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Marvellous histories: Reading the *Shāhnāmah* in India*

Pasha M. Khan

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This article considers the reception and genre of the Shāhnāmah *in India. It takes as its starting-point comments made by the poet Mirza Asad Allah Khan Ghalib in 1866, moving on to look at a Mughal* Shāhnāmah *adaptation, the* Tarikh-i dil-gusha-i Shamsher-Khani*, and its Urdu translations, as well as other Persian, Urdu and Arabic texts. It investigates the (mis)identification of the* Shāhnāmah's *genre, looking at cases in which it was understood as historiographical rather than as a romance, and seeking an explanation for this 'contamination' of the sincere genre of history by the mendacious romance genre. A methodological split in the historiographical corpus is proposed, between a rationalist (*'aqli*) and transmission-based (*naqli*) method. The contest between these two methods is considered, and the prevalence of transmission-based history and its similarity to romance is brought forward as a possible reason for the porousness of the border between these ostensibly opposing genres.*

Keywords*:* Urdu, Persian, literature, history, genre

This article will examine the border between two genres of writing or speech: the *tārīḫ* or history, and the *qiṣṣah* or *dāstān,* which I will refer to as the 'romance'.[1] I take it for granted that within any given culture and in any historical moment, genres

* Archival research for this article was possible thanks to a doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My transliteration scheme reflects classical and particularly Indo-Persian pronunciations in that, for instance, *majhūl* vowels are preserved—therefore classical "*dew*" for modern "*dīw*," and "*durogh*" in place of modern "*durūġh*" (nineteenth-century Orientalist philological works preserve these vowels; see Steingass' dictionary, for instance). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[1] I use the English word 'romance' to translate words such as *dāstān*, *qiṣṣah* and *ḥikāyat*, which, in spite of slightly different shades of meaning, share a common signification. These include works in verse as well as in prose. The translation of the genre as 'romance' originates in questionable assumptions that Indian *qiṣṣah*s and so on essentially belonged to the same 'romance' genre as *Gawain and the Green*

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exist in hierarchical relationships that reflect the ideologies of the societies in which their constituent texts are read or listened to. This idea, which has been elaborated elsewhere,[2] must be grasped in order to understand the role of the romance in the supposed degeneration of Islamicate historiography in the postclassical period.

The three authors of *Textures of Time* have documented the stance that was common among twentieth century Orientalists with regard to historiography in Arabic and Persian.[3] It was generally agreed that Arabic historiography got off to an admirable start with the rigorous hadith histories of the first few post-Islamic centuries. But as the ranks of the intelligentsia increasingly swelled with non-Arab, and particularly Persian, *mawālī*, and as Islamicate historiography began to be written in the New Persian language, it came under the malign influence of Persianate tastes and ideas, becoming superfluously ornate in its style and careless in its method. Furthermore—and this is the problem that we will consider in what follows—it increasingly became entangled with far-fetched legendary accounts. The new histories consisted of historical narratives illegitimately muddled with marvellous accounts that properly belonged to the poorly regarded romance genre. The adulteration of 'pure' history by elements of this lower genre was an indication of historiography's increasing bastardy.

This view as a whole was challenged effectively towards the end of the twentieth century by scholars such as Julie Meisami, on the basis of whose work the authors of *Textures of Time* also present a critique.[4] Meisami examines the rhetorical aspects of histories in Persian, showing at length how they served courtly functions.[5] The supposed irruption of romance-like marvels into chaste histories has been less carefully studied. It is necessary, then, to take up the question of the romance and how it was perceived in relation to history before the twentieth century. To begin to answer this question, we will take the case of the reception of the *Shāhnāmah* in India from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth. We will see from a mid-nineteenth century example that it was possible for the *Shāhnāmah* to be understood as history rather than—or in addition to—romance. A branch of the Indian history of this genre identification will be traced in order to demonstrate its solidification

Knight and the *Morte d'Arthur*. These assumptions must be done away with, but to properly dispel them and to truly repurpose the word 'romance' in a manner that is sensitive to the specificities of the texts known as *qiṣṣah*s, etc., will require a book chapter at least. What is important to understand, for the purposes of the paper, is that the romance was very often set up in opposition to the history as a narrative genre that did not scruple to tell lies and represent impossible things such as dragons, *jinn*s, and so on, in contrast to the ideally truth-telling genre of history.

[2] See for example Cohen, 'History and Genre' and Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.

[3] Narayana Rao et al., *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India*, pp. 214–15; see also Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century*, pp. 1–3. Both studies point to H.A.R. Gibb's representative comments on the contamination of Arabic historiography by Persian history-writing.

[4] Narayana Rao et al., *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India*, Ch. 5.

[5] Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century*.

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through repetition. It will be argued that what enabled this identification was a methodological split between rationalist and transmissionist historiography, the latter allowing for the accommodation of marvellous and apparently romantic elements, even as the former method rejected such a possibility.

Ghalib and the Simurgh

A convenient starting-point is provided by some remarks made upon the two genres by the celebrated Persian and Urdu poet Mirzā Asad Allāh Ḳhān Ġhālib of Delhi in the 1860s. That Ghalib had a deep fondness for romances is well attested. It may be illustrated by an interesting historical anecdote. On 4 April 1865, the elderly poet was reading the *Awadh Aḳhbār* newspaper, when he came across an advertisement for the newly printed romance *Paristān-i ḳhayāl,* written by his friend and student Sayyid Farzand Aḥmad Ṣafīr Bilgrāmī. According to the advertisement, the book had been published in two volumes by the Aẕīm al-maṭābi‘ press in Patna, and it was available for one rupee and 12 annas, plus postage. Ghalib, who was also familiar with a previous version of the romance, wrote immediately to the director of the press, Mīr Wilāyat ‘Alī, with an urgent order for two volumes. From his letter, it seems as though Ghalib was eager to get his hands on the book. He writes:

> I just found out about this today, and today I'm sending off this letter and the return postage. I ask you—indeed, I *urge* you—to act with similar promptness, and to send out the parcel on the very day that follows the arrival of my letter. In case of expedition, I am most grateful, and in case of delay, I make ready my complaint![6]

After he had sent this letter, Ghalib discovered that in his eagerness and haste, he had forgotten to send the return postage. The next day he sent, along with the postage, a letter of apology for the decline of his mind, which he blamed on his declining years: ‘I'm seventy years old, my memory is extinct, forgetfulness has overcome me![7]

The *Paristān-i ḳhayāl* was the first part of Safir Bilgrami's ultimately unfinished Urdu translation of Mīr Taqī Ḳhayāl's eighteenth-century Persian romance the *Bostān-i Ḳhayāl*—it was probably Khayal's original that Ghalib had read before.[8] Ghalib was well-acquainted with Safir, and he showed great respect to the young man, who belonged to an important Sufi family. Indeed, on the very day that he sent his initial order to Mir Wilayat ‘Ali, Ghalib also sent a letter of congratulation to Safir.[9] But there were many translations other than Safir's, and Ghalib was

[6] Ġhālib, *Ġhālib ke ḳhuṭūṭ*, p. 4: 1571.
[7] *Ibid*., *p.* 4: 1572.
[8] Ġhālib, ‘*Ūd-i Hindī*, 178.
[9] Ġhālib, *Ġhālib ke ḳhuṭūṭ*, pp. 4: 1580–81.

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certainly familiar with at least one other. In 1866, a year after the publication of Safir Bilgrami's volume, the Delhi-based press Akmal al-maṯābi' published the first volume of what would subsequently become the most famous Urdu *Bostān-i Ḵhayāl* (Garden of the Imagination), written by Ḵhwājah Badr al-Dīn Amān, who is referred to by Ghalib as his 'nephew' (*bhatījā*). (In reality Aman was the son of a horse-groom employed by Ghalib's father on a salary of five rupees per mensem.)[10] This first volume was entitled *Ḥadā'iq-i anẕār*, and it boasted a preface by Ghalib himself. Before we turn from Ghalib's enthusiasm for Safir to his preface in support of Aman, a caveat should perhaps be expressed regarding his display of zeal. Our reading of his enthusiasm for these two romances should be somewhat tempered by a recognition of the social purpose of such displays.[11] Safir's maternal grandfather Pīr Ṣāḥib-i 'Ālam of Marehra was a venerable elder whom Ghalib considered his spiritual preceptor,[12] while Amān was at least nominally a family member; thus in each case Ghalib had reason to maintain good relations with the *Bostān-i Ḵhayāl* translators. Nevertheless, we cannot reduce his show of eagerness for romances in general to his partly socially motivated raptures over these specific *Bostān-i Ḵhayāl* translations. Nor did social factors necessitate the defence that Ghalib undertook of the romance genre as a whole.

For Ghalib did use his preface to *Ḥadā'iq-i anẕār* to champion the genre, and wrong-footed its detractors with great eloquence. What concerns us here is his manner of mounting the genre's defence, which involves an example that must have appeared quite inexplicable to many twentieth-century readers. Ghalib takes the romance's alleged inferiority to history as his starting point, characterising each genre in the process:

> You may see in biographies and histories what happened hundreds of years before you. But in stories and romances, you may listen to what no one has ever seen or heard. Howsoever it may be that the wakeful brains of intellectual men will incline by temperament toward histories, nevertheless in their hearts they will attest to the tastefulness and delightfulness of romances and tales.[13]

The division between the two genres seems quite clear. Histories portray events that have occurred in the past. Romances, on the other hand, represent events that have always been non-observable because they have never occurred. There is no doubt that romances are lying tales (*jhūṭī kahāniyāṅ*), as Ghalib says himself later in the preface—and yet they are wonderful lies that please the aesthetic sense,

[10] Ġhālib, *Ġhālib ke ḵhuṭūṭ*, p. 4: 1669.

[11] This helpful caveat with regard to Khwajah Aman was expressed to me by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi in New York, in September 2010.

[12] Mushfiq Ḵhwājah, *Ġhālib aur Ṣafīr Bilgrāmī*, p. 69.

[13] Ġhālib, '*Ūd-i Hindī*, p. 449.

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arouse pleasure, and advise without being oppressively homiletic.[14] Ghalib reduces the history–romance hierarchy to a hierarchy of the faculties—the intellect favours history, while the heart prefers the romance, therefore the genre corresponding to the higher of the two faculties will be superior. As we will see, the intellect's supremacy in the system of the faculties was favoured by many, probably thanks to the wide influence of the Aristotelian model found in the *Kitāb al-nafs* (the Arabic translation of *On the Soul*).[15] And partisans of a certain type of history were also partisans of the intellect. Ghalib, however, chooses to privilege the heart. This is not an uncommon move, and it is likely to have been persuasive on account of its already being widely accepted.

What we see in Ghalib's preface is a genre system—in the form of a hierarchy—that is quite clearly marked. By inventing roots for this system in an analogous faculty system, Ghalib provides it with much sustenance and strength. Strength was needed, for this was a genre system that was contested; Ghalib's defence is no more or less than a response to a history of contestation in which the genre of historiography usually had the upper hand. Genres within any given system will be related to and differentiated from one another in a variety of modes that establish their identities. Certain pairs of genres are different yet non-conflictual, such as the romance and the ethical manual (*aḵhlāq*).[16] The relationship between the romance and the history genres, on the other hand, is on the face of it a relationship of 'opposition' between a genre to which mendacity (*kiẕb*) is central, and one in which sincerity (*ṣidq*) is paramount. Each gives the other its identity in a radical way, and their separate identities are thrown into relief in every expression of their conflict, no matter what genre happens to have the higher value under the particular circumstances. When Ghalib lifts the romance above the history, he does not alter the mode of their relation or the nature of their identities. He reverses the hierarchy without appearing to disturb the conflictual premise on which the genre division is based.

So it appears at first. But Ghalib soon seems to throw this straightforward genre division into question. He begins by decrying the injustice of assuming that histories do not contain impossibilities as well as romances. Impossible tales [*mumtana' al-wuqū' ḥikāyāt*] aren't narrated in histories?' he asks, 'You are unjust, it isn't so!'.[17] The word that Ghalib uses is more precise than the English word 'impossible'. Something that is *mumtana' al-wuqū'* is something whose 'occurrence' (*wuqū'*) is strictly barred (*mumtana'*). Recall that Ghalib has just described history as a genre that recounts that which has 'occurred' (*jo wāqi' hu'ā*), and it will become

[14] *Ibid*., p. 450.

[15] Ibn Rushd, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*.

[16] Therefore Tarif Khalidi is able to suggest that the genre of history in the Arabic language was inhabited by four modes, or what I would call genres, roughly in succession: *ḥadīṯh*, *adab, ḥikmat* and *siyāsah* (Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*).

[17] Ġhālib, '*Ūd-i Hindī*, p. 449.

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clear that if there is a history narrating events whose occurrence is impossible, this history is a traitor to its own genre.

One way to tiptoe around Ghalib's statement is to assume that the relation between romance and history being expressed is one of contained interiority. There are impossible tales within some histories, but they do not blight the particular histories in which they are embedded, nor do they taint the genre of history with their contrary identity. The history is a history in spite of the romantic passages that stand out like foreign excrescences upon its body. Ghalib's intentions cannot be gauged, nor is the discovery of his intentions our purpose, but the felicitous idea of the non-contamination of the history by the romance within it seems to be undermined by his use of this interiority to render 'justice' to the romance against the history by showing that if impossibility is in any way a defect, it is one that is shared between the two genres. If the romance is 'contained' within the history, then where shall we find the injustice that Ghalib points out? But if this is not so, if there is no such containment, where is the line between history and romance?

Another conundrum posed by the way in which Ghalib metes out justice is the choice of the text that he adduces as an example of a history containing impossible tales. This is the *Shāhnāmah*, the Persian *Book of Kings*, composed by Abū al-Qāsim Firdausī in the early-eleventh century CE, incorporating earlier material by the poet Daqīqī. In particular Ghalib writes about the *Shāhnāmah* hero Zāl and his son Rustam, recalling the episode in which Zal's father has his infant son cast away as an inauspicious freak, only to be discovered by the Sīmurġh, a marvellous bird possessed of occult powers. The Simurgh nurtures Zal until his father relents, and throughout his life Zal carries the feathers of the Simurgh, which he only has to burn in order to summon his avian foster parent. He does so when his son Rustam is wounded by the nearly impregnable warrior Isfandyār. The Simurgh appears, giving Rustam a special weapon with which to slay his foe. The tongue-in-cheek manner in which Ghalib recalls this romantic episode within the 'historical' *Shāhnāmah* is undeniable:

> When he despairs of Rustam's fight with Isfandyar, Zal calls out that name without a name, and the Simurgh comes directly upon hearing the sound of the trained pigeon's whistle. With a daub of its droppings, or some other medicine, it salves Rustam's wound. It gives him a double-shafted arrow, and bows out of the scene.[18]

Ghalib also refers to Rustam's more marvellous exploits, such as his battle with the demon Akwān Dew and his killing of an elephant at a tender age.[19] In spite of the hilarity with which he recounts these events, it later becomes clear that Ghalib

[18] Ghālib, *'Ūd-i Hindī*, p. 449.
[19] *Ibid*.

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understands the character of Rustam, if not his deeds, as historical.[20] We may well wonder whence such an idea may have come.

The *Shāhnāmah* as History in India

Once they have been accepted as normal, genre identifications tend to be resistant to alteration, although this may have been a shade less true of Ghalib's time than of the now ebbing age of physical bookstores and music stores, in which the bookseller cannot shelve a novel like *Robinson Crusoe* under 'Travel' without thereby making it more difficult to sell. In these terms, Ghalib appears to have mis-shelved the *Shāhnāmah* in the 'History' section. After all, today we are more apt to categorise the *Shāhnāmah* as a romance along with the *Bostān-i Ḳhayāl* and the *Dāstān-i Amīr Ḥamzah* (*Romance of Amīr Ḥamzah*). Indeed, the *Shāhnāmah* has commonly been seen as the forerunner of a certain subgenre of long romances including the two titles just mentioned, and as such it would seem right to identify the parent as belonging to the same genre as its children. Furthermore, works identifiable as romances were often orally performed in a certain style, often by professional storytellers acting in certain settings, such as the coffeehouse or the court.[21] The recitation of the *Shāhnāmah* is strongly associated with Iran, but professional *Shāhnāmah-ḳhwān*s were at work in India as well. To highlight an under-examined example, the storyteller Mullā Asad, a native of Shiraz who was patronised by the governor of Sindh in the seventeenth century, came from a family of Iranian *Shāhnāmah-ḳhwān*s, making it likely that the romance preserved by Firdausī was the staple of his repertoire.[22] Courtly storytellers were not the only reciters of the work. At the end of the next century (or the beginning of the eighteenth), there were, for example, individuals like Lālah Āsā Rām Sāth, who is mentioned by Mīr Taqī Mīr as having memorised Firdausi's great epic.[23]

This view of the *Shāhnāmah* as a romance or epic is now challenged mainly in academic circles, as when Julie Meisami insists that Firdausi wrote the *Shāhnāmah* primarily as a historical work, and uses this idea as a basis upon which to speak of a tension between Iranian and Islamic modes of historiography.[24] If Meisami is right about Firdausi, or at least about the impression that he gave to his readers, then Ghalib's seeming ineptitude in the science of genre identification could be forgiven, and the confusion might be traced to a historical shift in the *Shāhnāmah*'s

[20] See his assertion that romantic characters are based on historical characters such as Rustam (*Ibid*., p. 449).

[21] Ḳhayāl, *Bostān-i Ḳhayāl*, 9v.

[22] Both his father Maulānā Ḥaidar and his maternal uncle Fatḥī Beg are mentioned in the *Tārīḳh-i 'ālam-ārā-i 'Abbāsī* as courtly reciters of the Sh*āhnāmah* (Iskandar Beg Turkmān, *Tāriḳh-i 'ālam-ārā-i 'Abbāsī*, p. 1: 191). Taqī al-Dīn Auḥadī notes the kinship of the three storytellers (quoted in Faḳhr al-Zamānī Qazwīnī, *Tazkirah-i Maiḳhānah*, p. 599).

[23] Mīr, *Nikāt al-shu'arā'*, p. 77.

[24] Meisami, 'The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', p. 253.

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generic allegiance. One might speculate that it was widely considered to be a history in Ghalib's time but came to be regarded primarily as a romance by the twentieth century due to a shift in thinking. In reality it is unlikely that there was any historical moment in which the *Shāhnāmah* was not identifiable as a romance, but it is possible that for much of its existence it possessed a double identity, and that at times its historiographical identity was privileged.

Genre identifications are rarely new; for the most part they are based on precedent, adhering to the say-so of previous audiences. But would the idea that the *Shāhnāmah* was a historical work have been available to Ghalib from any source other than his own fecund imagination? It is true that many later dynastic histories in verse were modelled upon the *Shāhnāmah*. Sunil Sharma has written extensively on this tradition, and he presents the examples of Mustaufī's *Ẓafar-nāmah*, the *Shahanshāh-nāmah* of Aḥmad Tabrīzī, and Abū al-Malik 'Iṣāmī's *Futūḥ al-salāṭīn*, among others.[25] In addition, it is certainly the case that episodes from the *Shāhnāmah* are recounted in a large number of Persian and Arabic books describing themselves as histories. Ṯabarī's *Tārīḫ al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*), the *Tārīḫ-i Bal'amī*, and Mīr Ḵhwānd's *Rauẓaṭ al-ṣafā* (*Garden of Purity*) all contain a significant amount of *Shāhnāmah* material, and Ghalib is likely to have read Mir Khwand at least. On the same principle as that used to identify the *Shāhnāmah* as a romance because it was the progenitor of other romances, the use of *Shāhnāmah* materials in these histories would seem to retroactively mark the *Shāhnāmah* as a history itself. The trouble is that almost none of these histories make any mention of the marvellous episodes featuring the Simurgh and the Akwan Dew. Even the *Rauẓat al-ṣafā* omits the Simurgh, though it is otherwise replete with marvels. The outstanding exception to this rule is the Arabic *Ġhurar aḫbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyari-him* (*Choice Accounts and Lives of the Persian Kings*) by Tha'ālibī. Writing just after Ghalib's time, the Indian intellectual Shiblī Nu'mānī shows his familiarity with Tha'alibi, but whether or not Ghalib himself knew of Tha'alibi's work is a moot question. We will therefore postpone any discussion of the *Ġhurar aḫbār* for the time being.

To find the Simurgh in a Persian historical work, we must turn to a text produced in the Mughal empire around 1653 (1063 H). Shāh Jahān was emperor, and his domains extended to Ghazni in the west, where one Shamsher Ḵhān was posted as governor. According to the history's account of its own genesis, Shamsher Khan said one day to his assembled courtiers, 'If a book of history could be had, using which one could very briefly pick out and learn the particulars of past monarchs, and could be informed of all of their qualities, this would be very nice!' In response, the assembled men suggested Firdausi's book: 'There is no better book than the *Shāhnāmah* for the attainment of this object'. The genre identification being made

[25] Sharma, 'Amir Khusraw and the Genre of Historical Narratives in Verse'. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this journal for pointing out this historiographical legacy of the *Shāhnāmah*.

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in this courtly scene is clear: Shamsher Khan asks for a history, and his companions give him the *Shāhnāmah*. But Shamsher Khan complained of the *Shāhnāmah*'s prolixity and of Firdausi's emphasis on poetic virtuosity, and therefore his chronicler (*wāqi'ah-nawes*) Tawakkul Beg b. Tūlak Beg was commissioned to write a *Shāhnāmah* summary in prose.[26] This work was called the *Tārīḵh-i dil-gushā-i Shamsher-Ḵhānī* (*The Heart-Opening History, for Shamsher Khan*), later referred to simply as the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*.[27]

According to both its title and the story of its origin, the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī* is a book of history. But unlike many other histories, it includes the stories of the Simurgh as well as of the various demons that populate Firdausi's work.[28] So we see that in 1653, as in 1865, these unusual beings were characters in at least one history book. Could Ghalib's views on the *Shāhnāmah* have been influenced by the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*? Many seventeenth-century books had been forgotten by the nineteenth century, but the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī* remained popular and prestigious. Charles Melville, who has studied the work closely, has viewed at least four eighteenth century manuscripts in British archives, including two from Murshidabad, and has drawn attention to an early Edinburgh manuscript from 1697.[29] The fact that these were probably acquired by the British from the late-eighteenth to the nineteenth century suggests that they were in circulation during this period. Over a hundred South Asia-based manuscripts are known to the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*'s modern editor Tahira Parveen Akram, including sixty in India.[30] And Munzawī's catalogue lists eleven *Shamsher-Ḵhānī* manuscripts from the eighteenth century and a remarkable 26 from the nineteenth century in Pakistani archives alone (out of a total of 53, many undated).[31] Western Orientalists in the nineteenth century were well-acquainted with the abundant work; in 1832, James Atkinson declared it to be the best-known version of the *Shāhnāmah* in India.[32] A measure of the value attached to it is its reproduction as an illustrated manuscript in Punjab during the

[26] Tawakkul Beg, *Tārīḵh-i dil-gushā*, p. 15.

[27] Little is known of Tawakkul Beg, although Afshan Bokhari has kindly pointed out to me the existence of a *Nusḵhah-i Aḥwāl-i shāhī* written by a 'Tawakkul Beg Kolābī' about 1667. It is mentioned in Bokhari, 'The "Light" of the Timuria: Jahan Ara Begum's Patronage, Piety and Poetry in 17th-century Mughal India', pp. 54, 60.

[28] Tawakkul Beg, *Tārīḵh-i dil-gushā*, pp. 48–49, 233–34.

[29] Melville, 'The Tarikh-i Dilgusha-yi Shamshir Khani and the Reception of the Shahnama in India'. I am grateful to Charles Melville for sharing with me a draft of his very informative conference paper on the Indian reception of the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*.

[30] Melville, 'The Tarikh-i Dilgusha-yi Shamshir Khani and the Reception of the Shahnama in India'. According to Melville, Akram has published a new (2005) edition of the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī* based on a manuscript in Islamabad. I have not had an opportunity to see this edition.

[31] Munzawī, *Fihrist-i mushtarak-i nusḵhah-hā-i ḵhaṭṭī-i Fārsī-i Pākistān*, p. 10: 148–51.

[32] Atkinson, *The Sháh námeh of the Persian Poet Firdausí*, pp. xxiv–xxv. Quoted in Melville, 'The Tarikh-i Dilgusha-yi Shamshir Khani and the Reception of the Shahnama in India'. See also Melville's mention of the French Orientalist Jules Mohl.

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reign of Ranjīt Siṅgh (r. 1801 to 1839). Firstly we may note the two illuminated '*Shāhnāmah*s' in the Punjab State Archives and the National Museum in New Delhi. They are both prose works, and likely to be *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* manuscripts. The first was supposedly copied by Tawakkul Beg for Shāh Jahān and entered into Ranjit Singh's library in 1244 H (1828/9), while the second appears to have been produced in Lahore around 1830. Both manuscripts cry out for investigation.[33] Much more clear-cut is the case of the Lilly manuscript, an illustrated *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* that in the 1830s was in the possession of the Italian Jean Baptiste Ventura, a general in Ranjit Singh's employ. This manuscript, the object of a recent study by Brittany Payeur, now resides at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana, Bloomington.[34]

It is unclear whether there were any printed copies of the Persian text, but Ghalib could certainly have had access to a manuscript *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* given the abundance of copies. Besides, as we will see, the apparent paucity of Persian *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* lithograph copies was offset by a good number of Urdu translations in print. At any rate what matters is not whether or not he had read it or even heard of it, but its general popularity, as demonstrated by Atkinson's testimony, and by its frequent and sometimes prestigious reproduction. Its popularity raises the likelihood that it was able to saturate the cultural discourse (in which Ghalib participated) regarding the genre of the *Shāhnāmah* with its own representation of the narrative as a historiographical one. In order to complete the evidence of its popularity in Ghalib's time, let us consider two Urdu translations from the nineteenth century.

The first was composed in 1810 or 1811 (1225 H) by one Mūl Chand Munshī, who translated the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* into Urdu verse at the urging of an unnamed friend.[35] Its chronogrammatic title is *Qiṣṣah-i Ḳhusrawān-i 'Ajam* (*Tale of the Kings of Persia*). The earliest printed copies of which I am aware date from 1844 and 1846. The latter of these is a typeset copy by Ġhulām 'Alī of Hooghly, who writes that he undertook the reprinting for the benefit of the Urdu-learning students

[33] Payeur draws attention to these texts (Payeur, 'The Lilly Shamshir-Khani in a Franco-Sikh Context: A Non-Islamic "Islamic" Manuscript', p. 236), miniscule samples of which appear in Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers*, pp. 22–23. From the text discernable in these examples it is clear that neither manuscript contains Firdausi's work; rather, each contains a prose version of Firdausi, which raises the likelihood that at least the first is a *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* MS. In the case of the PSA MS, the name of the 'scribe' is given as Tawakkul Beg, and it is stated that it was copied in 1653 (the Hijrī equivalent of which is erroneously given by Lafont as 1069!) for Shah Jahan (*Ibid*., p. 162). This is all very perplexing; it seems possible that Tawakkul Beg's 1653 authorship during Shah Jahan's reign has simply been misinterpreted. What is clear is that it is probably a *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* and that it was inducted into the library of an important personage ca. 1828 (1244 H), probably Ranjit Singh's own library. It is not stated, however, whether Ġhulām 'Alī, the library official whose seal imprint is borne by the manuscript, is known to have been employed by the Lahore darbar. The second manuscript is said to have been copied 'probably in Lahore,' circa 1830. Both of these MSS undeniably require inspection.

[34] Payeur, 'The Lilly Shamshir-Khani in a Franco-Sikh Context: A Non-Islamic "Islamic" Manuscript'.

[35] Munshī, *Qiṣṣah-i Ḳhusrawān-i 'Ajam*, pp. 7–8.

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at the schools administered by 'Captain George Turnbull Marshal Bahādur'.[36] By dint of its very title, the *Qiṣṣah-i Ḵhusrawān-i 'Ajam* presents us with a generic ambiguity. The title points to its being a *qiṣṣah*, and many of the chapter headings refer to the accounts as *dāstān*s, yet it is a translation of a 'history' and indeed it simultaneously keeps up the genre identification presented by the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*. The terms *qiṣṣah*, *dāstān, ḥikāyat* and so on are vexatious in that while they are common identifiers of genre, they may also refer simply to narrative units, and do not necessarily carry connotations of fictionality.

In his *sabab-i tālīf* (exposition of the reasons for the work's composition), Munshi recounts the story of the *Shamsher-Ḵhānī*'s genesis at the governor's court in Ghazni, and repeats Tawakkul Beg's characterisation of it as a history:

> That assembly was the envy of the field's springtime.
> Every minute, poetry was being mentioned.
> Once, when histories were mentioned too,
> Everyone expressed themselves as follows:
> 'The *Shāhnāmah* is a wonderful book,
> 'Marvellous, with enthralling verses, and powerful.
> 'But it is not accessible to everyone—
> 'This happy history is not available everywhere'.[37]

The 'too' in the third line of my translation expresses a break between two genres. Poetry proper ('*shi'r o suḵhan*') is constantly mouthed at Shamsher Khan's court on the one hand, and on the other hand, history is also mentioned by way of a change ('*tawārīḵh kā bhī jo maẕkūr thā*'). A history like the *Shāhnāmah* can be in verse (*naẓm*), but it stands slightly apart from *shi'r*, perhaps in its technical sense of a mendacious genre. When Ghulam Haidar reprinted the *Qiṣṣah-i Ḵhusrawān-i 'Ajam* for Captain Turnbull in 1846, he did not dismiss Mul Chand Munshi's 'mis-shelving' of the *Shāhnāmah* under 'History' either. In his preamble to his reprint, Ghulam Haidar writes, 'Though this history [*tawārīḵh*] may be old, yet its tales [*qiṣṣe*] are so interesting and attractive…but you will have to read them to find out.[38] The identification with historiography is there in Ghulam Haidar's comment, even if he simultaneously allies the text with the romance, as does Munshi himself. Here, commercial or at least promotional impulses stand half-veiled behind the double genre identification; beyond the scope of this study, they are nevertheless as important factors as Ghalib's social spurs to praising Safir's and Aman's *Bostān-i Ḵhayāl* translations. The audience for Munshi's book will receive whatever they wish: romance, if they fancy romance; history, if they desire history.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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The year after Ghulam Haidar had republished Munshi's translation, the most important *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* translation was completed. Aside from being the best-known and probably the most frequently printed, it was written by a prominent Urdu litterateur who was an esteemed acquaintance of Ghalib's. This was the prose writer Rajab 'Alī Beg Surūr of Lucknow. His translation or rendering of the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* was dedicated to the last Nawab of Awadh, Wājid 'Alī Shāh, and bore the title *Surūr-i sulṭānī* (*The Sultan's Delight*). The royal press printed the first edition in 1847, less than 20 years prior to Ghalib's preface to the *Ḥadā'iq-i anẕār*. Even if Ghalib was ignorant of the Persian *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* and of Mul Chand Munshi's translation, it is unlikely that he would have been oblivious to this important work of Surur's. Though the elderly Surur was increasingly ill and impoverished after his patron's expulsion from Awadh in 1856, he was nevertheless established by this time as the grand old man of Urdu prose of his era. Consequently Ghalib expressly admired Surur's work, referred to Surur as his 'friend in spirit' (*rūḥānī dost*),[39] and wrote a preface to Surur's romance the *Gulzār-i Surūr* (*Rosegarden of Delight*) in 1859/60 (1276 H).[40]

It is true that Surur was and is chiefly known as a writer of prose romances such as the immensely popular *Fasānah-i 'ajā 'ib* (*Tale of Wonders*), and it is therefore tempting to assign the same genre to the *Surūr-i Sulṭānī*. However, it would be well for us to follow the example of the preeminent Urdu romance critic Gyān Chand Jain, who showed his usual perspicacity in his careful approach toward the *Surūr-i sulṭānī*. Gyān Chand did not include the *Surūr-i Sulṭānī* in his grand study of Urdu prose romances, objecting that 'one cannot call it a *dāstān*, since on the face of it, it is referred to as a history of a particular period in Iran.[41] Referred to by whom? Surur's own preface mentions the genre of his book:

> That which has been versified by the poet Firdausi is also the subject of the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī*. However, the present writing is another matter, since [in the previous work] the genealogies of famous kings have not been attended to. A mere picture-album has been made with the force of [Firdausi's] poetry, and with every hemistich, a painting caught in writing has been put on display. Therefore I have looked in the trustworthy works of history, whose names will be cited at the proper occasion and place, so that readers will regard it as authoritative, so that there will be no doubt left, so that the book will be worthy of trust.

We see that it is Surur's ambition to make the *Surūr-i Sulṭānī* even more historical than the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* by interweaving it with citations from other 'trustworthy works of history'. He fulfils his promise by referring throughout the book to canonical histories such as Tabari's *Tārīḳh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*

[39] Ġhālib, *Ġhālib ke ḳhuṭūṭ*, p. 2: 552.
[40] Ġhālib, *'Ūd-i Hindī*, pp. 445–48.
[41] Jain, *Urdū kī naṡrī dāstāneṅ*, p. 507.

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al-dhahab (*Meadows of Gold*), Mir Khwand's *Rauẓat al-ṣafā*, the *Tārīḳh-i mu'jam*, *Tārīḳh-i guzīdah* and so on.[42] Given this, it seems obvious that Surur does not regard his material as unhistorical. He does find fault with Tawakkul Beg for omitting what he considers important historical details such as royal genealogies, and chides him for his choice of form just as Shamsher Khan criticised Firdausi.[43] But clearly this flaw does not lead Surur to treat the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* as a non-history. Rather, he accepts its historiographical nature, and founds on this basis his own attempt to increase the concentration of historiography within it by intertextual means. Such was the genre identification made by Surur, the esteemed colleague of Ghalib.

However much the septuagenarian Ghalib may have lamented the waning of his memory, his odd-seeming characterisation of the *Shāhnāmah* turns out to have been a commemoration of the judgments made regarding its genre made by the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* and its brood in India. Not that his memory would have had to reach far into the past to catch fire upon the flame of the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī*'s influence, which continued to be strong in Ghalib's lifetime, as evidenced by the plenteousness and prestige of its nineteenth century manuscripts, and by the recent printing of Urdu versions that toed the same line as the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* in identifying the *Shāhnāmah* as a history. This genre identification was obviously available to Ghalib, and indeed the younger Shibli Nu'mani continues to refer to the *Shāhnāmah* as a historical work after Ghalib's death.[44] This would be no surprise, and no genealogy of the identification would have been necessary, if it were not for the inconvenient fact that Ghalib himself declares certain episodes of this 'history' to be *mumtana' al-wuqū'*; extremely unlikely if not impossible. If Ghalib is not referring to a simple contamination of history by romance, what is the alternative? Is he guided by a vision of a historiography that is not characterised primarily by its sincerity (*ṣidq*)? How substantial was the line between these two genres, the history and the romance, in the first place?

'Aqli and Naqli Historiography

The answer, I believe, lies in a methodological split within the genre of historiography. Before outlining this split, it would be worth our while to consider in passing the thesis of Julie Meisami with regard to the *Shāhnāmah*.[45] Her view of

[42] Suhail, 'Muqaddamah', pp. 29–30. Āġhā Suhail, the editor of the Majlis edition, takes pains to warn the reader that, in spite of Surur's claims, the *Surūr-i sulṭānī* is only a stylistically vibrant epitome of the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* and utterly fails as a history (*Ibid.*, pp. 28–31). But for the purposes of historicising the genre assigned to it, we need only note that it presented itself as a history and that this identity was probably credible in Surur's and Ghalib's time, if not in ours.

[43] The comparison of the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* to a 'picture album' (*muraqqa'*) seems to refer to the frequency with which Tawakkul Beg breaks up his prose with excerpts of Firdausi's verse.

[44] Shiblī Nu'mānī, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, p. 102 ff.

[45] My focus here is on her 1993 paper 'The Past in Service of the Present' rather than *Persian Historiography*.

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historiography is formally analogous to the one that I will present in that it also rests upon the idea of a binary tension within the genre. As has already been mentioned, she considers there to have been 'no doubt that Firdawsi considered his primary purpose to be historical'.[46] But she shows that the Firdausi *Shāhnāmah*, which is the earliest version of this narrative available to us, soon found itself on the wrong side of a rather dramatic intra-genre war that pitted what she calls 'Iranian' historiography against an 'Islamic' one.[47] She couples this generic warfare to the aftershocks of the real conflict that had occurred between the Sassanians and the Arabs, wonderfully illustrating the principle that the formation of genres generally conceals ideologies linking those genres to pragmatic history.[48]

The ideologies that Meisami unmasks are primarily identity-based; not quite ethnic in the sense of Arab versus Iranian, since the adoption of Islam by the Iranians meant that some of the most memorable objections raised against 'Iranian' history were raised by Muslim natives of Iran. Two of the most prominent eleventh century objectors were Abū al-Raiḥān Muḥammad Berunī, the well-known scholar from Khwarazm, and the historian Abū al-Faẕl Muḥammad Baihaqī, who wrote his *Tārīḳh-i Baihaqī* in Persian. Meisami shows how both of these men, along with the philosopher-historian Abū 'Alī Aḥmad Miskawaih, were severe in their comments on so-called histories that appeared to them no more than tall tales—romances, in other words.[49] She marshals a forceful body of evidence to show that thinkers like Miskawaih, Beruni and Baihaqi were reacting against an older form and method of history.[50]

What is quite clear in Meisami's study (as well as Tarif Khalidi's book *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*) is that as history in the young

[46] Meisami, 'The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', p. 253.

[47] *Ibid*., pp. 249, 250.

[48] See especially the account of the Iranian commander Rustam Farruḳhzād and the Arab general Sa'd b. Waqqās (*Ibid*., p. 256).

[49] *Ibid*., pp. 266–67.

[50] It is not clear in every instance that the criticised form of history was indeed specifically Iranian. Beruni's case is particularly vexed. In his pharmacological treatise he undoubtedly makes disdainful noises about the Persian language in comparison to Arabic, writing that 'this language is not suitable for anything but accounts of kings [*aḳhbār al-kisrawiyyah*] and tales told at night' (Berūnī, K*itāb al-Ṣaidanah*, p. 12; see Meisami, 'The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', p. 264). However, is there any indication that he does not regard the Persian 'accounts of kings' as historiographical? He is certainly willing to use *Shāhnāmah*s in his *Āṯḏār al-bāqiyah*. See his references to the *Shāhnāmah*s of Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Balḳhī (Berūnī, *Al-Āṯḏār al-bāqiyyah 'an al-qurūn al-ḵḫāliyyah*, p. 92) and Abū Manṣūr b. 'Abd al-Razzāq (Meisami, 'The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', p. 103). To complicate matters further, it is not entirely clear whether these *Shāhhnāmah*s resemble the one now famous. In the case of Abu 'Ali Muhammad al-Balkhi's *Shāhnāmah*, Beruni's comments about it include a mention of its source-citations, raising the likelihood that there were several *Shāhnāmah*s that would have hewed in part to the 'Islamic' historiographical method despite being part of a quintessentially 'Iranian' tradition, if we are to accept this distinction. Furthermore, Beruni does not shrink from using Zoroastrian texts and oral authorities. See also my comments on Beruni's attitude toward *naqlī* history later in this article.

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Islamicate world developed into a written genre, it opposed and devalued a kind of oral storytelling that one could in retrospect see as straddling the border between history and romance. The orally performed accounts that would later make up the Persian *Book of Kings* would have been identifiable as participants in this oral genre. Unfortunately, so would those portions of the Qur'an that dealt with history. We might take the example of the *sabab al-nuzūl* (reason for descent) given by certain commentators upon Qur'anic verses 8.31 and 83.13. In both of these verses the unbelievers are represented as scoffing at the Prophet's revelation, which they declare to be nothing but 'legends of the ancients' (*asāṯīr al-awwalīn*). According to a very early biography of the Prophet by the eighth century scholar Ibn Isḥāq, these verses and others refer specifically to accusations made by the merchant Al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥāriṯh, a contemporary of Muḥammad's who had learned (pre-Firdausian) *Shāhnāmah* accounts in Al-Hira while the region was being ruled by the Laḳhmid dynasty (the Laḳhmids being clients of the Sassanians), or possibly after 602 CE when it came directly under a Persian governor following the death of the last Laḳhmid king, Al-Nu'mān b. Al-Munḏhir. Ibn Isḥāq recounts that during a meeting in which Muḥammad was telling of previous peoples who had suffered God's punishment for disobedience, Al-Nadr arose once the Prophet had taken his seat. He boasted, 'I can tell a better story than he, come to me,' and proceeded to regale his audience with stories of the Persian kings, and particularly of Rustam and Isfandyar. He concluded with a taunt: 'In what respect is Muhammad a better storyteller than me?'[51] This account, which sets the tone for critical Muslim attitudes towards the *Shāhnāmah* stories, seems to bolster Meisami's argument further. But on the other hand one might see the Persian-ness of Al-Nadr's tales as a trait that is rather less important than their genre, which encompassed both Iranian and Arabian works. For the Arabs had their own storytellers or preachers, as Khalidi reminds us, and the new professional scholars who were responsible for moulding early Islamicate historiography were often anxious to draw a line between themselves and these individuals.[52] Whether the tales told by a storyteller were from Iranian or Arab lore may or may not have mattered a great deal.

In what follows, I will emphasise a different kind of split within the genre: a methodological split between what I will call the rationalist and the transmission-based—*'aqlī* and *naqlī*—approaches to historiography.[53] In all likelihood, *naqli* or transmission-based historiography was the dominant form or subgenre for most of the history of the Islamicate *tarikh* genre, and it is its proximity to the romance

[51] Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrat al-nabawiyyah*, p. 1: 370. Translation modified from Alfred Guillaume; Ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 136.

[52] Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, pp. 23–24.

[53] For these terms and for much else in this paper, I am indebted to Tarif Khalidi, in this case due to a remark of his regarding Tabari (*Ibid*., p. 74). It should be noted at the outset that the terms *'aqli* and *naqli*, while available in Islamicate discourse as Khalidi points out (see his reference to Fārābī), were not necessarily used in the way that I use them, and have been somewhat repurposed by myself.

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genre that goes some way to explaining how the *Shāhnāmah* could have been considered historiographical, Simurgh and all. Tarif Khalidi's account of the 'father of hadith historiography' Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's provides an excellent window into the *naqli* method. Tabari's modus operandi, as pointed out by Khalidi, is well illustrated by the following passage from the *Tārīḫ al-rusul wa al-mulūk*:

> We rely in most of what we describe in this book of ours on traditions and reports from our Prophet—upon whom be blessings and peace—and from pious ancestors before us, to the exclusion of rational or mental deduction [*istiḫrāj bi al-'uqūl wa al-fikr*] since most of it is an account of past events and present happenings, and these cannot be comprehended by rational inference and deduction.[54]

A history, according to this model, is constituted by the reports (*aḫbār*) of informants who witnessed the event, which are then passed down to us via the process of transmission (*naql*). Of course there are usually intermediary transmitters between the original witness and the historian—unless the witness *is* the historian—and often the chain of transmission or *isnād* is subject to something like the strictures of the 'science of men' (*'ilm al-rijāl*) and other laws well-known to hadith scholars.[55] But even when the most extreme caution is exercised, once it has been established that the testimony was sincerely given and properly transmitted, the report is not to be sifted by reason. Therefore it is possible for Tabari's history to contain marvellous accounts. In another passage quoted by Khalidi, Tabari explains that because no report regarding the origins of the Ka'ba has been handed down by way of 'abundant transmission' (*naql mustafīḍ*), the apparently fantastic possibility that the structure was a pearl descended from heaven cannot be ruled out. 'In the absence of such a report', Tabari writes, the truth of what occurred cannot be 'proven by inference or by analogy […] nor can it be deduced by individual reason'.[56] There are several mechanisms that Tabari considers valid for the evaluation of reports, but rational reflection is not one of them.[57]

To discover the general epistemology that made the Tabarian *naqli* position possible is not a task that can be undertaken here. The authors of *Textures of Time* see Tabari's circumscription of the role of reason as an 'epistemological distancing' on his part.[58] Stated positively, it is perhaps an expression of a form of fideistic

[54] Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫ al-Ṭabarī: Tārīḫ al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, p. 1: 58, quoted in Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, p. 76. Khalidi's translation.

[55] Chapter 3 of Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* touches upon these strictures.

[56] Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, p. 1: 410 quoted in Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, pp. 76–77. Khalidi's translation.

[57] Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, pp. 77–79.

[58] Narayana Rao et al., *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India*, p. 213.

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epistemology: a belief in the absolute power of God's creative decree, which may legitimately stretch the limits of possibility. This is at all events the way in which Khalidi understands it, and his explanation is compelling. He adduces the principle of the divine command '*kun fa-yakūn*' invoked by Tabari,[59] which obviates any 'procedure by which one can separate the true from the false in history since the command must always be admissible'.[60] That is, the divine 'Be!' may turn any apparent impossibility into a possibility, and to dismiss any attested account on rationalistic grounds is potentially to overlook the infinitude of God's desire. The thirteenth century cosmographer Yāqūt al-Rūmī is one of those *naqli* scholars who appear to credit the divine creative command with great power beyond the ken of the intellect. 'I have mentioned many things which rational minds would reject,' writes Yaqut, 'yet, nothing should be deemed as too great for the power of the Creator or the wiles of creation.[61]

However, *naqli* historiography was not an expression of an anti-rationalistic worldview. Reason had its place and its role in the world, but the task of the historian involved setting historical reports before the audience without allowing reason to destroy vulnerable reports beforehand by eating away at what, for the intellect, were their most tender parts: their possibility and probability. Thus we find *naqli* historiographers wriggling out of qualms about the probability of accounts that they record in conformance with the rules of their method. Beruni, who may otherwise have been a zealous devotee of the intellect, is in agreement with Tabari with regard to the correct method of historiography when he writes that when it comes to knowledge of 'the reports of bygone communities and information regarding past ages, […] there is no way to gain them by way of deduction based on rational objects, or analogy on the basis of sensory objects that we witness.[62] It is the historian's duty to record transmitted probabilities, improbabilities, and ostensible impossibilities, and the last two may extend the capacity of human reason, as Travis Zadeh's recent work on *'ajā'ib* (mirabilia) texts shows. Hence we find Beruni commenting with severity and at length upon those who reject transmitted accounts of ancient men who were extraordinarily large and long-lived—Beruni argues that his near contemporaries are wrong to judge past generations by present-day standards of normalcy.[63] This insistence upon the possibility of radical difference between ages—along with the parallel notion found in *'ajā'ib* texts of strange possibilities increasing with spatial distance—was one of the ways in which *naqli* historians

[59] Q. 2.117: 'When He decrees a thing, He has only to say to it, "Be!" and it comes to be.' The verse is alluded to in Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫ al-Ṭabarī: Tārīḫ al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, p. 1: 58.

[60] Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, p. 76.

[61] Zadeh, 'The Wiles of Creation: Philosophy, Fiction, and the 'Ajā'ib Tradition', p. 34.

[62] Berūnī, *Al-Āṯār al-bāqiyyah 'an al-qurūn al-ḫāliyyah*, 6. The second undesirable method is more accurately describable as the principle of *'ādah* (custom) rather than rationalism (see below).

[63] *Ibid*., p. 77 ff.

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were able to reconcile the results of their methodology to the rationalism to which some of them otherwise subscribed.[64]

It has been mentioned that there existed, outside of the series of *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* texts, another history in which the Simurgh played a part. This was the Arabic *Ġhurar aḳhbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyari-him* (*Choice Accounts and Lives of the Kings of Persia*) by Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī, a contemporary of Firdausi's about whom little is known.[65] Like Firdausi, Tha'alibi sought the patronage of the Ġhaznawids, writing his history for the governor of Ḳhurāsān, Abū al-Muẓaffar Naṣr b. Sabuktagīn.[66] The part of the *Ġhurar aḳhbār* that has been published is clearly based on the same source material as Firdausi's *Shāhnāmah*. On the other hand, it is closer than the canonical *Shāhnāmah* to what we would recognise as historiography; it is written in prose, and cites canonical histories such as those of Tabari, Ḥamzah al-Iṣfahānī and Ibn Ḳhurradādhbih.[67] Nevertheless, Tha'alibi's work and Firdausi's agree with regard to the substance of their narrative, and much like Surur's history, the *Ġhurar aḳhbār* contains marvellous accounts even as it displays the rigor of source–citation.

Yet Tha'alibi is one of those *naqli* historians in whom we see the paramountcy of transmissionism grating somewhat upon rationalist urges. This is brought out in Tha'alibi's commentary on the Simurgh's foster-parentage of Zal:

> I do not take any responsibility for this story. If it had not been for its fame in every place and time, and upon every tongue, and its use as a means to delight and amuse kings into wakefulness, I would never have written it. In those times, many strange things happened, such as the attainment of the age of one thousand years by a single person from among his family, and the subjection of the *jinn*s and satans by kings.[68]

This comment underscores the confusion between Tha'alibi's kind of *naqli* history and romance. Meisami quotes the triumvirate of Beruni, Miskawaih and Baihaqi writing dismissively of supposed historical accounts as being no more than tales to be told at night, although we have seen that Beruni's case is a nuanced one.[69] Tha'alibi is on the verge of making a fourth; for him the story of the Simurgh is uncomfortably close to the incredibility of romance. Yet he recounts the story and

[64] For a nineteenth century example of extenuation by temporal distance, see the case of the British traveller in Iran, John Malcolm, who received the following explanation from his companion Ḥājī Ḥusain for the endangered status of *ġhūl*s: 'The number of these ghools […] has greatly decreased since the birth of the prophet, and they have no power to hurt those who pronounce his name in sincerity of heart' (Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia, from the journals of a traveller in the East* ..., p. 2: 78).

[65] Bosworth, 'al-THaālibī, Abū Manṣūr'.

[66] Zotenberg, 'Préface', pp. v–vi.

[67] *Ibid*., pp. xix, ff.

[68] Tha'ālibī, *Ġhurar aḳhbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyari-him*, pp. 69–70.

[69] Meisami, 'The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', pp. 264–65.

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makes apologies for it. He resorts to an argument similar to Beruni's regarding the radical difference of the ancient era and the possibility in that era of things that would now seem strange; the reason attuned to the contemporary period exclusively is potentially unjust in its evaluation of such narratives. But more interesting is his treatment of the account's fame as an oral romance. He clearly indicates that he sees the story as a romance, and yet this very fact simultaneously makes it difficult to ignore the account as a candidate for inclusion within a history. Possibly what is at play is a crude version of *tawātur*, the principle in hadith scholarship of attestation by multiple individuals. The very fact that the tale is upon so many tongues makes it difficult to ignore it 'as history', according to the logic of its multiple attestation or *tawātur*. From the perspective of an ideal, maximally rigorous 'hadith historiography', multiple attestation is not enough without reliable *isnad*s, but then neither did Beruni, for example, demand *isnad*s from his informants in *Āthār al-bāqiyah*.

While transmission-based history was probably the most common kind, it certainly did not go uncontested. Given that Ghalib begins his argument by associating the history genre with 'men of intellect' before showing that histories, too, contain marvellous accounts, it seems likely that throughout much of history the *'aqli* form of historiography was theoretically dominant even as the *naqli* method was practically dominant. There was in any case no dearth of historians and thinkers who envisioned a much more important place for the intellect in the adjudication of historical accounts than did Tabari and his kind. The origins and trajectory of the rationalist tendency in Islamicate thinking are difficult to trace. Aristotle's emphasis on the intellect's dominance over the other faculties was no doubt influential. It is possible that the emphasis on reason ascribed to Mu'tazilism also had some effect on Islamic dialectics (*kalām*) even after the rival Ash'arī creed displaced it. It is also clear that, among a number of influential Sufis who were arising by the eleventh century, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī was quite firm in circumscribing the role of the intellect, criticising *kalām* for its over-emphasis on this faculty, and privileging the heart, this being of course the configuration that Ghalib seizes upon to champion the romance genre.[70] But a proper history of this 'physiology' is still wanting.

While the methodological *'aqli*/*naqli* divide does not map perfectly onto the identity-based Islamic/Iranian divide put forward by Meisami, the main representative of 'Islamic' historiography in Meisami's account *was* a clear partisan of the rationalist method. This was Baihaqi, the author of one of the earliest New Persian histories, now usually known as the *Tārīḫ-i Baihaqī*. In the passage from this history that is quoted by both Meisami and the *Textures of Time* authors, Baihaqi disparages the credulous multitudes, who 'prefer impossible falsehoods [*bāṭil-i mumtana' rā dost-tar satānand*], such as reports of demons, fairies, and ghouls of the desert, mountains and sea, to true history.[71] As I have already suggested,

[70] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, pp. 202–203.
[71] Baihaqī, *Tārīḫ-i Baihaqī*, p. 713.

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this and other criticisms like it may be understood as aspersions of *naqli* histories that allow themselves to be parasitized by romance accounts. Baihaqi's safeguard against this defect is a rationalist method. The source of a historical account must be either an oral informant or a book, and the informant or author must be 'reliable and truthful [*ṡiqah o rāst-go*]'—thus far Baihaqi and the *naqli* historians would tend to agree. But they differ in that for Baihaqi there is an additional requirement; namely that 'the intellect must also testify that that account is correct.[72] While Tabari is unwilling to allow reason to sit in judgment over transmitted reports, Baihaqi certainly is willing, and he makes this explicit when he describes the intellect's role among the faculties:

> The eyes and the ears are the Heart's spies and watchman, who convey to the heart whatsoever they see and hear, […] and the Heart lays whatever it has found out from them before the Intellect, who is a judge, in order to separate truth from falsehood.[73]

The role of the heart in this reconnaissance mission is respectable enough, but it is the judgment of the intellect that is decisive. This form of hierarchy of the faculties undergirds the *'aqli* historiography of Baihaqi and of those who come after.

For such historians, the great benefit of the discriminatory power of the intellect was of course that it was able to separate the wheat of truth from the chaff of falsehood. As Meisami shows, Baihaqi was anxious about histories that did not live up to his standards of truth-telling. This anxiety, more or less inseparable from historiography, was certainly not absent from the India of the later Mughal period. It was particularly pronounced when the truthfulness of accounts of early Islamic history was concerned. The existence of untruthful accounts of the Prophet's own life was very disturbing indeed to the South Indian religious scholar and litterateur Muḥammad Bāqir Āgāh in the late-eighteenth century, and it led him to write a new biography of the Prophet in Dakkani. Āgāh, who had studied under the enormously important religious thinker Shāh Walī Allāh in Tiruchirapalli, could not ignore the promise of Hell expressed in the abundantly transmitted saying of the Prophet, 'Let him who lies about me intentionally find himself a place in the Fire.[74] It is doubtful whether a man of Agah's creed would have been an absolute votary of the intellect. But in his rhetoric against previous biographies of the Prophet and previous histories in general, he shows a marked tendency to indict histories for crimes against reason.

Terms that he uses to describe such histories include *ġhulw*, *ifrāṭ o tafrīṭ*, and *nā-ma'qūl*. The last term is the most straightforward, meaning 'unacceptable to

[72] Baihaqī, *Tārīkh-i Baihaqī*, p. 716.
[73] *Ibid*., p. 715.
[74] Bāqir Āgāh Velūrī, 'Dībācah-i Rauẓat al-jinān', p. 131.

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the intellect'. *Ġhulw* (a term with which *ifrāṭ* and *tafrīṭ* are nearly synonymous), aside from denoting 'nonsense' generally, was a poetological term defined in Arabic, Persian and Urdu poetics manuals as the least condonable subtype of exaggeration (*mubālaġhah*).[75] The forms of *mubālaġhah* were categorised according to their acceptability on the basis of two touchstones of probability: the intellect (*'aql*) and custom (*'ādat*).[76] The type known as *tablīġh*, an exaggeration that was possible according to both intellect and custom, was generally considered to be inoffensive; *iġhrāq*, wherein the exaggeration was considered barred (*mumtana'*) by custom (that is, unprecedented), was suspect but nonetheless acceptable if it was rationally possible. (No category of exaggeration existed which might be acceptable according to custom but not to the intellect, indicating that *'adat* was ancillary to *'aql*). Finally, *ġhulw* was exaggeration that could not be admitted by either custom or the intellect.[77] For its insubordination to the intellect, *ġhulw* was considered a defect except under very peculiar circumstances. As in poetry, so in historiography as far as Baqir Agah was concerned. He congratulated himself that such defective histories were not the basis of his own, and dismissed their writers quite flamboyantly: 'O brother,' he announces, 'those histories which are far from being well-controlled and verified, and whose authors are half frogs and half quails, are not by any means the authorities upon which this book is based.[78] In Agah's confident verdict of avian-amphibian hybridity, we may discern an eighteenth century Indian descendant of Baihaqi's rationalist polemics.

Together with this anxiety over the flaws of *naqli* historiography, a distrust of romances, and especially historically based romances, was evinced now and then. This manifested itself most visibly in the genre hierarchy against which Ghalib's writing tends, in which the history was privileged and the romance was treated somewhat scoffingly as an inferior form of narrative. Only on very rare occasions were more serious anxieties about the romance's relationship to truth and history displayed, although there were many romances which dealt, if not with the Prophet, then with the Prophet's companions, family, and contemporaries, or with pre-Muhammadan prophets, positioning themselves just shy of the flame of

[75] The description of the types of *mubālaġhah* given here can be found in any number of Arabic, Persian and Urdu poetics manuals. One of the most important of these in India from the late-eighteenth century onward was Shams al-Dīn Faqīr Dihlawī's *Ḥadā'iq al-balāġhah*. For one example of a discussion of *mubālaġhah*, see Faqīr Dihlawī, *Ḥadā'iq al-balāġhah*, pp. 39–40.

[76] *'Ādah* or *'ādat* as an epistemological touchstone deserves a separate article. Translated as 'custom,' it signifies a normal state of affairs based on a repeatable precedent. Here it is secondary since the poetics manuals averred that a thing could be rationally possible even if it was not customarily possible.

[77] For instance, Ghalib's contemporary Imām Baḳhsh Ṣahbā'ī gave the following example of *ġhulw*, in the form of a verse by Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī' Saudā: 'The world is secured so that a spider's web/ has the force to tether a rhinoceros [*band o bast aisā hai 'ālam meṅ kih tār-i 'ankabūt / kargadan ke wāsiṭe rakhtā hai ḥukm-i resamāṅ*]' (Ṣahbā'ī, *Ḥadā'iq al-balāġhat*, p. 134).

[78] Bāqir Āgāh Velūrī, 'Dībācah-i Rauẓat al-jinān', p. 131.

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the hadith quoted by Agah.[79] Many apologies were made for 'fictional' or rather mendacious (*kāẕib*) genres such as poetry (*shi'r*), which was usually understood to contain falsehood by definition.[80] Yet because of what we might call the porous boundary between *naqli* histories and romances, a very few commentators could not rid themselves of qualms with regard to romances that told historical falsehoods. The immensely popular *Dāstān-i Amīr Ḥamzah* (*Story of Amir Hamzah*) recounting the wondrous deeds of the Prophet's paternal uncle Ḥamzah b. 'Abd al-Muṯṯalib, was a storytellers' staple. But it is noteworthy that one of the only storytellers to describe his craft in detail—'Abd al-Nabī Faḵhr al-Zamānī, who specialised in the telling of the Hamzah romance—conceded the falsehood of the story and advised colleagues to behave morally in order to counterbalance the sin that accrued to them as an occupational hazard.[81]

One of Agah's contemporaries, however, was much more caustic in his attitude towards romances that falsified history—or histories that were better relegated to the status of romances; it is not clear which characterisation he would have preferred. This was Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Fā'iz Dihlawī, a polymath who, like Agah, took a deep interest in religious matters, although unlike Agah he was staunchly Shi'a. Fa'iz took umbrage, for example, at 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's ahistorical exaggeration (*mubālaġhah*) in his verse romance *Yūsuf o Zulaiḵhā*, which recounted the love of the married Zulaikha for the prophet Yusuf. Accusing Jami of mendacity, Fa'iz execrated him for his depiction of Zulaikha's husband 'Azīz, who according to Fa'iz is a governor of Egypt, but who is described by Jami as a great emperor.[82] This is a correction that could have been made without recourse to rational judgement, on the basis of transmission alone. But when it comes to Firdausi's *Shāhnāmah*, Fa'iz shows his *'aqli* credentials more clearly.

Interestingly, he focuses additionally on the same episode of the Simurgh's intervention in the battle of Rustam and Isfandyar that Ghalib singles out, peppering with caustic scorn what Ghalib later treats with levity. His comments are worth quoting at length:

> With regard to some persons of accomplishment, I wonder at their versification of lying tales [*ḥikāyāt-i duroġh*] and false accounts. Thus most of what Firdausi has written in the *Shāhnāmah* is a lie, like the story [*qiṣṣah*] of Simurgh, which

[79] While the *Ḥamzah* romance is the most famous, other examples include the stories of *Tamīm Anṣārī* (including 'Umar b. Al-Ḵhaṯṯāb and 'Alī b. Abī Ṯālib as characters), *Muḥammad Ḥanafiyyah* (featuring Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah, a son of 'Ali), and the remarkably marvellous *Ḵhusrawān-nāmah* (in which 'Ali is the main hero, performing much the same role as Ḥamzah b. 'Abd al-Muṯṯalib in the *Ḥamzah-nāmah*s. Marvellous tales regarding the prophets sent by God before Muhammad (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*') are found in abundance.

[80] Ibn Sīnā, 'Fann al-shi'r', p. 183.

[81] Maḥjūb, 'Taḥawwul-i naqqālī wa qiṣṣah-ḵhwānī'. See also the author's forthcoming article on this storyteller, entitled 'A Handbook for Storytellers'.

[82] Fā'īz Dihlawī, 'Ḵhuṭbah', p. 188.

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> was the name of the hermit who brought up Zal. What lies he wrote—no one with any intellect [*ẕū al-'uqūle*] could put the finger of acceptance on them! Regarding Isfandyar's battle, he wrote that when Rustam became powerless to do battle with Isfandyar the Brazen-bodied, and was wounded, he placed the Simurgh's feather upon the fire, and the Simurgh came to cure Rustam's wound, and gave Rustam some moist wood so that he could make an arrow out of it that would slay Isfandyar in the blink of an eye. Just imagine that! Rustam's battle and his seven quests, and his killing of the White Demon and Akwan the Demon, and so on, are of the same order […]. The upshot of this speech is that the *Shāhnāmah*, *Sikandar-nāmah*, *Lailà o Majnūn*, *Ḳhusrau o Shīrīn*, *Nal o Daman*, and all the rest, are lies in the main. If there is one truth, there are ten other lies. What need is there for an intelligent [*'āqil*] person to spend his time versifying false accounts, and to make his words valueless before intelligent men [*'uqalā'*], and cast the ignorant into the error of counting these matters as truth? If the Exalted Real has gifted you with a well-balanced temperament, why is it that you don't versify truthful speech and sincere tales [*ḥikāyāt-i ṣidq*], but must set out lies, and divest your words of nobility?[83]

At no point in this screed does Fa'iz refer to the *Shāhnāmah* or the other texts mentioned as 'histories'. All of the titles inveighed against are to us identifiable as verse romances. Fa'iz refers to them as *ḥikāyat* and calls the Rustam-Isfandyar narrative a *qiṣṣah*. Yet he is as unhappy with them as if they had been histories whose authors had not shown due regard for rationalist strictures before setting them down onto paper. Indeed, in this passage the words *qiṣṣah* and *ḥikāyat* appear to refer to a unit of speech, the 'account', which is not in and of itself characterisable as historiographical or romantic, sincere or mendacious. He mentions both false and sincere forms of *ḥikāyat*, reprobating the former and recommending the latter; later on he commends Mirzā Rafī' Bāẕil for what he considers to be Bāẕil's truthful narration of the events in the life of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in his poem the *Ḥamlah-i* Ḥaidarī (Ḥaidar's Battle).[84] This 'colourless' meaning of *qiṣṣah/ḥikāyat* hearkens back to what has already been said about these words, otherwise genre labels, in the *Shamsher-Ḳhānī*, *Qiṣṣah-i Ḳhusrawān-i 'Ajam* and *Surūr-i sulṭānī.* No doubt Fa'iz was aware that the poems he lists were categorisable as romances. But this possibility of genre identification, rather than neutralising the works in question and driving them beneath his notice, merely told of their malignancy if their genre happened to be 'mistaken' by anyone of weak intellect. For all of them involved supposedly historical situations and historical characters, and as such could mislead the ignorant [*juhhāl*] into believing them to be histories simply because there

[83] *Ibid*., p. 188.

[84] *Ibid*., p. 188. Bāẕil himself referred to the *Ḥamlah-i Ḥaidarī* as a *qissah* and a *dastan* (Bāẕil, *Ḥamlah-i Ḥaidarī*, p. 6v).

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were particles of history lodged in them. It is the Baihaqian solution to which Fa'iz subscribes: the only just judge was the intellect, to whose superiority Fa'iz alludes thrice in the quoted passage.

Claiming Sincerity

As the examples of Agah and Fa'iz demonstrate, accounts that were not subject to the Baihaqian process of trial and judgment by the intellect were, in the opinions of some, prone to be mistaken for histories though they were in fact merely romances. Particularly when it came to the history of the prophets and the early history of Islam, this could be dangerous. It certainly was for Agah. And while the storyteller Fakhr al-Zamani warned his colleagues of the possible anti-salvational effects of reciting the *Ḥamzah-nāmah*, his nineteenth century counterpart Ġhālib Lakhnawī attempted to guard himself against the infernal consequences of telling falsehoods about the Prophet's uncle by appending to his narrative a supplication: 'May the writer and translator enjoy a happy afterlife […]. The truth or falsehood of this romance should be attributed to the narrators who invented it.[85] But what Ghalib Lakhnawi's disclaimer reveals is the relative safety that was to be found in making claims about the transmitted-ness of one's narrative, whether we consider those narratives to be historical or romantic. 'I do not take responsibility for this story,' wrote Tha'alibi about the Simurgh narrative, as we have seen. Tabari wrote in a similar vein:

> If I mention in this book a report about some men of the past which the reader or listener finds objectionable or worthy of censure because he can see no aspect of truth nor any factual substance therein, let him know that this is not to be attributed to us but to those who transmitted it to us, and we have merely passed this on as it had been passed on to us.[86]

Blame cannot accrue to these historians, in their own view, simply because the reports that they record are judged to be untrue after they have transmitted them. It is not the responsibility of the historiographer following the *naqli* method to judge the reports intellectually, only to transmit them properly.

Furthermore, the transmissionist historian's tendency to pass the buck to his informants means that he has an advantageous perspective on sincerity and mendacity. For Fa'iz, Jami is worthy of vituperation because he has described 'Aziz as an emperor, regardless of Jami's sources. Such tales are falsehoods, he writes, although we must beware: Fa'iz does not make it clear whether he is accusing Jami or Firdausi of mendacity because they have written down lying tales, or whether he

[85] Ġhālib Lakhnawī, *Tarjamah-i Dāstān-i Ṣāḥib-qirān*, p. 493.

[86] Ṭabarī, *Tārīḫh al-Ṭabarī: Tārīḫh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, p. 1: 8 quoted in Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, p. 74. Khalidi's translation.

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is simply characterising the tales themselves as false without assigning blame for their falsehood. Agah criticises two of the most canonical histories: Mir Khwand's *Rauẓat al-ṣafā* (Garden of Purity) and his nephew Ḳhwāndamīr's *Ḥabīb al-siyar* (Beloved of Biographies). They are, to his mind, too slavishly reliant upon transmission; of their authors he says disdainfully that 'whatsoever they have found, they have written down.[87] His juxtaposition of such criticisms with his quotation of the hadith on lying about the Prophet makes it appear as if the passage were meant to accuse such historians of mendacity, but again, it is not entirely clear. If accused of falsehood, however, *naqli* writers could argue that the repetition of accounts that may have been mendacious did not itself constitute mendacity. It was even possible for them to assert their own sincerity [*sidq*], as Yaqut al-Rumi did: 'I am *sincere* [*ṣādiq*] in adducing them [that is, falsifiable accounts] the way I have adduced them, so that you know what has been said, whether it be true or false.[88] Sincerity according to the *naqli* method meant the faithful transmission of reports, and not necessarily the transmission of 'true' reports.

Therefore, one of the ways in which marvellous accounts could position themselves in order to be recognised as sincere and historical in the *naqli* sense was by asserting their transmittedness. *Naqli* histories like that of Tabari, rigorous and very much along the model of 'hadith historiography,' made use of *isnad*s to demonstrate the transmittedness of the reports that they recorded. The chain of transmission or chain of authorities in its strongest form provides a link between the historian and the eyewitness or earwitness to the event being reported. It could be quite long and occasionally forked, as in the case of the following *isnad* from the *Kitāb al-Āġhānī* (*Book of Songs*):

> This was reported to me by Aḥmad b. 'Ubaid Allāh b. 'Ammār. He said: 'I was told by 'Abd Allāh b. 'Amr b. Abū Sa'd, who said: "I was told by Sulaimān b. Al-Rabī' b. Hishām the Kūfan…."' Besides, I found [the report] in some Kūfan manuscripts by Sulaimān b. Al-Rabī', more complete than the former [narration], so I copied it and composed the two together. He [Sulaimān] said: 'I was told by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Ṣāliḥ al-Mauṣilī al-Burjamī, who said: "I was told by Zakariyā b. 'Abd Allāh b. Yazīd al-Ṣuhbānī, who had it from his father, who had it from Kamīl b. Ziyād al-Naḳh'ī, from 'Alī—upon whom be peace!"'[89]

But chains of transmission were not necessarily so detailed and intricate. Later histories would often omit *isnad*s of this well-recognised sort, substituting for the chain of transmission itself a reference to the book that contained the report along with its chain of transmission. Often source-indications were even vaguer,

[87] Bāqir Āgāh Velūrī, 'Dībācah-i Rauẓat al-jinān', p. 132.

[88] Quoted in Zadeh, 'The Wiles of Creation: Philosophy, Fiction, and the 'Ajā'ib Tradition', p. 34. I have modified Zadeh's translation very slightly.

[89] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-āġhānī*, p. 19: 6694.

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with references not to specific works but to their authors, or to vaguely specified oral informants. Then there is the example of the *Chachnāmah*, a twelfth century history of Sindh by one ʻAlī Kūfī. ʻAli Kufi claims that the *Chachnāmah* is his Persian translation of an Arabic history by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Madā'inī, discovered in a private library in Bhakkar, and on several occasions he attributes specific reports to Mada'ini in brief *isnad*s. However, as Manan Ahmed points out in his study of the text, these *isnad*s are quite hazy, and aside from the 'pseudo-*isnad*s' that appeal to Mada'ini's authority, the *Chachnāmah* also contains thirty or so 'broad, generic *isnād* […] which follow literary conventions'.[90]

These last-mentioned *isnad*s are very commonly found at the beginning of romances (this is what is meant by the statement that they 'follow literary conventions'). A typical version of the formula is 'The narrators of reports and transmitters of past accounts narrate as follows… [*rāwiyān-i aḳhbār o nāqilān-i āṡār cunīn riwāyat mī kunand*]'.[91] Ahmed's important insight is precisely that these formulas may be regarded as a form of *isnad*, although in most cases they must be seen as very vague *isnad*s, to the point of being what Ahmed calls 'pseudo-*isnad*s.' Moreover, he shows that this kind of *isnad* is not absent from works like the *Chachnāmah*, which effectively present themselves as histories or are understood as histories by some portion of their audience. One could adduce other examples, such as the *Rauẓat al-ṣafā*.[92] The *Shamsher-Ḳhānī* restricts itself to the simple 'It has been related [*āwardah and*]',[93] while Mul Chand Munshi's translation attributes its reports to Firdausi. However, the *Surūr-i sulṭānī*'s versions are much closer to the common formulas. For example, Surur's history opens with the following phrase: 'The narrators of reports and tellers of past accounts are in agreement that… [*rāwiyān-i aḳhbār o ḥākiyān-i āṡār muttafiq haiṅ*]'.[94]

These apparently insignificant openings give us a tangible example of a genre marking that straddles the border between *naqli* history and romance. Given the foregoing discussion it should be clear what role they perform. However vague they may be, they devolve responsibility for the truth or falsehood of the narrative onto named or unnamed sources, allowing their composer to present himself as a mere transmitter. Because he is only transmitting them, there is no ground to accuse him of being anything other than sincere—at least within the strictures of the *naqli* method, although for the rationalists it is a different matter. Insofar as one of the basic binaries distinguishing the genres of historiography and romance

[90] Ahmed, 'The Many Histories of Muhammad b. Qasim: Narrating the Muslim Conquest of Sindh', p. 118.

[91] 'Haft sair-i Ḥātim', p. 59.

[92] The story of Qābīl and Hābīl (Cain and Abel), is, for example, introduced as follows: 'The stringers of the pearls of speech and the narrators of new and old reports relate that…' (Mīr Ḳhwānd, *Tārīḳh-i Rauẓat al-ṣafā*, p. 2: 32).

[93] The first of many instances appears on p. 19.

[94] Surūr, *Surūr-i sulṭānī*, p. 57.

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from one another is that of sincerity versus mendacity, the sincerity—or rather the sincerity effect—of these works enables them to be accepted as historiographical by some readers even if it is at the same time averred that they are untrue or even impossible, as Ghalib insists in his comments on the Simurgh.

The *isnad* or pseudo-*isnad* is not the only device that is shared between romances and transmission-based histories. However, it is the device that demonstrates most neatly how a work that one audience member might understand as a romance could be understood or misunderstood as a history by the other. If they were taken at face value, the opening formulas that we have seen would have identified the works that they introduced as transmission-based histories. We know that works like the *Chachnāmah*, *Rauẓat al-ṣafā*, and *Surūr-i sulṭānī* were understood as such. That they contained accounts that were absurd according to the judgment of the intellect did not signify except in the eyes of those who believed that the intellect must be the judge of what was worthy and unworthy of being set down in works of history. We have seen examples of such partisans of the intellect, and we have also seen how those who favoured the transmission-based method parried the blows of their own doubts with regard to the possibilities of certain marvellous events taking place and of the existence of certain wondrous beings.

Conclusion

The dilemma posed by Ghalib's preface to his nephew's *Bostān-i Ḵhayāl* translation had to do with the apparent paradox of his treating certain episodes of the *Shāhnāmah* as impossible and yet historiographical—to avoid confusion we shall not say 'historical'. He treats as historiographical that which could with equal justice have been understood as romantic, and which undoubtedly would have been understood as such by rationalists. If he has done all of this, the only way to understand his position is to first of all recognise the power of the several precedents that would have led him to identify the *Shāhnāmah* as a history, and then to understand how it was that Islamicate histories adhering to the transmission-based methodology could contain improbable and even impossible accounts without appearing to contravene the genre's golden rule of sincerity. We looked at three texts that were based on the *Shāhnāmah* and designated as histories, and saw that all of them were either circulating vigorously in Ghalib's nineteenth century India, or were at least composed in that milieu, and that one of them, the *Surūr-i sulṭānī*, was written by an esteemed contemporary and acquaintance of Ghalib's. We have also examined the two methodologies that were used by historiographers, and the argument has been put forward that histories of the transmission-based variety could be sincere without necessarily representing truths, and could therefore even represent impossibilities without ceasing to be histories.

A few clarifications remain to be made. Meisami's binary of Islamic versus Iranian history, which has in many ways pointed the way to the *'aqli*/*naqli*

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distinction, is useful for its articulation of the historical circumstances under which the history genre may have found itself inwardly rent, although the *'aqli*/*naqli* split can by no means be reduced to an Islamic/Iranian tension. The long multi-regional history of this genre process is much more complex than its story in one moment in a specific place and period. In this article I have not been able to examine in depth the historical circumstances behind the development of the transmission-based method, its survival and modifications to it, and the same shortcoming is true of my treatment of what I have called 'rationalism'. The long history of these methods, broached already by Khalidi, deserves further study. Nevertheless it is most likely that identity-based sentiments, raised by socio-political circumstances, simply took hold of one side or another of a pre-existing methodological dispute in order to gain substance. It has already been shown that the *'aqli* and *naqli* methods were not absolutely separate; for *naqli* historians in particular the intellect was very important. It is only that it was not all-important, and indeed suspending rational scepticism in order to accept the seemingly inscrutable, marvellous 'signs of God' in the world (a gesture found in *'aja'ib* texts) often led to an enlargement of the intellect's arena rather than a diminution. Finally, we must be on our guard against assuming that there was nothing at all distinguishing *naqli* history and romance, and that they were altogether the same. The very same opening formulas that could have marked accounts as histories might easily have been read in precisely the opposite manner. This is not due to their relative vagueness alone; their formulaic nature would have been important as well. The presence of such phrases in a text that was already understood to be a romance would have meant that in subsequently encountered texts their repetition might be taken as a sign that those texts belonged to the same genre as the initial text, that is, the romance genre. Indeed, it is possible to hypothesise that, aside from explicit paratextual indicators (titles, prefaces, etc.) the most effective marks of the romance genre were formulas: set phrases like these '*isnad*s' as well as conventional plot elements such as the recurrent motifs of the long-childless king being blessed with offspring, the hero healing an important man's daughter, and so on. In this regard folklore studies have much to teach us.

Yet as we have seen quite sufficiently over the course of this study, even recurrent motifs did not always lead audiences to identify texts as romances. Many works admitted of either genre identification, and there was disagreement regarding the genre of several of them. The case of Ghalib's comments on the *Shāhnāmah* has been chosen because it is so perplexing, so extreme, and therefore so instructive. For an account to be both impossible and historiographical sharply challenges the intellect-based model of history and most of our present-day models of the genre. Thus it has been heuristically useful even though in most cases such marvels would have been understood not as impossible, but as improbable—impossible, perhaps, but for the divine will.

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