

TWIN SPIRITS  
ANGELS AND DEVILS  
PORTRAYED IN SHAH TAHMASP'S SHAH NAMEH

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This *Shah Nameh* was probably started by Shah Tahmasp's father, Shah Ismail but largely completed during the reign of Shah Tahmasp. In his later years, Shah Tahmasp became increasingly preoccupied with political concerns. When the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent died during the siege of the castle at Szigetvár in 1566, there were fears that his successor, Selim II might not adhere to the treaty signed by the Persian and Turkish rulers in 1555 to settle the western frontier of Persia. Consequently in 1567, a Safavid delegation travelled to Turkey and met the Ottoman Sultan at Edirne in February of 1568. Two of the most outstanding gifts were this *Shah Nameh* and a Qur'ān possibly written by the Imam 'Alī.

The *Shah Nameh* remained in Constantinople until the late nineteenth century but in 1903 it had entered the collection of Baron Edmond de Rothschild. During the Second World War it was looted by the Nazis and taken from France but recovered by Edmond's son, Maurice de Rothschild who died in 1957. At the sale of Maurice de Rothschild's books, it was purchased by Arthur A. Houghton. The volume was subsequently disbanded so that individual leaves could be displayed at various places and separate leaves entered private collections. The most recent event concerning this great work took place in 1994. The carcass of the manuscript, text, illumination, binding and 118 remaining miniature paintings was returned from the United States to Iran in return for an oil painting by Willem de Kooning. The final exchange took place after protracted verification in true Cold War style on the tarmac of Vienna airport. The manuscript is now housed in the Reza-i 'Abbasi Museum in Tehran where 31 leaves are currently on display.

It was Stuart Cary Welch who devoted so much time and analysis to this work, which resulted in the major two-volume publication with Martin Dickson

in 1981. Much of the information on the subject matter of the paintings has been taken from this work.

However before examining the miniature paintings, in particular those with devils and angels, it is necessary to examine some of the general beliefs that lie behind these illustrations.

The early chronology of the great Persian religious leader, Zoroaster and his revealed faith (“the only prophetic religion ever produced by the Aryan race” according to Zaehner 1961) remains somewhat obscure. It may even be the case that Zoroastrianism is the world’s oldest revealed religion, dating as far back as 1700 BC<sup>1</sup>. There is also no doubt that many of Zoroaster’s teachings seem to have been elaborated in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is, however, the radical dualist vision of Zoroaster’s teachings that is of relevance to this topic, namely the Twin Spirits that are perennially in conflict. These spirits are Spenta Mainyu, the Beneficent or Holy Spirit and Angra Mainyu, the Hostile or Destructive Spirit. They epitomize the conflicting moral choices between *asha* (truth) and *druj* (untruth). The One Supreme deity was called Ahura Mazda (or Wise Lord) and in time this became altered to Ohrmazd or Hurmuzd while Angra Mainyu (the Hostile Spirit) became changed to Ahriman<sup>2</sup>.

One of the fundamental beliefs of Zoroastrianism is free choice, so the question is whether Ahriman was evil by his nature or by his choosing. It seems more probable that because of the emphasis placed on free choice by Zoroastrianism, Ahriman chose the path of “untruth” and doing “worst things”. It appears that Ahriman chose from the very beginning to incarnate and inaugurate the ways of evil thoughts, words and deeds and became the great adversary of Ahura Mazda or Hurmuzd. The struggle between the Holy Spirit and Good Creation and his evil Twin Spirit becomes irreconcilable, though Ahriman is destined to be defeated and paralysed by Hurmuzd at the end of time. The *Yasna* or Acts of Worship describes these two spirits in the following way:

“Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our preferences nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions nor our souls are in accord” (*Yasna* 45:2)<sup>3</sup>.

Man is confronted with the same moral choice of the two ways of good or evil in the constant war between the Holy and Destructive Spirits. Man’s use of his free will and choice will be judged at the immediate individual judgement

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<sup>1</sup> Kriwaczek 2002:206. The author makes a strong case that Zoroaster lived around 1200 BC, i.e. at about the same period as Moses.

<sup>2</sup> Some of this background material has been taken from Stoyanov 2000:21-28.

<sup>3</sup> Dedications to a Deus Arimanius, including a statue unearthed in York, may suggest that this was a Romanised version of Ahriman, the force of all-evil in the world. See Kriwaczek 2002:123.

of the soul at death on the so-called “Bridge of the Separator” as well as at the Universal Judgement during the final renovation of Hurmuzd’s Good Creation. The First Judgement elevates the righteous souls to the Zoroastrian Heaven or “House of Song”. It relegates the wicked souls to the Zoroastrian Hell, known as the “House of Worst Thinking” or “House of Untruth”, where these souls are condemned to “a long age of misery, of darkness, ill food and the crying of woe” (*Yasna* 31:20). Those souls whose good and evil deeds appear in exact balance are sent to Hamistagan (the region of the mixed). As in the old underworld kingdom of the dead, these souls lead a grey existence, lacking both joy and sorrow Boyce (1979:27). Following the resurrection of the bodies during the Last Judgement, the saved will be sent for three days in Paradise while the damned will face another three days of punishment in Hell. The Zoroastrian idea of the renewal of the *macrocosmos* also serves to epitomise the pre-ordained victory of Ahura Mazda while Angra Mainyu is thrown out of the sky. He is rendered powerless and is cast into the darkness where his destructive powers and weapons will be sealed up forever.

Whether or not the first Achaemenid rulers, Cyrus and his unstable son, Cambyses (d. 522 BC) were adherents of Zoroastrianism is not known. However there is evidence that Darius (521–486 BC), who founded the new capital of the Achaemenid Empire at Persepolis, was a Mazda worshipper. During the Achaemenid period, the earlier Zoroastrian belief that the Twin Spirits were beneath Ahura Mazda began to change. During this period, a gradual process began whereby Ahura Mazda began to merge with that of Spenta Mainyu, the Holy Spirit and it was this kind of theological belief that eventually emerged as the orthodoxy of the Zoroastrian state-church during the Sassanian Empire in Persia (c. 224 to 642 AD) Within this stricter dualist system of beliefs there were contrasts between Hurmuzd as the Creator who is “all goodness and all light” and lives in the Endless Light above, while Ahriman, or the Lie, is the destroyer who is “all wickedness and full of death” and lives in the abyss of Endless Darkness below. The contrasts are not only between goodness and light and evil and dark but also between the hot, moist, bright and light substance of Hurmuzd and the cold, dry, heavy and dark essence of Ahriman. The Jewish ideas of opposition between the Prince of Light and Angel of Darkness may be considered to be a reflection, or even modified version, of this Iranian dualism.

For about four centuries the Sassanian Empire and the Roman and later the Eastern Roman Empire were to come into constant collision. Eventually, the Sassanians were to meet their match in the person of the Byzantine Emperor, Heraclius who took his armies into Sassanian territory eventually sacking the Sassanian Emperor’s palace at Dastagird. This significant defeat and the rising force of Arab armies to the south were ultimately to lead to the Arab conquest of

Iran and the deposition and assassination of the last Sassanian ruler, Yezdegird III in 652 AD. The great Sassanian King Khusrau I said that the “King of Kings”, as ruler of this material world was an intermediary between humanity on earth and Hurmuzd, Lord of the Spiritual Realm. However, with the foundation of the Arab Umayyad caliphate, Zoroastrianism was disestablished in Iran and some anti-Zoroastrian persecution and the turning of some of the fire temples into mosques accompanied the advance of Islam. Nonetheless for three centuries or so Zoroastrianism lingered on in the former heartland of the Achaemenid Empire, namely the province of Fars.

This idea of two co-eternal beings causes difficulties to followers of all monotheistic faiths such as Islam, which believes that one God is creator of all. How then can evil exist in a God-ordained world? Either God is not all-good or He is not all-powerful? Islam does not readily resolve the problem of evil and its sources but puts the question in a different context. God is Creator (*al-hāliq*) of all things (Q 13/16). “He turns astray whom he wishes and guides whom He wishes” (Q 6/39 amongst others.) Al-Ašcarī and his followers, for example, thought that Divine omnipotence was absolute and that there was no limit to God’s freedom and power. Evil was defined as that which is forbidden by God and it was not necessarily the act itself that was wicked<sup>4</sup>. There is also an interesting dialogue between the Devil or Iblīs and Mu‘āwiya in the *masnavī* of Rūmī<sup>5</sup>. In this the Devil says that it is Man who is responsible for his acts, and not Iblīs. This text also describes Iblīs in different forms such as a thief, an archangel radiating light, a friend of God who changes in to a spy, a gardener and so on. Such transformations can be seen in some of the paintings in this *Shah Nameh*. Indeed, one of the main themes within this great poem is the need facing Man to make moral choices. This takes us back to the dualist argument of two Spirits competing for power over mankind.

The contrast between good and evil and the final victory of the former is, as Rypka (1968:159) says, a thread running through a considerable part of the epic *Shah Nameh*. King Jam, or Jamshid, is invited, but declines, to be the bearer of Ahura Mazda’s message to mankind. In the *Shah Nameh* he reigns for 700 years not only over men but also over birds, fairies and more importantly, demons. He becomes so proud with such a string of achievements that he is eventually overthrown and killed by the usurper Zahhak. Zahhak represents the snake Azhdahak of the *Avesta*. Zahhak had two snakes growing from his shoulders requiring a daily intake of human brains and is, significantly, changed into an Arab appearing as a tyrant and chosen instrument of the Devil who leads Zahhak from his

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<sup>4</sup> See Antes 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Translated into French by Kappler 1987.

previous innocent vegetarianism to eating animal food and ultimately cannibalism. The symbolism here refers of course to the Devil's desire to rid the world of mankind. A miniature on folio 26 verso, attributed to Sultan Muḥammad, shows Zahhak with snakes growing from his shoulders attended by various courtiers and doctors. It is interesting that this painting includes two angels in the upper architectural register. These are shown holding a water sprinkler and casket and are the first example of angels shown in this great manuscript.

Within this *Shah Nameh* there are a large number of textual references to Ahriman and Iblīs as well as a few references to Hurmuzd. Both text and illustrations refer to the archangel Surush, representations of which will be examined as a counterweight to the prevailing larger number of textual and illustrated references to the forces of evil. There is something of a counterweight in Surush who makes an appearance on two occasions but this does not substantially alter the eight-fold balance of illustrations in favour of the forces of darkness. This is rather unexpected. If, as Milan Kundera (1996:85-86) proposes, we see the Devil as a partisan of Evil and an angel on the side of Good, the suggested demagogy of the angels would lead one to expect a far greater number of images of the forces of good and of Divine Creation.

Zoroaster's teachings are revealed early in this manuscript. An illustration on folio 20 verso shows the Court of Gayumars, where we read that Gayumars came to the throne to rejuvenate the world. Yet though life was idyllic under Gayumar's just rule, Ahriman was already plotting the downfall of man. In this his vicious son, the Black Div, assisted him. Although the archangel Surush had warned mankind of what was to come, Gayumars' son, Siyamak, was killed by the Black Div though his son, Hushang remained to carry on the fight. Ordered by his grandfather to lead a holy war against the forces of evil, Hushang was assisted by an army of angels and animals that put to flight the lesser demons while Hushang killed the Black Div, thus achieving some retribution for his slain father. This particular miniature painting on folio 21 verso, attributed to Sultan Muḥammad is a particularly busy one (**Fig. 1**). Hushang is shown astride the Black Div, pinning him to the ground and this portrayal of good triumphing over evil is echoed in the flying angel who is about to strike down a fallen white demon. Other demons are shown cowering before one of Hushang's allies while a fleeing demon on the left of the painting points his finger at a leopard that is about to attack him in the same way that two lions are already mauling a demon in the centre of the painting. Two angels are shown appearing just below the text block and to the right of the painting. This scene in many ways encapsulates much of what has already been said about the forces of good and evil as portrayed in dualist theories and is one of the few to show the struggle between the twin angelic and demonic spirits.

Three folios later, we can see a representation, also attributed to Sultan Muḥammad, of Hushang's son, Tahmuras continuing his father's good work by defeating Ahriman and the divs. (folio 23 verso, **Fig. 2**) However he spared their lives in return for their promise to teach a new and valuable art, namely the ways of writing thirty scripts, including Greek, Arabic, Persian, Soghdian, Pahlavi and Chinese.

Although the reign of Jamshid was to usher in a golden age and reign of 700 years, Jamshid was to be punished for his pride and his failure to continue to worship God. Jamshid's demand that he be worshipped in place of God led to God's withdrawal of divine support and as punishment, God unleashed Ahriman, who was later to incite Zahhak to kill Jamshid. A miniature painting on folio 24 verso shows two carpenters sawing a piece of wood in half, referring to the manner of Jamshid's death. At this stage, we can see how the Zoroastrian teachings still preserved an overall Supreme God with the lesser Twin Spirits subservient to him.

The different ways in which the Devil may appear has already been mentioned in the context of the dialogue between the Devil and Mu'āwiya. In folio 25 verso that shows the death of King Mirdas, the Devil appears in the guise of a well-wisher. With a black beard and wearing a blue coat, boots and turban the Devil is shown in the act of having led Zahhak to murder his father, the just and God-fearing Mirdas. King Mirdas used regularly to go at night to a secluded place in the palace grounds where he performed ritual ablutions in private. On this occasion the Devil led Zahhak to allow him to dig a pit in the King's path, line it with branches and grass. King Mirdas fell in to the pit, broke his back and died. This painting is important as it shows the actual moment of death as well as the Devil and Zahhak as onlookers of this evil act.

In a painting entitled "Rustam's fourth course: he cleaves a witch" (folio 120 verso) we see the Devil in a girl's clothing (**Fig. 3**). Rustam and his horse, Raḥš had come to a clearing where, beside a stream, lay a roasted sheep, wine and various sweetmeats. After drinking some wine, Rustam picked up the lute and began to sing, whereupon this attracted the attention of one of a party of witches whose meal had been interrupted by Rustam's arrival. This witch is none other than Ahriman who took on the disguise of a young girl scented with musk and dressed in colourful attire. Rustam invited her to join him for some wine but when he thanked God for His generosity, she turned black. Rustam caught her with his lasso and she turned in to an ugly wizened witch. This could also be seen as a representation of the ghastly hag who meets the evil souls as they cross the "Bridge of the Separator", seizes them as they try to cross the bridge that has shrunk to the size of a blade width and plunges down to Hell with them. The painting shows Rustam cleaving her through with his scimitar. The background



of the landscape shows two other witches watching these events unfold. Food has here been used as a form of temptation.

Three paintings in fairly rapid succession show Rustam grappling with the forces of evil in the form of various divs or devils. In folio 122 verso Rustam is shown killing Arzhang the Div General. Rustam slew this div by tearing off his head. This painting also contains some groups of demons hurling boulders at Rustam. On folio 124 recto, we can see the progress made by Rustam as he battles with, and kills, the White Div. Three other demons look on from the safety of some rocks as the fight becomes ever more deadly with limbs being torn from the White Div by the hero Rustam. Another painting in this sequence (folio 127 verso) shows the Div King, the Shah of Mazanderan being brought before the now freed Kay Kavus. Kay Kavus had been captured by the Div King and his ally the White Div when Kay Kavus had set out on an expedition to Mazanderan. When Rustam had captured the Div King, he had turned himself into a stone so heavy that only Rustam could carry it. When brought before Kay Kavus and threatened by Rustam that he would hack the stone to pieces, the Div King reappeared in human form, only to be cut in two by the royal executioner. This sequence of paintings shows to good effect what Dhalla refers to as “the infernal crew”, namely the divs or demons who have entered into a compact with Ahriman to mar the good creation of Ahura Mazda or Hurmuzd (Dhalla 1914:49). It is interesting to note that in Zoroastrian theology a corresponding angel and archangel representing exact counterparts of goodness, match these retinues of male and female demons who dwell at the court of Ahriman.

A further miniature that contains the two embodied elements of devils and angels is that which illustrates the account whereby one of the divs responds to Iblīs’ efforts to wean the Shah from God. The div persuades Kay Kavus that he deserves to rule heaven as well as earth and, misled by this idea, Kay Kavus and his advisors work on a solution whereby eagles carry his throne heavenwards or as the *Shah Nameh* puts it “rose to the reaches of the angels”. On his return to earth, Kay Kavus is shamed, does penance and prays to God to forgive him for his pride. This illustration is shown on folio 134 recto.

To decide on who should succeed Kay Kavus on his abdication, the Shah decided on a competition. Whoever should manage to capture Bahman Castle, a stronghold of the divs, would become his successor. The painting on folio 221 recto shows Kay Khusrow performing this seemingly impossible task. In his letter fixed to the castle walls, the prince warned that “if it be Ahriman – Satan himself – who dwells within this castle, let him know that by the power of the *farr* (i.e. pomp or splendour) that God has graced me with, I will bring him crashing down from his vainglorious heights.” The painting in question has a variety of illustrations showing the divs being killed by Kay Khusrow’s soldiers or being led out across

the drawbridge to captivity. Kay Khusrow stayed on in this province constructing a new city including the erection of a fire temple dedicated to Azar Gushasp, the spirit of fire and lightning, thus reaffirming Zoroastrian elements of worship.

As we saw earlier, the devil may appear in a variety of forms. On folio 294 recto, he appears in the form of an onager, which kept on attacking Kay Khusrow's horse. Rustam was sent for to kill this div who was in reality Akvan, a div that brought great harm and suffering to the people. This painting by Muẓaffar °Alī is a masterly portrayal of movement with the sense of pursuit by Rustam and the helpless galloping in different directions of the horses that takes the observer's eye to both sides of the page.

There are some very dramatic illustrations to the various deeds undertaken by Isfandiyar including the killing of monster wolves, the evil simurgh and a dragon (folio 434 verso). These are outside the scope of this paper but it is worth drawing attention to the miniature on folio 435 verso where Isfandiyar is shown killing the sorceress, known by the name of Ghoul (**Fig. 4**). Isfandiyar ensnared her by slipping round her waist a precious chain that had been brought down from paradise by Zoroaster, who had himself wound this chain round Isfandiyar's arm. This chain protected its wearer from any backsliding in the faith. The painting shows Isfandiyar having killed the witch, a scene that reinforces the sense of opposing twin spirits of good and evil

So far the emphasis has been entirely on evil spirits and the forces of darkness. Perhaps that says something about the text in question or the degree to which man must guard against these negative forces. The *Shah Nameh* does not give anything like the same prominence to angels and the powers of good. Ahura Mazda had a number of ministering angels, which take a prominent place in the old Iranian faith. These were known as Amesha Spentas or "Immortal Holy Ones" and within the Zoroastrian hymns we come across references to Ahura Mazda and his associates meaning these angels. Each of them is known by an individual name and each of them has a twofold character since each embodies some specific virtue such as devotion or righteousness while on the physical side each presides over some material object as its guardian spirit. Next in rank to these associates are the Yazatas. This literally means "the adorable ones". If Amesha Spentas are the archangels in Zoroastrian theology, then Yazatas are the angels (Dhalla 1914: 96).

The Yazatas of the Avestan period became known as Izads during the Pahlavi period. These Izads or angels are immortal and Surush is one of the most prominent, becoming one of the judges of the dead. There is only one significant representation in this *Shah Nameh* of Surush, his very importance in the panoply of angels more than offsets this. On folio 708 verso there is an illustration of the angel Surush rescuing Khusrow Parviz from a *cul de sac* (**Fig. 5**). Pursued by



Bahram-i Chubineh and three followers, Khusrow had rushed into what he had thought was a cave but in fact was a grotto and a solid wall of rock. Trapped and with his enemies in hot pursuit, Khusrow called out to the Lord. A roar issued from the mountainside and Surush was at his side. In this painting, the winged Surush, mounted on a dapple-gray horse, assists Khusrow to mount and later sets him down out of harm's way. Khusrow gives thanks to the Lord and asks the identity of his deliverer. "I am Surush", replied the angel "but now that you are safe and sound, what further need to cry?" We know from Zoroastrian beliefs that Surush, in the final struggle between angels and devils, will smite his adversary and join with Hurmuzd in celebrating the final destruction of evil. In a much earlier painting, on folio 36 verso (**Fig. 6**), there is another representation of Surush interceding to save Zahhak who has been struck down by Faridun. In this painting by Sultan Muhammad, Surush is shown swooping down, advising that Faridun should spare Zahhak and saying that his time had not yet come. The inscription over the doorway to the right reads: "O opener of the gates!" This is a reminder of the Qur'anic description of God as "the opener of the gates" to paradise or to hell.

The eternal battle between goodness and evil, represented by angels and devils, is one of the most enduring elements of Zoroastrian beliefs. It is these eternal beliefs that have preoccupied mankind over the centuries and it is these beliefs, in particular the opposition of the twin spirits of good and evil or devils and angels, that can be seen so vividly illustrated in this outstanding example of Persian literature and book production.

Perhaps it would be fitting to leave the last word to the Prophet Zoroaster himself. In one of the *gathas* there is a hymn to the Prophet that encapsulates much of what I have described from these Shah Nameh illustrations:

Hear with your ears the Best; look upon it with clear thought. When deciding between two beliefs, each for himself before the great consummation, think that it be accomplished to our pleasure.

The two primal spirits, who reveal themselves in vision as twins, are the Better and the Bad, in thought and in word and in action. And between these two, choose aright, the foolish not so.

In the beginning, when those two Spirits came together, they created Life and Not-Life, and at the end, the followers of the Lie shall inherit Worst Existence, but Best Existence shall be for those who follow the Right.

Of the two Spirits, he that followed the Lie chose the Worst. The holier Spirit, he that clothes himself with the massy heavens as with a garment, chose the Right. So should likewise they do that would please Lord Mazda by dutiful action.

The Daevas also chose wrongly between the two. Infatuation came upon them as they took counsel together, so that they chose Worst Thought. Then together they rushed to Violence, that they might enfeeble the world of men.

If, O mortals, you shall hearken diligently unto those commandments which Mazda has commanded you, of happiness and pain, long punishment for the followers of the Lie, and blessings for the followers of the Right, then hereafter all shall be well<sup>6</sup>.

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*al-Qur'ān* tr. by the author.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Kriwaczek 2002:227.

<sup>7</sup> No edition is mentioned because standard references are given.

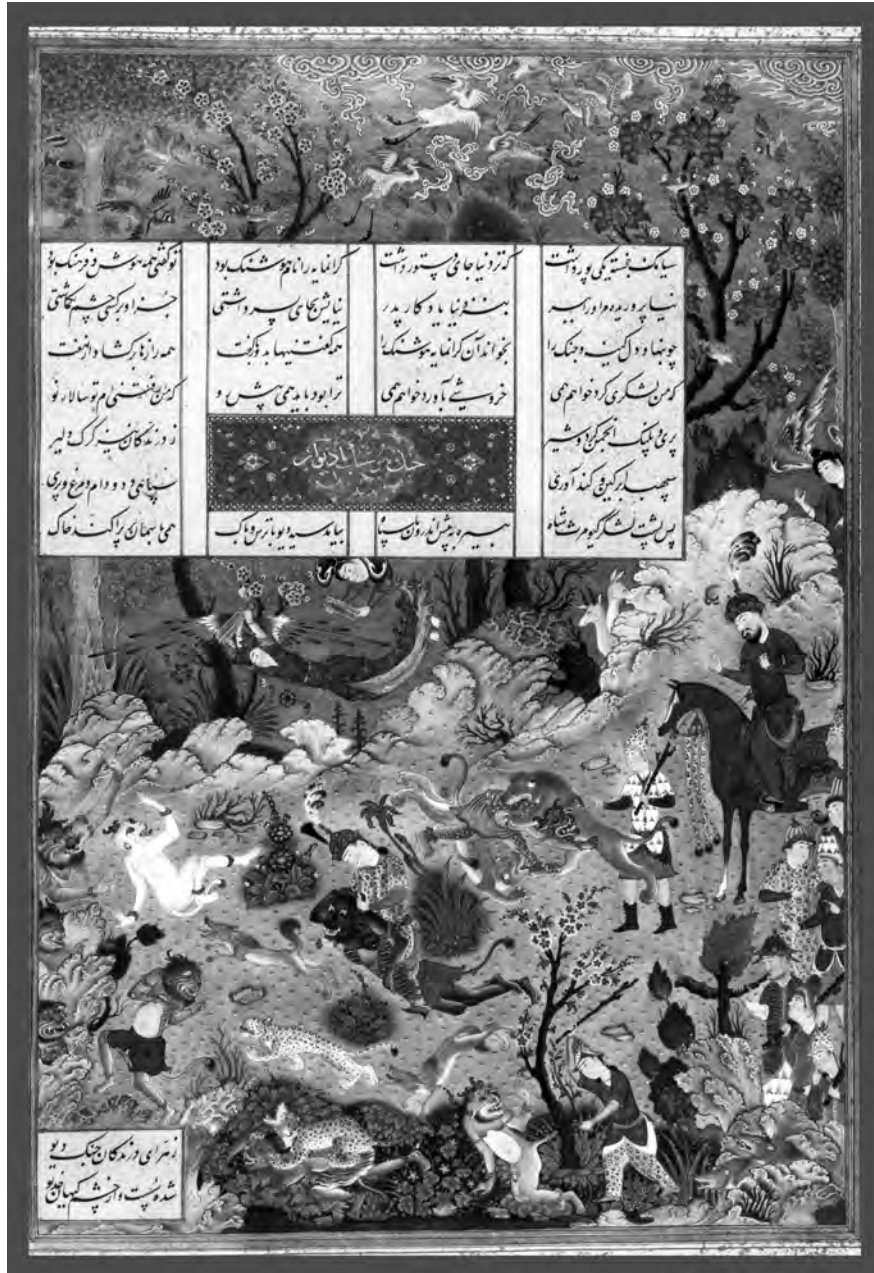


Fig. 1. Folio 21v: *Hushang slays the black div*  
(Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum,  
Harvard University Art Museums, Private Collection)



Fig. 2. Folio 23v: *Tahmuras defeats the divs*  
 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
 Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970. /1970.301.3/)





Fig. 3. Folio 120v: *Rostam's Fourth Course: He cleaves a witch*  
(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970. /1970.301.17/)



Fig. 4. Folio 435v: *Isfandiyar's Fourth Course: He slays the sorceress Ghoul*  
 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
 Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970. /1970.301.52/)





Fig. 5. Folio 708v: *The angel Surush rescues Khosrow-Parviz from a cul-de-sac*  
 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
 Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970. /1970.301.73/)



کجوه اندرون بود سبک او می  
 فریدون پیش نهاد مسو ویر  
 نیار برش خویش و سواد او  
 کند بی بار است از گرم سیر

Plate VII