge.

That the narrator's sympathies lie with Dilārām is evident from the beginning. Not only does he portray her as the sympathetic deer, but he figures her as the “treasure,” and Bahrām Gūr as the “dragon,” and seeks to show the injustice of the king's acts by remarking that “With kings, one must not say a word against/their wishes, even though it be the truth.” The narrator's compassion for Dilārām further emerges in the description of her torturous journey through the desert, where, as he writes, “The foot that hurts from the touch of petals/what is its fate, when it is met by thorns?” Unlike the circumstances obtaining in Nizāmī's version, moreover, the narrator casts no suspicion on the slave girl simply by virtue of her name.

Khusraw's transformations have their limits. Despite having been partially disrupted, the basic injustices of the hierarchy suggested by the story remain in force. Rather than creating a new, more equitable world, Dilārām, by the story's end, rejoins Bahrām Gūr's hegemony, in which—we must assume—she subsumes her desires and wishes to his.<sup>53</sup> Her purpose, in the end, remains to educate and entertain him. The story is primarily concerned with his development, not hers. Such an ending cannot be regarded as truly happy by contemporary feminist standards (if a generic version of such standards even exists). But nonetheless it is notable that in the work a downtrodden female character exercises agency and is able to acquire power and to use it to promote a more expansive and tolerant form of humanism than that which previously existed, and to find a love that, although imperfect, is nonetheless sustaining.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Studies comparing two or more versions of the story include Julie Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah? Nizami's Ethical Poetic,” *Edebiyāt*, I, no. 2 (1989): 41–75, Mu ḥammad Ja‘far Ma ḥjūb, “*Hasht Bihisht*” va “*Haft Paykar*” (Tehran, 2523/[1976]), 7, 11, J. C. Bürgel, “The Romance,” *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York, 1988), 166–170, Heshmat Moayyad, “Dar madār-i Nizāmī: *Hasht Bihisht-Haft Akhtar*,” *Irānshināsī*, 1 (1990): 135–159, and Kamran Talattof, “Nizami's Unlikely Heroines: A Study of the Characterizations of Women in Classical Persian Literature,” *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Kamran Talattof and Jerome W. Clinton (New York, 2000), 56–57, 66.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, 1981), 42.

<sup>3</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma-yi Firdawsī*, ed. by Y. A. Birtils (Moscow, 1960–71), 7: 272, l.151.

<sup>4</sup>See Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah,” 55.

<sup>5</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 7: 272–3, ll.150–156; 7: 273, l.168.

<sup>6</sup>بدو گفت آزاده کای شیر مرد/بأهو نجویند مردان نبرد. The verb *justan* signifies to seek something with the intention of acquiring it; Bahrām Gūr clearly intends to kill the deer and to acquire its carcass.

<sup>7</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 7: 274, ll.177–182.

<sup>8</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 7: 275, n.11 (emphasis added); 7: 275, ll.194–197; 7: 275, l.198.

<sup>9</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 7: 275, ll.189, 195.

<sup>10</sup>It must be remembered that Firdawsī's account may simply have been a faithful rendering of the narratives he found in his sources. But that he included the tale without passing judgment upon it is significant.

<sup>11</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 7: 271–272. ll.125–144.

<sup>12</sup>As Marshall Hodgson observes, the masculine hero of heroic and romantic epics had to be “watchful of his honour—his right to precedence—against all attacks; this honour could be sullied either through his own weakness—if he let a challenge go without silencing the challenger—or through his women, if his presumed sexual jealousy were offended.” Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), 2: 301.

<sup>13</sup>Gurdiya's wisdom is lauded on numerous occasions and compared favorably with that of men, and her character's appearance in the text provides a platform for an exposition on the numerous positive qualities of women, including their eloquence, purity, piety, and their ability to provide both comfort and good counsel. See Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 9: 172, ll.2768; 9: 173, ll.2783–84, 9: 171, ll.2746–48.

<sup>14</sup>See Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 2: 184–190, ll.197–273.

<sup>15</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 3: 15, l.165; 7: 433, ll.2251–52.

<sup>16</sup>Meisami has pointed out that the episode has been received “as exemplifying the heroic ethos” by the remarkable degree to which it has been illustrated and rewritten. As she writes, *The Preliminary Index of Shah-Nameh Illustrations*, compiled by Jill Norgren and Edward Davis (Ann Arbor, 1969), “records a total of 49 illustrations of the story (especially of the trampling), a figure exceeded only by representations of heroic exploits and scenes of ritual significance such as enthronements or mourning ceremonies.” Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah,” 65–66, n.18.

<sup>17</sup>Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton, 1987), 78–80.

<sup>18</sup>Nizāmī Ganjavī, *The Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, trans. by Julie Scott Meisami (Oxford, 1995), 76–77, ll.16–17; 77, l.19.

<sup>19</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 81, l.2.

<sup>20</sup>As Meisami notes, the story elevates the slave girl from “the status of one of the king's chattels to one analogous and complementary to his own.” “Fitnah or Azadah,” 47.

<sup>21</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 77, ll.30–31.

<sup>23</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 84–85, ll.68–70; 85, ll.71–74.

<sup>22</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 78, l.38; 78, l.46.

<sup>24</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 85, l.80; 85–86, ll.88–89; 86, l.91; 86, l.100.

<sup>25</sup>Bürgel, “The Romance,” 174.

<sup>26</sup>Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah,” 61.



<sup>27</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 86, ll.94–95.

<sup>28</sup>Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah,” 57.

<sup>29</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 80, ll.94–95.

<sup>30</sup>Meisami, “Fitnah or Azadah,” 55.

<sup>31</sup>Nizāmī, *Haft Paykar*, 85, l.81.

<sup>32</sup>Amīr Khusraw Dihlavī, *Hasht Bihisht*, ed. by Ja‘far Iftikhār (Moscow, 1982), 49–50, ll.478–479. All translations from the *Hasht Bihisht* in this article are my own.

<sup>33</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 50, l.481.

<sup>34</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 50, l.483, 51, l.491.

<sup>35</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 52–53, ll.501–506. Likewise, in the *Haft Paykar*, Bahrām Gūr refrains from slaying onagers under four years of age.

<sup>36</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 55, ll.525–527; 56, l.529.

<sup>37</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 57, l.544; 57, ll.546–547.

<sup>38</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 58,

1.552. شیرگیری مکن که در نخچیر/گستی از شیر شرزه آهو گیر. To capture lions—*shīrgīrī kardan*—can also mean to be bold and daring; or, in Dilārām's case, impudent. The *bayt* also plays on an alternate meaning for *āhū*, or deer: defect or fault.

<sup>39</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 58, ll.554–555.

<sup>40</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 59, ll.556–558. Dragons are typically depicted as guardians of great treasures.

<sup>41</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 59–60, ll.561–565.

<sup>43</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 64, ll.609–611.

<sup>42</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 61, ll.576–583.

<sup>47</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 65, ll.622–632.

<sup>44</sup>The skills demonstrated by the *dihqān* and taught to Dilārām are reminiscent of those demonstrated in a tale widely circulated about the great philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950). It is said that he played various songs that caused members of a gathering to cry, to laugh, and to sleep. Amīr Khusraw may have based his story on that tale. See Maḥjūb, “*Hasht Bihisht*” *va* “*Haft Paykar*,” 21.

<sup>45</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 64, l.613. The wording of this phrase leaves the slave girl's action open to a degree of ambiguity. It plays on the term *parda*, which can mean both musical scales as well as veil, and also denotes the protective covering that sheltered Muslim women from the gaze of outsiders, as well as any protection or covering for secrets or mistakes—an analogue for the more well-known word “purdah” in Western culture. To leave the *parda*—*az parda raftan*—means to make public; but to fall outside the *parda*—*az parda uftādan*—as it is stated here, can mean to lose one's reputation. Given the musical connotations of the word as well it could also imply that Dilārām is going out of tune.

<sup>46</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 64, l.614.

<sup>49</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 69, ll.654–655.

<sup>50</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 69–70, ll.656–659.

<sup>48</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 68, l.647.

<sup>51</sup>Amīr Khusraw, *Hasht Bihisht*, 70, l.664.

<sup>52</sup>As Bürgel notes, Amīr Khusraw's version is “even superior to Nezāmi's version in one respect, namely, in avoiding the somewhat incongruous vision of a girl with the muscles of a heavyweight champion and in endowing the girl with an art which is spiritually superior to that of the king: captivating animals by the tones of a lute alone is certainly subtler than changing the sex of animals by such coarse means as an arrow shot.” “The Romance,” 174–175.

<sup>53</sup>In particular, the desire to acquire new mates: he takes on multiple spouses through the course of the poem.