Book Review

Abolfazl Khatibi, *Āyā Firdawsī Maḥmūd-i Ghaznavī rā hajv guft? Hajv'nāmah-i mansūb bih Firdawsī: Bar'rasī-yi taḥlīlī, taṣḥīḥ-i intiqādī, va sharḥ-i bayt'hā* [*Did Ferdowsi Satirize Mahmud of Ghazni? The Satire Attributed to Ferdowsi: Analysis, Textual Criticism, and Commentary*] (Tehran: Pardīs-i Dānish, 2016), 226 pages. ISBN: 9786003000568, Price: $23.95 (Paperback).

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In the year 400/1010, after more than three decades of toil, the poet Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī completed the second, and probably final, redaction of his *Shāhnāmah*.[1] The work was begun around 366/976–7, when the Samanid dynasty was still nominally in power, but after 388/998 a new empire, based in Ghaznah, came to control much of Iran and Central Asia (and beyond). The Ghaznavid ruler at this time of expansion was Maḥmūd ibn Sebüktegin (r. 388–421/998–1030), and he apparently became the new dedicatee of the *Shāhnāmah* by default. As Firdawsī revised and expanded his epic, he added a number of passages in praise of Maḥmūd. This much is clear. But the question of what, if anything, took place between the poet and his assumed patron after the completion of the work has been one of the longest-running controversies in Persian literary history.

According to popular narratives that can be traced back at least as far as the mid-twelfth century CE, Firdawsī traveled to Ghaznah to present the *Shāhnāmah* to Maḥmūd, with the understanding that there would be a generous monetary reward. Unfortunately, as the story goes in its oldest documented version, there were certain individuals at the Ghaznavid court who disliked Firdawsī, and they spoke to Maḥmūd, a staunch orthodox Sunni, about the poet's Shiʿi (*rāfiżī*) leanings and allegedly Muʿtazilī theological views. As a result of this defamation, Maḥmūd decided to grant Firdawsī twenty thousand silver *dirham*s—a paltry sum for a masterpiece of fifty thousand lines. Firdawsī was so offended that he went straight to the public bath, bought a beer, and gave away all of the money. He then fled Ghaznah for

1. Romanization of Persian and Arabic words in this review follows the Library of Congress standard, with some exceptions for proper names (including Abolfazl Khatibi). Historical dates are generally given according to both the Islamic (AH) and Julian (CE) calendars. Please note that the English translation of the book title provided above is taken from the back cover.

the northwest, eventually seeking refuge at the court of the Bāvand dynasty in Ṭabaristān. Once there, the poet composed a verse satire (*hajv*, *hijā'*, or *hajv'nāmah*) against Maḥmūd, in which he lambasted the king for his lack of appreciation for a work as grand as the *Shāhnāmah*. The Bāvandid ruler, who was himself a vassal of the Ghaznavids, managed to defuse the situation by paying Firdawsī for the *hajv'nāmah* and then expunging it. Only a few lines, we are told, survived in popular memory. Some time later, Maḥmūd realized that he had done wrong by Firdawsī, and he sent a caravan bearing a new, much larger gift. The poet died shortly before its arrival.

This is a remarkable tale, and again, it has a long history. The earliest surviving account of Firdawsī's interaction with Maḥmūd (*i.e.*, the one just summarized) is given in the *Chahār maqālah* of Niẓāmī ʿArūżī, a prose work written around 551/1156 under Ghurid patronage.[2] Niẓāmī claims to have received some of his information from the locals of Nīshāpūr, near Firdawsī's home city of Ṭūs, during a visit in 514/1120–21. In a further indication of the currency of this story from a relatively early date, both Niẓāmī Ganjavī (d. *ca.* 605/1209) and Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 618/1221) refer to Maḥmūd's mistreatment of Firdawsī at several points in their own narrative poems. Finally, and most importantly, many manuscripts of the *Shāhnāmah* contain some version of the *hajv'nāmah*, included either as part of an introduction to the work, or at the end as a kind of epilogue. This is where the problems begin; and the problems are numerous and confounding.

Our oldest extant copies of the *Shāhnāmah* date to the seventh/thirteenth century, meaning that the deepest layer of textual criticism is separated from the authorship of the work by two hundred years.[3] Whether or not Firdawsī ever visited Ghaznah, there was ample time for stories involving him and Maḥmūd to be told and retold—as indeed seems to have happened—with the original truth of the matter being difficult to recover. The text of the purported *hajv'nāmah* consists of just thirty or forty lines of poetry in some early *Shāhnāmah* manuscripts, while it runs to nearly one hundred and fifty lines in certain later codices. Throughout this range, the variations between one copy and the next are often extensive. It is also difficult to reconcile these presentations with the account of Niẓāmī ʿArūżī, who, writing in the 1150s, quoted what he claimed were the only six surviving lines of Firdawsī's diatribe against Maḥmūd. How are we to explain the dramatic growth of this poem, except as the result of a creative scribal tradition which, over the same period, increased the *Shāhnāmah*'s total size by roughly twenty percent? Looking closely at *any* recension of the *hajv'nāmah*

2. See Edward G. Browne, *Revised Translation of the "Chahár Maqála" ("Four Discourses") of Niẓámí-i-ʿArúḍí of Samarqand* (Cambridge, 1921), 54–9.

3. There may be a few exceptions to this statement, depending on how one views the earliest works that quote lines from Firdawsī, such as the anonymous chronicle *Mujmal al-tavārīkh va al-qiṣaṣ* (begun in 520/1126), and indeed the *Chahār maqālah*. It is worth noting, however, that these texts have also survived in significantly later manuscripts. While external sources that discuss Firdawsī and transmit segments of his work are clearly important, and provide some insight into the early textual history of the *Shāhnāmah*, the fact remains that we have nothing copied before the seventh/thirteenth century.

only reveals further problems. Some lines appear to have been duplicated from the body of the *Shāhnāmah*. Others are stylistically inferior, their meaning difficult to parse. Still other lines have metrical faults, or employ Arabic loanwords that occur nowhere else in Firdawsī's œuvre. (The Persian epic is famous for its small share of Arabic-derived vocabulary.)

Faced with such an array of historical dilemmas and textual inconsistencies (only a few of which have been mentioned here), scholars of the *Shāhnāmah* grew increasingly skeptical about the legitimacy of the *hajv'nāmah* over the second half of the twentieth century.[4] This trend went hand-in-hand with the process of establishing critical editions of the epic—first in Moscow by E. E. Bertels' team, and later by Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh and his collaborators. In recent years, something approaching a consensus has developed among historians of Persian literature, that Firdawsī *may* have gone to Ghaznah; that there *may* have been some unpleasantness between him and Maḥmūd; and that other parts of the traditional narrative, including the composition of new verses against the ruler, *could* reflect actual events; but that we lack the necessary source material to substantiate these conjectures. More to the point, the highly problematic nature of the *hajv'nāmah* as it occurs in different manuscripts makes it difficult to imagine that any version of the poem could be labeled an authentic work of Firdawsī. And so it was set aside. The careful methods that were used to produce scholarly editions of the *Shāhnāmah* itself were never applied to the *hajv'nāmah*.

It is here that an important new monograph by Abolfazl Khatibi enters the conversation. For the first time, a researcher has collected a large number of copies of the *hajv'nāmah*—with a focus on earlier manuscripts, including those that form the basis of the Khaleghi-Motlagh edition—and studied them in depth to see what fresh insight can be gained. The short title of the book is *Āyā Firdawsī Maḥmūd-i Ghaznavī rā hajv guft?* or, in the translation provided on the back cover, *Did Ferdowsi Satirize Mahmud of Ghazni?* In reality, only the first chapter (of four) is directly concerned with answering this question. Khatibi begins by explaining the problem of the *hajv'nāmah*, after which he offers a concise but comprehensive review of prior scholarship. He then addresses the matter of the poem's status at some length (pp. 28–70). The conclusion that Khatibi reaches is in line with the suspicions of many *Shāhnāmah* scholars; namely, that whatever may have transpired between Firdawsī and Maḥmūd, we have no sound basis on which to claim the authenticity of the *hajv'nāmah*, whether by accepting one of the versions found in manuscripts, or by trying to separate some "original" core of the text from the accretions of the scribal tradition. Going perhaps a step further, Khatibi casts doubt on the idea that there was ever a unified, substantial poem in which Firdawsī denounced Maḥmūd. Some of the early sources, such as the (Arabic) *Āthār al-bilād* of Zakarīyā ibn Muḥammad Qazvīnī (d. 682/1283), give the impression that Firdawsī composed *a few lines* out of frustration at the ruler's failure to reward him as he deserved. If this were true, then

4. Several references on this topic are given by Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh in two entries in *Encyclopædia Iranica*: "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem i. Life," and "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem ii. Hajw-nāma." Earlier studies by Muḥammad Amīn Riyāḥī and Maḥmūd Khān Shīrānī are of particular importance.

it probably would not make sense to refer to a *hajv'nāmah* in the first place.

While Khatibi's verdict may not come as a surprise to specialists, he is obviously able to discuss the subject with greater authority than earlier commentators, since he has assembled all of the relevant sources. In critiquing the legitimacy of the *hajv'nāmah*, Khatibi emphasizes problems that he organizes into six categories. First, there is a relatively large number of Arabic words in the *hajv'nāmah*, as compared to the remainder of the *Shāhnāmah*. This is most striking in the later, larger versions of the poem; but even in the six lines provided by Niẓāmī ʿArūżī, there are three loanwords—*ghamz*, *ḥikāyat*, and *ḥimāyat*—that cannot be found anywhere else in the work of Firdawsī. Second, Khatibi observes a lack of "organic connections" (*payvand'hā-yi andām'vār*) among the verses of the *hajv'nāmah*. In his view, the text reads more like a patchwork of individual lines drawn from various places. Third, on another point of style, Khatibi is critical of the empty verbosity (*iṭnāb*) of the *hajv'nāmah*, which is especially clear in the way that certain passages were expanded over time. Some of the later copies have added lines that are little more than lists of the kings whose stories are told by Firdawsī. Fourth—and here we come to an objectively severe problem—many lines in the *hajv'nāmah* appear to have been copied or adapted from elsewhere in the *Shāhnāmah*, and, in a few cases, from narrative poems by other authors. One of the oldest versions, found in the Cairo manuscript of 741/1340–41, includes a line taken from the *Būstān* (655/1257) of Saʿdī! Fifth, Khatibi points out that there are early Persian prose works, such as the *Rāḥat al-ṣudūr* (*ca.* 601/1204–5) of Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī Rāvandī, which transmit a substantial amount of Firdawsī's poetry; but they do not quote any lines unique to the *hajv'nāmah*. Sixth, and finally, there is the blatant (in Khatibi's estimation) technical and stylistic weakness (*nāʾustuvārī*) of much of the poem, particularly in later versions. It may be that not all of these arguments will be equally persuasive for all readers, but, taken together, they make it more difficult than ever to accept the authenticity of the *hajv'nāmah*. And they stand beside the badly disordered codicological situation, which is confronted in the next section of Khatibi's book.

The second chapter (pp. 71–86) provides a concise guide to the early manuscripts that contain the *hajv'nāmah* in one form or another, as well as an explanation of the approach taken by Khatibi in attempting to construct discrete recensions of the poem. He has made use of about twenty manuscripts of the *Shāhnāmah*, plus a few ancillary sources. (For example, there is a *jung*, or book of miscellany, which includes a *hajv'nāmah* of thirty-eight lines and may date to the first half of the eighth/fourteenth century.) In all, Khatibi lists twenty-six copies, of which sixteen are considered "primary" (*aṣlī*) for the recensions to which they belong, while the remainder are "secondary" (*farʿī*), used for corroboration and largely drawn from newer codices. It should be noted that all of the oldest surviving manuscripts of the *Shāhnāmah* have been considered, including those that were relied upon by Khaleghi-Motlagh and his colleagues. Not all of them contain a *hajv'nāmah*—the incomplete Florence manuscript of 614/1217, for instance, seems to have offered a more positive account of

Firdawsī's rapport with Maḥmūd—but Khatibi has incorporated all available resources, with the result that his work will pair nicely with the critical edition of the *Shāhnāmah*.

In the third chapter (pp. 87–120), Khatibi's constructed recensions of the *hajv'nāmah* are presented. There are four, in addition to the original six lines transmitted by Niẓāmī ʿArūżī, and they mostly proceed in both chronological order and increasing size. (The correlation between the date of a manuscript and the number of lines in its *hajv'nāmah* is unmistakable.) The first post-Niẓāmī recension is labeled 1a; it consists of forty-four lines and is drawn from the introductions of three manuscripts dating to the eighth/fourteenth century. Next is recension 1b, which is clearly related but larger, at seventy-nine lines; it is based primarily on introductory material from five manuscripts of the ninth and early tenth centuries AH. Recension 2 is quite different; it comprises just thirty-two lines, sharing little with 1a or 1b, and it is sourced from the *end* of six manuscripts dating between the eighth and tenth centuries. Finally, recension 3 is the longest, at 143 lines; it is based again on introductory sections, with four primary manuscripts from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries AH. The rough impression given by Khatibi's work is that one form of the *hajv'nāmah* evolved from the fragment quoted by Niẓāmī ʿArūżī (among other sources), growing progressively larger into recensions 1a and 1b as part of the prefatory material often added to the *Shāhnāmah*. A separate textual tradition may have given rise to recension 2, which is placed at the end of manuscripts and consists of mostly new lines. (None of it comes from Niẓāmī ʿArūżī.) Then, in later codices, the *hajv'nāmah* continued to grow, building upon all prior versions; and this is what Khatibi designates recension 3.

Of course, none of this is straightforward. As Khatibi acknowledges, it is unusual to find any two early manuscripts in which the *hajv'nāmah* has the same number of lines—let alone that the text be identical. The reader may be tempted to conclude that every copy represents a recension unto itself. Again, however, Khatibi discusses these problems openly. He is clear about his methods and his intent, and the resulting edition is a huge improvement over what was previously available. Most importantly, even if one were to take issue with the form of these composite recensions—and there is no need to treat them as authoritative—the variations among manuscripts are listed. Now we know which lines are found in which copies of the *hajv'nāmah*, as well as the broad arc of the poem's development over a few centuries.

The fourth chapter of the book (pp. 121–72) is devoted to commentary on individual lines (or groups of lines) from each recension. Potentially unfamiliar words are defined; attempts are made to parse ambiguous phrases; material that seems to have been taken from the body of the *Shāhnāmah* is traced back to its sources; *etc.* Khatibi also uses this chapter as a place to record additional lines that occur only in his "secondary" copies of the *hajv'nāmah*. (His stated goal is to document as much as possible from the manuscripts that he consulted.) Following these notes, the book ends with four shorter reference sections: a useful list of all of the lines in the *hajv'nāmah* and where to find each of them in the recensions (pp. 173–94);

photographs of some of the manuscripts (195–207); an index of proper names (208–15); and a bibliography (216–26).

There are questions about the *hajv'nāmah* that will probably continue to be debated. For example, how should we deal with lines that are strong, unique, and attested from an early date? Many copies of the poem begin with the following famous statement: "O Shah Maḥmūd, conqueror of lands / If you fear no man, then fear God!"[5] Should we refuse to attribute such a line to Firdawsī because it is part of a problematic whole? More broadly, it is worth wondering about the process whereby recent scholarly editions of Persian classics have either excised or modified passages that were widely known and beloved for ages in their previous, perhaps corrupted form. (Other examples include the introduction to the story of Rustam and Suhrāb in the *Shāhnāmah*, and the opening lines of the *Maśnavī* of Rūmī, d. 672/1273.) We might also ask what it means that popular narratives about the conflict between Firdawsī and Maḥmūd developed relatively soon after the poet's death. Niẓāmī ʿArūżī claims to have spoken about the issue with people in Nīshāpūr in 514/1120–21. The lore surrounding Firdawsī and his interactions with the Ghaznavid court therefore seems to predate, by a considerable margin, our earliest extant manuscripts of the *Shāhnāmah*. How much can we confidently reject? But these are difficult questions that may never be settled. For the time being, the work of Abolfazl Khatibi represents a major step forward in our understanding of the *hajv'nāmah*. He has, with his edition, carried out the one arduous task that was most needed. This book deserves a place on the shelf of anyone who cares about the textual history of the *Shāhnāmah*.

5. *Ayā Shāh Maḥmūd-i kishvar'gushāy / Zi-kas gar na-tarsī bi-tars az Khudāy*. See recensions 1a and 1b in Khatibi, pp. 88, 92. This line also occurs in recension 3, albeit not at the beginning; see p. 115.