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To Tell Anew: Fresh Perspectives on Persian Narrative

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> *[...] when some fool kicks up a commotion and a throng of likeminded people gathers round him, [...] he regales them with such things as, "In a certain sea, I saw an island, and five hundred of us landed on that island; we baked bread and set up cooking pots, and when the fire got going and its heat reached down into the ground, it moved, we looked, and lo and behold, the island was a fish."*
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> Beyhaqi, *The History of Sultan Masʿud of Ghazna*, vol. 2, 371

Everyone likes a good story, or so one would think. Yet, the father of Persian historiography, ascertaining his method while chronicling the reign of the Ghaznavid sovereign Sultan Masʿud (r. 1030–41), seems to shun the taste for fiction as a vulgar amusement. According to Beyhaqi (995–1077), the "mass of common people" (*mardom-e ʿāmme*) all too readily gives credence to the wildest of fables: they "are so constituted," he writes, that they revel in "impossible absurdities (...) and other such nonsensical tales (*khorāfāt*) that bring sleep to the ignorant when read to them at night."[1] The "wise" and the "learned" (*kheradmandān*), by contrast, "are those who test a statement for its veracity before they give credence to it; they welcome the truth in all its beauty and discard unseemly falsehoods."[2] As noted by the historian, however, such discerning scholars "are very few in number." So few, perhaps, that they too, at times, might be tempted to indulge in a well-rounded tale. Had he not enjoyed them himself, would Beyhaqi have taken the trouble to mimic a storyteller in his own voice, as is attested in the epigraph? Obviously, the purpose of this account is to ridicule fabulists for their "absurdities": all tissues of lies never to be trusted. It is the task of the historian, precisely, to disentangle facts from fiction, relying only on reasonable, veracious accounts either directly witnessed or gleaned from trustworthy informants and reliable books. Yet, the reader is left wondering: how is the citation above to be understood? Why would Beyhaqi, in his own prose, lend a voice to that "fool" (*ahmaqi*) of a storyteller? Could it be that the author of the *Tārikh-e Masʿudi* found some amusement in the imitation of the raconteur, if not in the narrative itself?

To Beyhaqi's audience in Ghazna, the tale invoked in the epigraph would have been well known: already at the time, the story of the sea-monster mistaken for an island was something of a trope. Likely disseminated through the Alexander romance, where it is attested since the earliest Greek recensions of the legend, it remained a longtime favorite among Persian authors, pervading a host of different genres, from chronicles and natural histories

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[1] Beyhaqi, *Tārikh-e Beyhaqi*, vol. 2 (*khotbe*), 1018–1021; Bosworth, *The History of Beyhaqi*, vol. 2 (exordium), 370–372.
[2] Ibid.

to romance and advice literature.[3] As the Ancients were well aware, there is a pleasure inherent in storytelling, appealing to audiences across social and educational boundaries.

As early as the tenth century, the Arab compiler Ibn al-Nadīm (d. c. 995) believed the *Furs* were especially prone to storytelling.[4] In the technical literature, however, the workings and mechanisms of narrative production remain highly elusive. This is in part due to the fact that premodern Persian literary theory focused almost exclusively on lyric poetry; narrative is hardly ever accounted for prior to the modern period, whether in "learned" or "popular" prose, or as romance in verse (*masnavi*).[5] In his 2018 lectures dedicated to the "anthropology of narrative in classical Persian literature," Mario Casari suggests that, in such linguistically and culturally cohesive traditions as the Persian literary corpus, stories themselves are the best gateway to probe the powers of narrative.[6] In the form of *dāstān*, *nāme*, *afsāne*, *hekāyat*, or *qesse*, he explains, narrative produced and circulated in the Persian language was also a formidable vehicle for the transmission of knowledge throughout the centuries. After all, thirst for stories is a drive akin to *libido sciendi*, the desire to know. Perhaps the principal conveyor of scientific discoveries and ethical wisdom to the general public, stories not only shaped a common vision of the world, Casari claims, they also contributed to the modeling and self-representation of identities across the Persianate sphere.[7] Thus emboldened in our inquiry, we ask: What can the Persian tradition teach us about narrative, its powers, and its ways? The contributors came together to address aspects of this question, in a variety of approaches that reflect as much the breadth of the corpus as the diversity of their expertise.

That Persian narrative can hardly be addressed as a consistent object of inquiry is evident from its dizzying scope. In literature alone, narrative spans the full array of genres in verse and prose, from the earlier forms of the romance and the written recensions of oral storytelling to the modern novel and short stories. Impervious to the categories of the veracious and fictitious, moreover, its strategies converge across the types of accounts Beyhaqi so strenuously worked to tell apart: from epic legends and fantastic fables to authenticated memoirs, chronicles, and travelogues, narrative schemes and techniques are for the most part common.[8] In this regard, twentieth-century narratology established what had long been suspected: different types of narratives share most of their tropes, modules, and motifs, in addition to following similar procedures in the sequencing of events.[9] Even lyric poems are not altogether immune to narrative, though it seldom appears in a poem in fully expanded form. Instead, as Dominic Brookshaw has shown for Hāfez in his recent monograph,[10] narrative in the lyric is often handled by the figure of *talmih* (allusion), through evocations of personal and place names reminiscent of well-known stories: tiny narrative kernels lined-up like the pebbles of Hop-o'-My-Thumb to drive the audience––and its cultural memory––home.

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[3] The earliest manuscript of accounts associated in the tradition with "Pseudo-Callisthenes" is dated to the fourth century C.E. See Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*. An earlier Greek version of the story is already attested in the *Physiologus*, a didactic Christian work of natural history compiled in Alexandria in the second century C.E. Contemporary or later variants are found across the global Middle Ages, in Hebrew, in the Babylonian Talmud; in bestiaries and legends in the European vernaculars; in Arabic literature, and beyond. For an overview of the development of the Persian versions of the Alexander story, see for instance Casari, "The Alexander Legend in Persian Literature," 378–542.

[4] See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist*, vol. 2, chap. 8, part 1.

[5] See Rubanovich, "Literary Canon and Patterns of Evaluation in Persian Prose." See also, Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature."

[6] Casari, Šēš ṭaraf-e donyā "Les six côtés du monde."

[7] On the endurance and refashioning of Persianate norms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Fani and Schwartz, "Persianate Pasts; National Presents."

[8] See Fragner, "Considerations on Literary Aspects of Persian Historiography."

[9] Coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, the discipline claimed earlier figures like Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin as forerunners. It coalesced mainly in the 1970s and 80s in the French structuralist milieu, with Gérard Genette, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov among its prominent representatives.

[10] See Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*, 155–200.

The boundaries of narrative are no less apparent for being expandable: after Benveniste's seminal *Problems in General Linguistics*, "narration" is clearly defined in distinctive opposition to "discourse."[11] The latter is understood in its broadest sense as "every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way."[12] Discourse is anchored in the present tense of the person who speaks, and on the relationship between an "I" and a "you." Typically concerned with "past events," by contrast, "(historical) narration" is, strictly speaking, "the mode of utterance that excludes every 'autobiographical' linguistic form," the scholar explains. Thus, "in a historical narrative strictly followed," "we shall find only the forms of the 'third person'."[13] "No one speaks here," Benveniste adds; "the events seem to narrate themselves," as though "outside the person of a narrator."[14] The opposition between discourse and narrative plays out on two planes at once: the correlation of verbal tenses and the choice of pronouns. Narration focuses on the event, while discourse focuses on the speaker. As is evident from experience, however, the demarcation between the two "modes of utterance" is hardly ever so rigid in actual narrative texts. Few texts rely on either discourse or narrative alone. Storytelling typically relies on a back-and-forth between sequences of reported events and authorial interventions whereby the narrator makes direct contact with the audience. In fact, the proper space of literature may well identify with the extent to which the two modes of utterance intersect and overlap.[15] Key to the formal analysis and stylistic interpretation of narrative effects, the heuristic distinction between "discourse" and "narrative" remains, for this reason, the major premise underlying the literary approach to narrative texts.[16]

With such a broad and expansive corpus, however, it comes as little surprise that methodological commonalities in the study of Persian narrative are seldom foregrounded. As illustrated in the contributions below, conclusive comparisons benefit from the practice of close study within the meaningful scope of a single motif, tight chronological framework, or well-identified genres. Yet, some of the most powerful scholarly insights arise from a cross-fertilization of fields. Beyond the borders of literary studies, to which the bulk of the critical discourse remains indebted, no serious discussion of modern narrative strategies can overlook the conversations developed in the fields of visual and media studies, for instance, or the performing arts. The analysis of Shia devotional narratives would not be complete without proper attention to the ritual dimension of ceremonies. Likewise, recent breakthroughs in the understanding of "popular" narrative prose are largely indebted to folklore and performance studies. By bringing into dialogue interventions on such diverse materials as premodern narrative verse, theater and performance, the modern novel, and cinema, we hope to shed light not only on shared strategies and techniques in Persian narrative across time and media, but also on some of the methodologies developed in conversation across our fields. Foremost in our approach is the endeavor to identify and reconstruct, for each singular work under study, its own narrative agenda, working, so to speak, from the bottom-up, based on close-reading and renewed critical attention to contextual information. In so doing, these essays tease out narrative patterns yet unseen. Thus, classic plots may give rise to competing narratives where they are least expected, and a blurred dialogue may be key to the narrative coherence of a film. In addition, attention to the subtle dynamics of role exchange among writers and readers, performers and audience, addresser

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[11] Benveniste, "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," 237–250; Meek, "The Correlations of Tense in the French Verb," 205–215.

[12] Meek, "The Correlations of Tense in the French Verb," 209.

[13] Ibid., 206–207.

[14] Ibid., 208.

[15] Among the typical combinations of the two modes of utterance are the use of the "historical present" (or "narrative present") and indirect speech (in Persian, the default form of reported speech). While the first is hardly ever touched upon in his writings, Benveniste discusses to some extent the implications of indirect speech. See also Arrivé, "Histoire, discours : retour sur quelques difficultés de lecture."

[16] Some of the most sophisticated discussions are found in Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*.

and addressee, allows several contributions to question the very status of the authorial voice, highlighting new issues of power and agency in the production and appropriation of narratives as such.

This project was, in large part, prompted by the impressive renewal of scholarship on Persian narrative in recent years. Akin to the paradigm shift in the study of Persian lyric poetry initiated in the late 1990s by such landmark studies as Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry* and Losensky's *Welcoming Fighani*, studies in Persian narrative have made major forays across a variety of fields and perspectives.[17] Recent advances in the arena of popular prose narrative have brought to the fore a long-overlooked tradition and a reconsideration of the relationship between high-classical and popular literature, with particular attention to the Alexandrian lore.[18] Theater studies have joined forces with history and folklore studies to propose a novel, fine-grained understanding of the development of Iranian dramatic performance and its role in the early shaping of modernist ideas. Moving away from the long dominant paradigm of aesthetic modernization, on the other hand, studies in modern and contemporary fiction have paired with gender, diaspora, or sensory studies to offer a fresh lens through which to read the process of meaning-production in prose works, while also envisaging the specific contribution of women writers and diaspora authors.[19] In film and media studies, attention has shifted away from the identification of movements and influences to foreground the special interplay of visual elements of "narrative" and "discourse" behind the camera, allowing for new aesthetic and political interpretations to emerge. At the same time, historians of art and architecture have opened new perspectives on the narrative impetus underlying premodern manuscript illutrations, or mural paintings in the contemporary cityscape. Such studies significantly transform the way we think about old and new forms of narration in the Persianate world. Without casting away trusted methodologies, they also disturb and displace the classic analytic and interpretive frameworks inherited from the West, instead centering Persian productions and their context at the core of the inquiry.

Our initial conversations gave rise to an international conference on the "Modalities and challenges of the narrative in the Persianate world," held June 27–28, 2019, at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris. This conference, like the present volume, was held in memory of our colleague, Marina Gaillard (1955–2015), whose work on premodern prose narrative has consistently inspired and guided our intellectual and methodological endeavor. By coining the "semi-popular romance," defined as a specific interweaving of high-classical references and popular literature intended for performance, Marina Gaillard also lifted a long-standing barrier internal to Persian literary studies, opening new horizons in the study of Persian narrative. As a header to this cluster is her posthumous contribution titled "Alexander the Great or Būrān-Dukht: who is the true hero of the *Dārāb-nāma* of Ṭarsūsī?" which was entirely revised and edited by Anna Livia Beelaert.

The two following articles forefront narrative strategies developed outside literature proper, making apparent the fluidity of staging and framing techniques across the fields of traditional storytelling, performance, and cinematic practice. In "Soft Epiphanies: The Multilayered Narratives in Abbas Kiarostami's Film *Close-Up* (1990)," Agnès Devictor and Amélie Neuve-Eglise examine the complex aesthetic effects created by the purposeful combination of staging, editing, and cinematic citation in a classic work by Kiarostami. They demonstrate how a veritable layering of meanings ensues from the blurring of conventional markers of linear narrative, to the point of casting doubt in the viewer about the truthful or fictional status of what is seen. In their article titled "From narrative to performance, from

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[17] Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*; Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani*.

[18] Discussed at the "Modalities and challenges of the narrative in the Persianate world" conference by Julia Rubanovich. See Rubanovich, "Telling a Different Story: Redeployment of the Narrative Alexander Tradition in a Medieval Persian *Dāstān*."

[19] Discussed at the "Modalities and challenges of the narrative in the Persianate world" conference by Christoph Werner and Julie Duvigneau. See Werner, "Intertextuality and Subversion: Nezāmi in Modern Persian Literature."

ritual to performance: *Taʿzieh* in Iran today," Christian Biet and Yassaman Khajehi explore in turn the fundamental "oscillation" at the core of *taʿzieh* performance. They show that the viewer's divided consciousness, held in unresolved suspension between adherence and playful disbelief, is inseparable from the collective experience of the performance itself. Based on a video installation by Kiarostami, they further establish that this oscillation is integral to the ritual's communal success in its modern instances: despite an appearance of continuity, the staging and viewing both rely on a series of interruptions.

As is clear from the next two articles, similar continuities and discontinuities also pervade the literary narrative, as much in composition as in effect. At times, however, these are found where one might least expect them. As storytellers know well, a good story is one that lends itself to countless telling and retelling. Much like the modular structure witnessed in popular prose, many instances of romance in verse are also conspicuous rewritings of older legends. In such cases, what the author decides to leave aside is as significant as what they retain. In "What is at Stake in the Frame Story: A Timurid Reshaping of the Romance of Bahrām Gūr," Marc Toutant addresses the heritage of a stifling giant: Nezāmi. Rewriting the *Haft Peykar* in Chaghatay Turkish at the Timurid court, however, Mīr ʿAlī Shīr Navāʾī offers as much a Naqshbandi Sufi rebuke as a literary homage to the master of Ganja. In this case, the work on the frame story in this complex assemblage of nested narratives is key to understanding the new romance. Taking up the issue from the perspective of prosody, Gabrielle van den Berg examines the case of "Early Persian verse romances in *mutaqārib*." Typically associated with epic content, or an avowed tribute to the *Shāhnāmeh*, the "heroic" meter reveals a far more versatile profile. Based on early instances of romantic and didactic *masnavi*s in *mutaqārib*, including one *Yusof-o Zoleykhā* attributed to Ferdowsi himself, she probes the relationship between meter and content. In the process, she lays bare a tendency within the narrative tradition itself to continuously rewrite its own story.

Partaking in a dialogue developed beyond the borders of strict disciplinary fields, the contributions in this cluster open new pathways for reading and critically understanding the narrative processes at work not only in textual form, but across major mediums of expression in the Persian context. From the delineation of narrative agendas and the identification of structural patterns to the reframing of authorial dynamics in the production of narrative as such, these intermedial conversations, possible insofar as they rely on a common cultural heritage and tradition, allow for new approaches to emerge. As such, they lay the groundwork for new ways to read, see, and interact with narrative productions integral to the self-fashioning of the Persianate sphere.

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