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Poetry and power: the appreciation of the verse in Seljuq and Ilkhanid chronicles : the case of Rāḥat al-Şudūr and Jāmi‘ al-Tavārīkh

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4. Conclusion

Empires may not always originate from a strong ideology, but in order for them to last, they are in need of an ideology. It is how they present themselves to their opponents, their allies, their subjects, and overall, to the world. It is a stage for their performance as well as fuel to their machines. Such were the Seljuqs and the Mongols who made use of whatever they had, from their past to their present, to create their world-encompassing ideologies. Bureaucrats, historians, and poets were mediators who could form, articulate, and spread their words.⁶⁴²

Since the Islamic conquest and the emergence of books written in the Persian language using the Arabic script, known as ‘New Persian’, authors have made use of what they consider to be ‘wise words,’ be it in Arabic or Persian, to intensify the effect of their message.⁶⁴³ They included Qur’anic verses, didactic anecdotes, and poetry. It is the latter that this study aimed to investigate in historical works of *RŞ* and *JT*. Situated during the Seljuq and Mongol eras, *RŞ* and *JT* are two perfect instances of applying poetry, not only as flowery ornamentation of the texts, but also as a tool to establish and spread ideology.

RŞ’ contribution to the Seljuqs’ imperial ideology and legitimacy takes place in various forms. *RŞ* was written in a time when the Seljuq family no longer had power in Iran, but a branch of them still ruled over Anatolia. Therefore, it was composed both to immortalise the Seljuqs and their history, and to legitimise the Anatolian branch. Rāvandī’s own ambition to gain a position at Sultan Kaykhusraw I’s court also played an important role in the book’s production, structure, and writing style.

Rāvandī’s ample usage of rhetorical figures, such as *saj’*, *ḥall*, *‘aqd*, and *tarjuma*, especially in the introduction dedicated to his patron, is a demonstration of his literary skills, his wisdom, and his knowledge as well as an attempt to flatter Sultan Kaykhusraw I. In his carefully written introduction, Rāvandī makes sure that his patron will learn of the author’s education, his family connections to the Seljuq court, and his loyalty to his previous benefactors. It is also in the introduction that he reveals his scheme to include a poem at the end of every chapter to praise Sultan Kaykhusraw I. In other words, while the history of the Seljuqs is narrated, it all comes back again to Sultan Kaykhusraw I, the only true heir in the Seljuq family, according to Rāvandī’s point of view. On a few occasions at the end of the chapters, Rāvandī explicitly indicates the sultan’s equality to the Great Seljuq Sultans, when

⁶⁴² In the case of the Ilkhanids, Reuven Amitai suggests that it was primarily the Iranian bureaucrats who added the Iranian layer of ideology to the Mongol’s view of the world. See: Reuven Amitai, “Political Legitimation in the Ilkhanate: More Thoughts on the Mongol Imperial Ideology, the Introduction of Muslim Justifications, and the Revival of Iranian Ideals,” in *New Approaches to Ilkhanid History*, ed. Timothy May et al (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 235.

⁶⁴³ Jennifer London argues that when authors include a wise man’s words, *ḥikma*, in their works, they implicitly reproduce the original context in which the wise words were indicated. See: Jennifer London, “Speaking Through the Voice of Another: Forms of Political Thought and Action in Medieval Islamic Context” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009), 139.

he includes panegyric poems composed for other rulers of the Seljuq dynasty, rather than making use of his own.

By creating an analogy between the heavenly bodies and the court of Sultan Kaykhusraw I, Rāvandī seeks to assure his readers of the divine mandate bestowed upon his patron and by extent, to all Seljuq rulers. In this image, the author makes use of the pre-existing motifs of the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. These heavenly bodies had long been in use in Persian literature along with their associations with certain attributes, most notably in Niẓāmī's *Haft Paykar*. Rāvandī applied these motifs in an innovative way in order to establish the Seljuqs' pre-destined supremacy. As was believed in the 13th century, people's destinies and fortune were engraved in the sky. It is based on this belief that Rāvandī's poetical image of court is depicted in *RŞ*.

Haft Paykar was not the only one of Niẓāmī's works that attracted Rāvandī's attention. As is evident from the great amount of Niẓāmī's verses included in *RŞ*, Rāvandī invests deeply in the great poet's compositions. Most notably here is *Khusraw va Shīrīn*, a romantic *maṣnavī*, centring around the love story of the Sasanian king, Khusraw II, and his Armenian beloved, Shīrīn. Julie Meisami suggests that in *Khusraw va Shīrīn*, Niẓāmī intends to picture the relationship between love and justice, in the way that the qualities and abilities of a good lover demonstrates his fitness for kingship.⁶⁴⁴ As the book shows, Khusraw II is by no means a devoted lover throughout the ups and downs of the story.

Contrary to this, Rāvandī's viewpoint on this story is quite different. In his view, Khusraw II is a model of a just and wise king. He refers positively to his personality in both poetry and prose throughout the book. It is not merely his kingly attributions that interests Rāvandī, but also the similarity between the name of his patron, Kaykhusraw I, and the Sasanian king, Khusraw I. In connecting the story of *Khusraw va Shīrīn* to the history of the Seljuqs, the author modifies several verses to accommodate the new historical context while simultaneously invoking the original context of the verse.⁶⁴⁵

Rāvandī's relationship with the *Shāhnāma* varies significantly compared to that of his predecessors. As Nasrin Askari shows, the *Shāhnāma* was perceived as a work of mirror for princes during the medieval era.⁶⁴⁶ Many sources included a couple verses of the *Shāhnāma* as a poetic proof for subject they were tackling. This poetic proof would have increased their credibility while strengthening their arguments; especially as it was composed by a wise figure such as Firdawsī. Rāvandī not only makes use of *Shāhnāma* verses in the latter way, but also, he writes his own verses in the style of the *Shāhnāma* and even blends them into Firdawsī's verses at times.

⁶⁴⁴ Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 182-183.

⁶⁴⁵ Example of this were discussed in chapter two.

⁶⁴⁶ Askari, *The Medieval Reception of the Shāhnāma*, 6.

Although Rāvandī is not the first to compose verses in the style of the *Shāhnāma* during the Seljuq era, he was certainly the first poet who wrote an abundant number of verses in such a way.⁶⁴⁷ Moreover, unlike many of his predecessors, Rāvandī did not choose Firdawsī's verses from the *Ikhtiyārat*, rather he selected them carefully with regard to their contexts. As was seen in chapter two, in many cases, the original contexts matched the stories about the history of the Seljuqs as well. In this way, Rāvandī implicitly linked the Seljuqs to the ancient Iranian kings of the *Shāhnāma*. The choice of the *mutaqārib* meter, which is mostly associated to epic poetry, could only benefit the author in his heroic depiction of the Seljuqs.

As opposed to *RŞ* which was first written and then dedicated to Sultan Kaykhusraw I hoping for his patronage, *JT* was written according to the order of Ghazan Khan and thus enjoyed patronage from its inception. Despite their differences, *JT*'s verses also made a remarkable contribution to the Ilkhanids' imperial ideology. *JT* is a world history which on its own reflects the global worldview of the Mongols, but even before Öljeitü's order for the second volume, *TMG*'s structure speaks to its globality. As the Mongols' conquests were narrated in *TMG*, so were the events of their neighbouring regions as well as, to some degree, the history of the conquered areas. The composition of the second volume only verified this worldview further.

The idea of *farrah/farr* also appears in both volumes of *JT*, though more explicitly for Ghazan and Öljeitü in *TMG*. Appealing to the mythical Pīshdādīd king, Jamshīd, to praise the Ilkhanid sultans could be seen as the first step in *TMG*'s verses to connect the Ilkhanids to the Iranian ancient past; especially considering that those verses may have been composed by Rashīd al-Dīn himself. As was investigated in chapter three, the idea of fortune recurs several times with the connection to the *Shāhnāma* and ancient Iranian kings and heroes. In these occasions, the events of the original context (i.e. the *Shāhnāma*) fit closely to those happening in *TMG*. This is the same method of context alteration seen earlier in *RŞ* as well.

The connection with the *Shāhnāma* only intensifies as we get further in the history of the Mongols in *TMG*. Firdawsī's verses aside, it is pseudo-Firdawsī's verses that make a substantial appearance in the stories of the Ilkhanids. Apart from their similarity to the *Shāhnāma* which already draws a connection between the Ilkhanids and *Shāhnāma* figures, it is their epic nature that contributes to the creation of a heroic depiction of the Mongols. Many of the pseudo-Firdawsī verses possess literary qualities, including their wording and their rhetorical figures, which give them an epic ambiance, thus making the Ilkhanids correspondingly epic.

Rashīd al-Dīn made sure that his works were reproduced periodically, demonstrating impressive foresight on his part and viewing *JT* as an on-going project. As Stefan Kamola suggests, Rashīd al-Dīn made some alterations to several stories during his lifetime. However, the major change seems to have occurred in the court of the Timurids when Ḥāfiẓ Abrū

⁶⁴⁷ For instance, see: Kirmānī, *'Iqd al-'Ulā lil-Mawqif al-A'lā*, 104.

inserted his own composition, *Majma'*, into the second volume of *JT* along with an enormous amount of poetry. There is no doubt that *JT* was intriguing for the Timurids, as it was an important work of Mongol historiography with regard to its ideological aspect and its capacity for legitimation as can be deduced from the Timurids' interest in reproducing *JT* in their workshops. However, it is the nature of the newly inserted verses by Ḥāfiẓ Abrū that is most interesting. He follows in Rashīd al-Dīn's footsteps to make use of epic poetry's potential for legitimacy by choosing to add verses from Firdawsī and Sharaf al-Dīn Qazvīnī's work on the history of ancient Iran. However, it was not only Rashīd al-Dīn's treatment of the *Shāhnāma* that drew Ḥāfiẓ Abrū's attention to Firdawsī. As we saw earlier in case of *RŞ*, the *Shāhnāma* proved beneficial for various dynasties—for the Seljuqs as much as the Ilkhanids and Timurids—by offering a model of just kingship and portraying them as the continuation of Iranian rulers.

The writing styles that Rashīd al-Dīn and Rāvandī chose for their works, although being the product of their eras as well as influenced by their sources, are related to their aspirations. Rashīd al-Dīn already had a secure job at the court of the Ilkhans and the Ilkhans were entirely aware of his skills and abilities; while Sultan Khaykhusraw I did not know Rāvandī and Rāvandī had to make sure that by this one book, he could introduce himself well enough to gain a position at the sultan's court.⁶⁴⁸

The usage of Firdawsī verses, their rearrangement, and modification as well as the composition of pseudo-Firdawsī verses is the major connection between *RŞ* and *JT*. *Shāhnāma* verses had been long in use, especially for their didactic value, before *RŞ* and *JT*. However, it is in *RŞ* for the first time that we see how they are modified and rearranged with Rāvandī's own pseudo-Firdawsī verses. Subsequently, Sharaf al-Dīn's work, *al-Mu'jam fī Āṣār al-Mulūk al-'Ajam*, rewrote the story of ancient Iran until the reign of Khusraw I in the style of the *Shāhnāma* during the reign of Abaqa. Due to *al-Mu'jam*'s subject, it was a logical choice for Sharaf al-Dīn Qazvīnī to compose the verses in the *mutaqārib* meter, but he was not the only with an interest in following Firdawsī's path. Before him, Juvainī had made use of Firdawsī's verses with special emphasis on the stories of Rustam and Suhrāb and Rustam and Isfandiyār and drew analogies between the Mongols and heroes of the *Shāhnāma*. Later, Vaṣṣāf included *Shāhnāma* verses in his history as well, composing his own pseudo-Firdawsī verses for the same purpose.⁶⁴⁹ As we saw in the last section of this study, this practice continued to thrive in Timurid historiography, no doubt due to its profound impact in spreading ideology and fixating legitimacy. The extent of this is, however, beyond the scope of this study and requires a separate investigation in Timurid historiography and poetry.

⁶⁴⁸ It is the same case for Vaṣṣāf. He was not ordered by Ghazan Khan to write a history, but he dedicated his work to the Ilkhans. His literary skills could have provided a higher chance of getting acceptance, compared to his peers.

⁶⁴⁹ For more on Juvainī's and Vaṣṣāf's treatment of the *Shāhnāma*, see: Sara Mirahmadi, "Legitimising the Khan," 229-232.