DOI: 10.46586/er.14.2023.9941
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Entangled Religions 14.2 (2023)
er.ceres.rub.de

Shahrbānū's Recompense

Muslim and Non-Muslim Antagonists and the Hero-Imam in Rabīʿ's *ʿAlī nāma*

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ABSTRACT This article explores the central antagonisms at work within the *ʿAlī nāma* of Rabīʿ, a fifth/eleventh-century Persian epic by a Twelver Shīʿī poet narrating the deeds of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, in particular the battles of the Camel and of Ṣiffīn. It gives an analysis of this poem within its twin contexts of Shīʿī imamology and Persian poetry, illustrating how these fields are variously drawn upon, combined and challenged in the poem's unique narrative of the imam, and arguing that Rabīʿ cultivates his oft-cited opposition between Arabo-Islamic truth-telling and Iranian/Zoroastrian deception as a means of navigating intra-Muslim sectarian dynamics. The article argues against reductionist views of the poem, demonstrating the hybrid nuance of its engagement with Sunnīs, Shīʿīs and the pre-Islamic past, as well as providing an overview of this under-studied work of literature.

KEYWORDS ʿAlī nāma, Shāh nāma, Ferdowsi, Persian epic, Shīʿism, Dalāla, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān

Introduction

[1] The *ʿAlī nāma* ("Book of ʿAlī") of Rabīʿ is the first known Persian Shīʿī epic. Completed in 482/1089 by the otherwise unknown Twelver Shīʿī poet Rabīʿ, its 11,000-odd lines narrate the history of two major battles of ʿAlī's caliphate, the battles of the Camel and of Ṣiffīn, cast in the poetic metre and (to some extent) idiom of Ferdowsi's (Abū'l-Qāsim Firdawsī, d. 410/1019 or 416/1025) great *Shāh nāma* ("The Book of Kings"), written some eight decades earlier.[1] The Shīʿī tone of Rabīʿ's poem is unmistakable, with ʿAlī lauded as the perfect, miracle-wielding imam battling against correspondingly depraved adversaries, accompanied by an array of

1 Except when otherwise demarcated, citations from the *ʿAlī nāma* will give the line numbers from the printed edition (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011) throughout. While this text is not free of typographical errata (see Mūsawī Garmārūdī [1390] 2011), the presence of line numbers recommends its use over the earlier facsimile edition (Rabīʿ [1388] 2009–2010); errors will be pointed out where necessary. All translations from Persian are the author's own.

distinctly Shīʿī theological concepts. Nevertheless, Rabīʿ does not explicitly oppose himself to Sunnīs, instead colouring the poem with a recurring hostility to Iranian and Zoroastrian themes and subjects. From the outset, he denounces the *Shāh nāma* as "lies" (*durūgh*), comparable to a "Book of Magians" and unworthy of readers' attention, even as he emulates its style. He meanwhile emphasises the worthily Arabic and Islamic character of his own subject matter, while describing the chief villains of his story (historically Muslims all) as unbelievers or even Zoroastrians (*gabr*), and likening them to Ferdowsian figures such as Qubād and Rustam.

[2] The following offers an analysis of these two antagonisms—against Sunnī ideas and histories, implicit in the poem's narrative, and against Iranian and Zoroastrian figures, explicit in the poet's apostrophising—examining their nature, their role in the overall workings of the poem, and the relationship between them. I will argue that Rabīʿ's condemnation of Iranian and Zoroastrian subjects serves a valuable purpose for his poem's intra-Muslim polemic, as he promotes ʿAlī's greatness while negotiating the perilous sectarian landscape of the Seljuq period,[2] and in so doing I hope to demonstrate the importance of devotional poetry as a site of such negotiations. In addition, this article aims to introduce in English some key themes of a text that has received lamentably little scholarly attention outside Iran, one that constitutes an invaluable source for histories of New Persian epic, Muslim devotional literature and Seljuq-era Shīʿism in Iran.[3]

Muslims, Magians and Poets

[3] From the opening lines of the *ʿAlī nāma*, Rabīʿ repeatedly casts his poem as an essentially Arabic and Islamic work, to be contrasted absolutely with Ferdowsi's *Shāh nāma* and its reservoir of pre/non-Islamic stories of Iranian kings and heroes (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 93–103, 2975–3005, 4818–24, 6754–63).[4] The poem is resolutely Islamicate in its subject matter and Arabicising in its diction, with Iranian imagery—be it the strength of Rustam or the citadel of Qubād—associated overwhelmingly with evil characters (Jaʿfariyān and Gulrīz [1393] 2014, 91–94). Nevertheless, these oppositions are kept at a certain distance from the action of the narrative, which is, after all, a conflict between Arab Muslims[5] taking place in Syria and Iraq. Instead, condemnation of Iranian subjects is largely restricted to framing addresses by the author to his readers, often incorporated into the opening and closing sermons of the fifteen sessions (sg. *majlis*) that make up the poem, alongside exhortations to reflect upon the surrounding narrative and invocations of blessings upon the Prophet and the imams.

2 Though Rabīʿ himself gives no mention of his location or circumstances, the patron to whom he addresses the *ʿAlī nāma*—ʿAlī b. Ṭāhir—has been identified as ʿAlī b. Ṭāhir b. Abī'l-Qāsim al-Sajjād, an ʿAlid based in Bayhaq. Accordingly, we may place Rabīʿ with some confidence in that region and thus in the wider context of Seljuq Iran (Rabīʿ [1388] 2009–2010, xiv–xv).

3 Despite its drawbacks, the term 'epic' has long since become embedded in the study of Persian poetry, and retains a basic heuristic utility as a label for the genre to which the *ʿAlī nāma* and the *Shāh nāma* belong. For an overview of the term's applicability and the limits thereof, see Omidsalar (2011, 2–7).

4 Omidsalar ([1389] 2010–2011, [1393] 2014–2015) has forcefully pushed back against scholarly assumptions of Rabīʿ's total hostility to the *Shāh nāma* and its contents. While I share Omidsalar's opposition to a simplistic reading of the *ʿAlī nāma* as evidence for a generalised hostility between Shīʿī Muslims and the stuff of Iranian 'national' epic ([1389] 2010–2011, 52–54), I will argue below that the antipathy that Rabīʿ's poem projects towards Ferdowsi is real and substantial, expressing not a universal sentiment but the particular mimetic concerns of Rabīʿ himself. Specific points of divergence with Omidsalar's arguments in this regard will be addressed below as and when they appear.

5 This is not to erase Shīʿīs' capacity to question the Muslim identity of ʿAlī's opponents; see paragraphs 37–38 below.

One consequence of this confining of the poem's anti-Iranian sentiments is that it leaves their relationship with the actual narrative open to interpretation, and this will occupy us repeatedly in what follows. To begin with, however, this feature is also significant in that it associates these sentiments specifically with Rabīʿ's poetic persona—the voice that he constructs for himself whereby he addresses his audience. Even as Rabīʿ's presentations of himself as a poet and of his poetry are the primary locus for his attacks on Ferdowsi, they also connect the *ʿAlī nāma* to the wider corpus of early poetic responses to Ferdowsi, in particular those works usually labelled as 'successor' or 'secondary' epics. Composed over the three centuries following the *Shāh nāma*'s completion, these poems both stylistically imitate the *Shāh nāma* and typically share its focus on stories of Iran's pre-Islamic past, thus apparently embodying the very thing to which Rabīʿ is opposed. Indeed, by some definitions Rabīʿ's departure in subject matter places him in a separate literary category (van Zutphen 2014, 70). From another perspective, however, Rabīʿ operates squarely within this tradition of post-Ferdowsian epic, his very concern to frame his poetry in relation to the *Shāh nāma* engaging a number of observable conventions within the broader successor corpus.[6] [4]

One central aspect of these conventions is the question of patronage. In a brief opening statement, Rabīʿ dedicates the *ʿAlī nāma* to one ʿAlī b. Ṭāhir, whom he lauds as a descendant of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, making explicit the pertinence of this honour to the poem's subject matter (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 90–92; [1388] 2009–2010, xxi–xxii). Though the dedication of a poem about ʿAlī to an ʿAlid might seem straightforward enough, the gesture gains significance in the context of the patronage ecosystem of New Persian epic. Poetic celebrations of Iranian heroes were inseparable from the literary appetites of rulers, and poets can often be found drawing flattering links between their patrons and their subject matter, be it full-blown dioramas of the patron as Khusraw battling Arabs with the aid of a dragon (Ibn Abī'l-Khayr [1377] 1998–1999, 153–58) or more subtle parallels between the narrated heroes' exploits and the ruler's campaigns (Omidsalar 2011, 100–108; [1393] 2014–2015, 22–23; van Zutphen 2014, 545–50). Rabīʿ's break with tradition in refusing pre-Islamic Iranian material entirely is certainly conspicuous, but this does not diminish his participation in the same epic celebration of the patron. Thus conceived, the ʿAlī who would beat Rustam in a fight (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 4823–24) is just another competitor in the market of hero-ruler parallels. [5]

In addition to reflecting patrons' interests, poets of this period also show an enduring concern to define their own relationship to Ferdowsi himself, anxious to justify their compositions within the already prodigious shadow of the *Shāh nāma*. Panegyrists not only compare their living subjects favourably to the *Shāh nāma*'s legendary ones, but also vaunt the truth of their own praise in contrast to Ferdowsi's fictions (Tetley 2009, 5, 164; Omidsalar [1393] 2014–2015, 22–23). As for the successor epics, from at least the sixth/twelfth century these shorter poems were being cast as inferior to and derivative of Ferdowsi, even as they noticeably move away from the *Shāh nāma* in terms of style and substance (van Zutphen 2014, 62; Ibn Abu'l-Khayr 2022, 16–17). Some poems focus on heroes who are antagonists of Rustam, the *Shāh nāma*'s most famous protagonist, while others move geographically beyond Ferdowsi to India, China and Rome. An especially explicit example is the opening of the *Garshāsp nāma* (completed 458/1066), where its author Asadī Ṭūsī laments that Ferdowsi neglected to tell the story of Garshāsp, despite his being mightier than any hero in the *Shāh nāma* (Asadī Ṭūsī [1393] 2014–2015, 44). This allusion to Ferdowsi's failure to include a great hero is an effec- [6]

6 Notwithstanding the recent appearance of some valuable studies, the successor epics as a corpus have been anomalously neglected as a topic, even remaining unedited in some cases (Gazerani 2015, 5–6).

tive reassurance that there are still stories left to write, denigrating the *Shāh nāma*'s subject matter in justification of Asadī Ṭūsī's own. In this endeavour, at least, there is little to separate Asadī Ṭūsī from Rabīʿ (Omidsalar [1389] 2010–2011, 50).

[7] A further aspect of Rabīʿ's writing that ties him to his fellow successor epic poets, even as he appears to distance himself from them, is his description of his sources. More frequently than any explicit criticism of Ferdowsi, the framing addresses of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s fifteen sessions describe its narrative as following the narration of Abū Mikhnaf, the eminent second/eighth-century Kufan historian.[7] Accompanied by the staple vocabulary of Islamic historiography and its truth-claims, such as hadith, narrators (sg. *rāwī*) and chains of transmission (sg. *isnād*), these assertions undoubtedly solidify Rabīʿ's desired contrast between the untruths of the *Shāh nāma* and his own supremely authentic narrative (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 2275, 4466, 4623–25). Nevertheless, his evocation of ancient, authentic sources is wholly germane to the epic tradition and the broader spectrum of early New Persian poetic narrative. Much ink has been spilled wondering to what extent Ferdowsi's own remarks about his sources are reliable references to an earlier textual and/or oral tradition, and to what extent they constitute a poetic trope (Davis 1996; Omidsalar 1996; Yamamoto 2003, 60–80), but what is indisputable is that the figure of the 'ancient source' had become established in Persian narrative poetry by the middle of the fifth/eleventh century. As a matter of course, narrative poets open their stories with claims to be reproducing the text of a buried book or the words of an ancient sage (Asadī Ṭūsī [1393] 2014–2015, 34; Gurgānī [1349] 1970–1971, 29; Ibn Abī'l-Khayr [1370] 1991–1992, 17). These performative assertions of an authentic source serve to construct and legitimise the poet's role as narrator, thus connecting intimately to poets' anxieties of legitimacy in relation to Ferdowsi; Asadī Ṭūsī's claim to be correcting Ferdowsi's neglect of Garshāsp and his history cannot proceed without a corresponding claim to superior source material.[8]

[8] The *ʿAlī nāma* thus sits towards the more dichotomous end of a broad spectrum of differing creative attitudes held by Iranian Muslims towards the various facets of their identities in the early Islamic centuries. Many authors (including Ferdowsi) embrace both the pre-Islamic Persian past and their Muslim, indeed Shīʿī identities, with pre-Islamic imagery sitting comfortably alongside the most devoutly Muslim themes and concerns (Omidsalar 2011, 86–91;

7 Like Ferdowsi's source material, Rabīʿ's claimed reliance on Abū Mikhnaf has been disputed, with scholars debating the likelihood that he had direct access to a (now lost) work by the early historian (Rabīʿ [1388] 2009–2010, xxvi–xxvii; Afshārī [1389] 2010–2011, 25–26; Jaʿfariyān and Gulrīz [1393] 2014, 77–78). It is undeniable that elements of Rabīʿ's narrative are quite different in tone and substance from all we know of Abū Mikhnaf's works, and while it is possible that this may derive wholly from a hypothesised mediating textual source, it seems highly likely that Rabīʿ felt at some liberty to shape his narrative as he wished, and that his claims about his sources are—in conformance with the genre—performative to a significant extent. See also note 8 below.

8 The question of comparative historicity is one area where Omidsalar argues against any real hostility to the *Shāh nāma* in the *ʿAlī nāma*, asserting that Rabīʿ's claims of his own historicity and of the *Shāh nāma*'s falsity are merely inoffensive acknowledgements of the self-evident truth that the *ʿAlī nāma* deals with historical material whereas the *Shāh nāma*'s contents are mostly legendary (Omidsalar [1389] 2010–2011, 46–47). Apart from the profound moral charge (discussed below) with which Rabīʿ imbues the distinction between truth and lies, this hypothesis of an unproblematic, clear dichotomy between history and legend is not born out by the sources. While elements of Ferdowsi's narrative were often cited as blatant fictions, Muslim historians often took ancient Iranian materials very seriously, working to reconcile them with Abrahamic-Islamic narratives (Savant 2013, 31–60). As for Rabīʿ, he is still a poet and not a historian, such that his narrative of ʿAlī's caliphate is very different to that acknowledged either in universal histories like al-Ṭabarī's or in the polemical works of fellow Twelver Shīʿīs (e.g., al-Mufīd 1983, 199, 206; Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 1373–94, 1927–51). Indeed, part of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s immense significance as a text is that it gives us a rare view of how the events of Islam's early history were recounted and reimagined beyond the confines of the strictly historiographical writings that dominate the surviving source material.

Savant 2013; Ibn Abu'l-Khayr 2022, 23–26).[9] Rabīʿ stands quite apart from his fellow poets in his declared animosity to their preferred subject matter, sharpening their many-layered negotiations with literary precedent and patrons' expectations into a starker binary of Islamic against Iranian. This binary is not absolute, however, rather Rabīʿ's attacks on Ferdowsi inhabit a liminal space between participation and denunciation, remaining densely enmeshed within the literary conventions of the post-Ferdowsian epics and in particular those through which poets seek to situate and justify themselves in relation to the Book of Kings and its author.

[9] The *ʿAlī nāma*'s more dichotomising approach to the Islamic and the Iranian has one obvious parallel in the successor epic corpus, namely the anonymous *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*, which seems to have been composed around the same time. This poem is sometimes erroneously attributed to Ferdowsi due to a preface affixed to it in some manuscripts that purports to be by the *Shāh nāma*'s author, in which he repents of his great work and its unbelieving subject matter (denounced, as in the *ʿAlī nāma*, as *durūgh*—"lies"), pledging the resolutely Islamic story that follows as a pious literary recompense (Ethé 1970, 23–32). Though the preface has been established as pseudonymous (de Blois and Storey 1939–1997, 5:576–82), both the sentiment it expresses and the work it introduces, a retelling of the Qurʾānic Joseph story (thoroughly bulked-out with extra-Qurʾānic material), strongly echo Rabīʿ's professed project to Islamicise Ferdowsi's legacy. The poem's existence further anchors Rabīʿ and his literary experiment within the spectrum of epic responses to Ferdowsi, but also highlights certain peculiarities of the *ʿAlī nāma* if conceived of as a straightforward valourisation of the Arabo-Islamic. *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā* tells what it and the Qurʾān itself both identify as "the best of stories" (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*), wherein Joseph's oscillations between downfall and deliverance and his eventual triumph embody a world governed by divine wisdom (*ḥikmat*), thus delivering a loaded rebuke to the *Shāh nāma*'s bewailings of brute, relentless fate. Such a story has an obvious appeal to a poet seeking an unimpeachably Islamic riposte to Ferdowsi. Rabīʿ, by emphatic contrast, takes us to ʿAlī's embattled caliphate—almost the archetype of contested Islamic history, the unholy terror of war between Muslims (*fitna*), and the seditious confusion of the Sunnī-Shīʿī schism.

Shīʿīs, Sunnīs and Signs of the Imam

[10] This brings us to the second of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s core antagonisms: that between Sunnism and Shīʿism. Thus far we have seen how the poem's hostility to Iranian themes, though it may not be bereft of antipathy towards real Zoroastrians, is primarily articulated along literary lines in which the antagonists are poems and poets rather than religious communities and their theologies. When it comes to Sunnī and Shīʿī themes, however, the situation is very different. Rabīʿ identifies himself as a Twelver Shīʿī (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 5921), and the *ʿAlī nāma*'s subject matter engages directly with a foundational tension between competing Sunnī and Shīʿī visions of the Muslim umma's early history, a focus that could not fail to evoke partisan responses from Muslim readers, not to mention risking political and personal consequences for the poet in an era of increasing Sunnī political dominance.

[11] Nevertheless, the presence of Sunnīs and Sunnism is a deeply ambiguous one in the *ʿAlī*

9 Though it has at times been overstated, there already existed in Rabīʿ's era a specifically Shīʿī discourse of developing connections between figures of Iranian identity, such as Muḥammad's companion Salmān and the Iranian bride of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī (see below), and love for the Prophet's house (Savant 2013, 71–89, 102–8; Amir-Moezzi 2010, 45–100).

nāma, in ways that often seem to belie the staunchly Shīʿī story that it tells. On the one hand, Shīʿism pervades the poem's subject matter, both on the level of the narrative itself, in which an entirely virtuous ʿAlī is pitted against foes like Marwān and Muʿāwiya, who are unambiguously condemned, and on the theological level, with the invocation of basic shibboleths of Twelver Shīʿī doctrine such as the twelve imams and their divine appointment (*naṣṣ*) (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 7–18, 5921). On the other hand, Rabīʿ omits a wide array of polemical themes and discourses that are mainstays of other Shīʿī writings of the period. Moreover, Sunnism and its adherents are quite absent from Rabīʿ's framing addresses; the many passages in which he warns the reader of the *Shāh nāma* and its frivolous seductions are not accompanied by a parallel volume of condemnations of Sunnīs or Sunnī ideas, be it those who revere Muʿāwiya and even denounce ʿAlī, or relevant Sunnī concepts such as consensus (*ijmāʿ*) that adjacent Shīʿī writings readily criticise.[10] This ambivalence about Sunnism and disinterest in Sunnīs extends deep into the workings of the *ʿAlī nāma*, pointing to a nuanced and multifaceted conversation with the poem's sectarian milieu, and also directly engaging the poem's invocation of non-Muslim others.

[12] Rabīʿ's reluctance to attack Sunnism is nowhere clearer than in his treatment of the first three 'rightly guided' caliphs. Twelvers and most other Shīʿīs had long harboured a robust enmity towards these figures, rebuking their usurpation of ʿAlī's right to the caliphate and blaming them for the strife that followed. The *ʿAlī nāma*, by contrast, seems largely to absolve them. The poem's prologue sweeps past the complexities of the Prophet's immediate succession with an evasive terseness; no explicit condemnation is cast upon Abū Bakr, ʿUmar or ʿUthmān, and Rabīʿ even furnishes them with occasional positive epithets (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 240, 3634). As he quickly moves on to ʿAlī's accession, he remarks that he does not wish to dwell upon the "ancient pain" of the umma's first disputes ([1389] 2010–2011, 21). This briefest of glosses by a Shīʿī author over a subject so pregnant with sectarian charge can only indicate a self-conscious attempt to sidestep polemics rather than develop them. Rabīʿ does invoke the Prophet's designation of ʿAlī as his rightful successor at Ghadīr Khumm ([1389] 2010–2011, 8), an event that for Shīʿī authors is a routine cue for the revilement of those (like Abū Bakr and ʿUmar) who failed to honour that designation, but in the lines that follow this cue is ignored. Given that Rabīʿ offers no explanation for how these first caliphs might be justified regardless, and excluding the possibility that he silently subscribes to an otherwise unknown doctrine (e.g., supposing that the first three caliphs were divinely designated, too), we must conclude that he is deliberately restraining his own Twelver theology from taking the *ʿAlī nāma*'s narrative too far in an openly anti-Sunnī direction.[11]

[13] This concern for rapprochement is not unique to the *ʿAlī nāma*, but in fact finds parallels among other Shīʿī voices writing in similar Seljuq contexts. Especially significant is its similarity with another member of the sparse chorus of voices that make up early Twelver poetry in Persian: Rabīʿ's near-contemporary Qawāmī Rāzī (d. c. 560/1165), whose *dīwān* contains

10 The closest the work comes to such an address is a single passage in which Rabīʿ censures as *nāṣibī*—a Shīʿī derogatory term for enemies of the Prophet's family—people who spend all day condemning ʿAlī (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 6877–80). Though the denunciation is a strong one, it is brief and isolated in comparison to Rabīʿ's repeated attacks on the *Shāh nāma*; moreover, its explicit focus on the excessive hater of ʿAlī, rather than on those who revere his opponents, keeps a well-trodden line of Shīʿī apologetics seeking to minimise provocation.

11 Rabīʿ's assertion of ʿAlī's explicit *naṣṣ* eliminates the possibility that he might be drawing upon Zaydī theologies of the innocence of the first caliphs (Kohlberg 1976).

Omidsalar emphasises that it is animosity towards Sunnīs, not Ferdowsi, that animates the *ʿAlī nāma*, but does not discuss these many ways in which the poem actively avoids Sunnī-Shīʿī antagonism ([1389] 2010–2011, 49–53).

many verses in praise of the Prophet and the imams, often integrated into panegyrics addressed both to ʿAlid patrons and to Seljuq authorities. Qawāmī Rāzī's efforts towards reconciliation with Sunnīs are articulated more clearly than Rabīʿ's, not only offering conciliatory views of the companions and early caliphs alongside veneration of the twelve imams, but also presenting direct appeals for mutual understanding: "The two of us are from two groups (sg. *madhhab*) belonging to one religion, just as day and night both belong to one world…" (Qawāmī Rāzī [1334] 1955, 121–25, 133, 143). For a poet in Qawāmī Rāzī's position, praising the imams in the presence of Seljuq potentates, the need for such negotiations is clear ([1334] 1955, *ḥ-ṭ*), and it is tempting to attribute Rabīʿ's apparently similar attitude to the pressures of a similar courtly context. We know little of Rabīʿ's immediate circumstances beyond his probable location in Bayhaq (see note 2 above), and the religious leanings of his patron are not certain, but the bare fact that the *ʿAlī nāma* addresses a patron already places it within a courtly environment that is unlikely to have been predominantly Shīʿī in outlook. We will see below that Twelver scholars writing for the Twelver community did little to mollify narratives that might offend Sunnīs; the more cautious stance observable in both Qawāmī Rāzī and Rabīʿ is therefore suggestive of a distinct register of Shīʿī poetry that was able to inhabit Sejluq courtly spaces provided that certain lines were not crossed. Such an impression is further strengthened by overlaps between the *ʿAlī nāma* and images of ʿAlī used by Sunnī Persian poets of the era. From the Ṣūfī lyrics of Sanāʾī to panegyrists such as Muʿizzī, ʿAlī (often, as in the *ʿAlī nāma*, referred to as Ḥaydar—"the lion") routinely appears as the archetypal warrior of faith (e.g., Sanāʾī [1381] 2002–2003, 389, 624; Muʿizzī [1318] 1939–1940, 14, 510), a role exemplified by the *ʿAlī nāma*'s epic setting. Though such imagery is also common in Shīʿī literature, there it is often accompanied by accounts of ʿAlī as the wise teacher, even as the purveyor of esoteric mysteries. The fact that Rabīʿ confines himself to a vision of the imam as warrior-hero thus resonates with a trans-sectarian poetic and devotional vision of ʿAlī.

[14] Despite these more eirenic features, the fact remains that most of the *ʿAlī nāma* chronicles the unredeemed and disastrous misdeeds of Muʿāwiya and Marwān, companions of the Prophet the condemnation of whom (let alone of the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾisha; see below par. 32) could provoke severe hostility from Sunnīs, and was widely considered emblematic of Shīʿī heretical extremes (Osman 2013, 284–89; Kohlberg 2020, 29–34; al-Qazwīnī [1358] 1980, 64–65). The poem thus remains an unmistakeably Shīʿī voice in the Sunnī-dominated world of the Seljuq east, a voice that inevitably intersects with the dense theological-polemical discourses of Shīʿī scholarly literature. An indispensable body of evidence for how the *ʿAlī nāma* inhabits this dimension of its sectarian context comes from the *Kitāb al-naqḍ* of ʿAbd al-Jalīl al-Qazwīnī (d. second half of the sixth/twelfth century). A systematic rebuttal of a Sunnī scholar's polemic against Shīʿism, *al-Naqḍ* supplies an invaluable record of the sectarian dynamics of the period, in particular through its rare descriptions of how these dynamics played out beyond the exchanges of the scholarly elite. A passage of especial interest is the book's discussion of Shīʿī *manāqib khʷānān*—the "singers of virtues" of the imams and of ʿAlī in particular—who it seems often courted antagonism with Sunnī singers of the virtues of the early caliphs (*faḍāʾil khʷānān*) (al-Qazwīnī [1358] 1980, 64–73). It is evidently necessary to ask how Rabīʿ and his poem may be related to these figures, and indeed it has been suggested that the *ʿAlī nāma* is an example of *manāqib khʷān* poetry—by far the earliest to have survived (Jaʿfariyān and Gulrīz [1393] 2014, 83–84; Afshārī [1389] 2010–2011, 25–30). While there are a number of difficulties with this hypothesis as we shall see (Omidsalar [1393] 2014–

2015, 13–22), much light can nevertheless be shed on the nature of Rabīʿ's attitude to Sunnīs and Sunnism by going through the evidence of *al-Naqḍ* in some detail.

[15] A first, crucial aspect of al-Qazwīnī's account is his supplying a reason for potential animosity between the *manāqib khʷānān* and those who recount the glories of pre-Islamic Iranian heroes. He declares that stories of Rustam and his ilk were, in fact, an invention of the Umayyads, who sought by these fabricated tales of heroism to undermine the very real majesty of the Prophet's house. Such lies could thus still function—as they were intended to—as a seditious obstacle to those who affirmed the supreme truth of ʿAlī's heroics (al-Qazwīnī [1358] 1980, 67).[12] Back in the *ʿAlī nāma*, Rabīʿ makes a similar argument, in one passage seeming to blame the composition of the *Shāh nāma* on the machinations of non-Shīʿīs. Unlike al-Qazwīnī's account, however, Rabīʿ blames this subterfuge not on Sunnīs nor even on Nāṣibīs, but on the Karrāmiyya—an ascetic group, ultimately denounced by Sunnīs and Shīʿīs alike, who were a major presence in Khurasan from the third/ninth to the fifth/eleventh century (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 2975–91).[13] The passage is a bewildering one for several reasons, the first of which is that apart from these lines in the *ʿAlī nāma* there is no evidence of crypto-Zoroastrian characteristics—real or imagined—within Karrāmī thought, in contrast to the established heresiographical convention of attributing sinister Jewish or Iranian origins to Shīʿism (Anthony 2011, 139–60). Moreover, the *ʿAlī nāma*'s major themes and oppositions do not much overlap either with what is known of Karrāmī ideas or with the concerns of anti-Karrāmī polemics written in this period (Zysow 1988; al-Baghdādī 1988, 189–97); Karrāmīs are reported as having a forgiving attitude towards Muʿāwiya (al-Baghdādī 1988, 223), but this hardly differentiates them from many other non-Shīʿī groups. Furthermore, Rabīʿ was writing at a time when the decline of the Karrāmiyya in Khurasan was largely complete—though they enjoyed some prominence in the middle of the fifth/eleventh century, by the time Rabīʿ finished his poem their influence had waned (Malamud 1994, 45–51).

[16] In light of these factors, it seems improbable that a specifically anti-Karrāmī animus underlies either Rabīʿ's hostility to Ferdowsi or the connection between that hostility and his poem's Shīʿī concerns. A more plausible reading, therefore, is to understand this passage as co-opting the Karrāmiyya as ammunition for Rabīʿ's polemic against the *Shāh nāma*, presenting its heady (if improbable) mix of Karrāmīs and Magians as a potent image of disreputable religiosity to be attached to Ferdowsi's work. The Karrāmīs were a fitting choice, given that their access to political power had dwindled, they were roundly condemned as heretical by other groups, and they were historically associated with Ferdowsi's patron, Maḥmūd of Ghazna (Malamud 1994, 45–46). While al-Qazwīnī's preferred culprits, the Umayyads, included figures revered by many Sunnīs, blaming the Karrāmīs was unlikely to cause any offence where it mattered.

[17] Once again, we find Rabīʿ sidestepping a potential attack on Sunnīs to double down on his anti-*Shāh nāma* rhetoric, a dynamic that only intensifies when we examine the apologetic

12 Omidsalar argues that this passage in *al-Naqḍ* does not suggest any conflict between the *manāqib khʷānān* and tellers of tales from pre-Islamic Iran, pointing out that al-Qazwīnī's attribution of such stories to the Umayyads is not presented directly as the cause of such a conflict, but is instead couched in a broader complaint about his interlocutor's double standards regarding the *manāqib khʷānān* (Omidsalar [1393] 2014–2015, 15–17). Though this is true, it ignores the profound sectarian force of what al-Qazwīnī claims. Not only does he blame the existence of tales of Iranian heroes on the Umayyads—the arch-villains of Shīʿī history—but he attributes them specifically to Umayyad efforts to discredit ʿAlī and his family. This need not evidence a prevailing Shīʿī attitude, but it is unmistakably intended to cast these stories as deeply inimical to the Shīʿī cause, and to those who sing ʿAlī's praises in particular.

13 This is one of the passages in which Rabīʿ mentions a *Mugh nāma*—a "Book of Magians"—alongside the *Shāh nāma* (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 2991), making his asserted elisions between pre-Islamic Iranian and Zoroastrian figures particularly clear.

context in which al-Qazwīnī introduces the Umayyad invention story in *al-Naqḍ*. The starting point for his discussion of *manāqib khʷānān* is the Sunnī complaint that Shīʿīs go to extremes in their attribution of miracles to the imams, attributing to ʿAlī the kinds of wonders that only befit a prophet (al-Qazwīnī [1358] 1980, 64–66; Loebenstein 2003, 206–10). In such an argument, the similarly supernatural deeds of Iranian heroes serve as an obvious point of reference. This line of al-Qazwīnī's reasoning, however, complicates any link connecting his suggestions of antipathy between the *manāqib khʷānān* and Iranian narrative subjects with the antipathy expressed by Rabīʿ. The reason for this is the basic dearth of *manāqib* in the *ʿAlī nāma* itself. This is certainly a poem in praise of ʿAlī, but *manāqib* are usually defined as individual events, feats or miracles that signal the imam's unique status. In Shīʿī discourses an imam's *manāqib* are regularly conflated with his *dalāʾil*—"signs"—the irrefutable proofs of his imamhood that usually contain miraculous elements, even as the *dalāʾil* of Muḥammad's prophecy do in Shīʿī and Sunnī literature alike ('*dalāʾil*' will hereafter be employed accordingly as encompassing both concepts). By the time Rabīʿ was writing, compilations of the imams' *dalāʾil* had become a staple of Twelver Shīʿī literature, but there is strikingly little overlap between this *dalāʾil* literature and the contents of the *ʿAlī nāma*.[14]

[18] Broadly speaking, Rabīʿ evidences a conservative attitude to imamic miracles. His poem does contain a few such events, including staples of Shīʿī *dalāʾil* collections such as ʿAlī lifting an unliftable boulder to reveal a flowing spring, but also less familiar elements such as ʿAlī's voice sending Muʿāwiya's troops into such consternation that they attack one another (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 5860–5955, 8708–24; al-Mufīd 2008, 1.334–8; al-Fattāl al-Nīsābūrī 1986, 129–30). These instances, however, are extremely dispersed throughout the *ʿAlī nāma*, the considerable length of which is mostly devoted to negotiations and battles between the different factions. While the latter do draw upon the dramatic vocabulary of the epic tradition, with a fair few adversaries split open from skull to saddle in a single swordstroke, this approaches neither the portentous wonder-working of the Shīʿī *dalāʾil* literature nor the more demon-heavy conflicts of other Persian epics, nor indeed their descriptive density. Moreover, the *ʿAlī nāma* conspicuously lacks a swathe of the most popular episodes from *dalāʾil* literature of the period, ranging from the least miraculous, such as prophetic declarations of investiture, to superhuman warrior heroics like ʿAlī's hurling of the fortress gate at Khaybar, to wholly marvellous episodes such as the imam commanding the sun to reverse its course so that he can pray on time (al-Mufīd 2008, 1:168, 333, 345–47; al-Ṭabarsī 2004, 141–44; Ibn Shahrāshūb 1991, 2:353–62).[15] On the rare occasions in the poem when ʿAlī does do something miraculous, the imam attributes his deeds to God's power and the Prophet's guidance, even telling his followers "I am powerless without you" (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 5968, 8820).

[19] This disinterest in *dalāʾil* has numerous implications for the nature of the *ʿAlī nāma* as a text. First, it clearly distances the poem from the stories told by al-Qazwīnī's *manāqib khʷānān*, in which ʿAlī displays such exploits as having himself fired from a catapult into a city so that he may slaughter the inhabitants single-handed (al-Qazwīnī [1358] 1980, 66). Second, it must be emphasised that this feature cannot be explained as expressing only the same suspicion

14 This is also in contrast to the longstanding tradition of Arabic devotional poetry in praise of the imams, wherein stock episodes from the *dalāʾil* literature are regularly alluded to (e.g., Shubbar 2001, 2:112, 223, 241, 283).

15 It may be observed that many of these most oft-cited *dalāʾil* (e.g., ʿAlī's heroics at Khaybar) are situated in historical moments prior to those that the *ʿAlī nāma* narrates. While the significance of this will be revisited below, it suffices here to note that the recollection of past events as proof is entirely germane both to the *ʿAlī nāma*'s dialogue and to Shīʿī *dalāʾil* literature of the period. The absence of such accounts thus remains highly significant.

of unsubstantiated accounts of the marvellous that worries both al-Qazwīnī and his Sunnī interlocutor. Rabīʿ does not merely omit highly miraculous *dalāʾil* stories, but shows only a sparing interest in the entire *dalāʾil* corpus. The *ʿAlī nāma*'s portrayal of the imam and the role of *dalāʾil* therein must therefore be based in concerns broader than theological sensibilities around the miraculous. Third, this approach to *dalāʾil* disrupts the logic behind al-Qazwīnī's explanation for the antipathy to Iranian themes; however many demons Rustam may have slain, Rabīʿ has no urge to claim that ʿAlī slew even more, and his opposition to such subjects must therefore be rooted elsewhere.

When it comes to Rabīʿ's attitude to Sunnīs, meanwhile, a fourth significance of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s dearth of *dalāʾil* is the resultant disconnection from a pivotal logic of Shīʿī *dalāʾil* literature, one that usually serves to emphasise the distinction between the imams' enlightened Shīʿa and the misguided Sunnīs who reject them. Texts that assert the imams' special status are closely associated with those asserting the special status of their followers (*shīʿa*), and it is common for chapters in *dalāʾil* collections and even whole books to be devoted to the virtues (*faḍāʾil*) or characteristics (*ṣifāt*) of the Shīʿa. Such texts serve to reinforce the imam's legitimacy much like other *dalāʾil* (if the imam's followers are uniquely safe from the hellfire, this has a clear bearing on his status as imam), but they also make explicit the communitarian thrust operating within Shīʿī *dalāʾil* literature: by illuminating the imams' miraculously proven right to the loyalty of the umma, these collections of their signs and miracles point to the dreadful consequences awaiting those who violate that right, even as they list the rewards of those who give the imams their due (al-Mufīd 2008, 1:41–43; al-Fattāl al-Nīsābūrī 1986, 119; al-Ṭabarī 1988, 6, 11). [20]

This exclusivist dynamic, in turn, ties into a more pervasive aspect of Shīʿī writings about the imams, namely the distinct character of Shīʿī hadith literature and the probative hurdles this created. Shīʿī and especially Twelver hadith literature had increasingly diverged from that of other groups over the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, both in its content and in its sources, with the result that texts and whole corpora that Twelvers considered decisive proofs were accorded little or no value by non-Shīʿīs (Warner 2021, 123–26). This reality is keenly felt in *dalāʾil* literature, and its assemblages of the imams' recorded miracles are often accompanied by harsh condemnations of those who do not accept the textual proofs thereof. Failure to recognise the imams' *dalāʾil*—a position held in reality by the great majority of Muslims—is declared to be explicable only by hypocrisy, a total rejection of all textual sources, or enmity towards Islam itself (al-Mufīd 2008, 1:341–4; Ibn Shahrāshūb 1991, 1:13–19). [21]

Shīʿī literatures affirming the imams' *dalāʾil* were thus deeply embedded within anti-Sunnī discourses, emphasising both the salvific, sectarian distinctness of Shīʿīs as a group and their narration of these miracle stories as a marker of that distinctness. Accordingly, Rabīʿ's undertaking to celebrate the imam with a reduced focus on *dalāʾil* facilitates his avoidance of any over-severe dichotomy of Sunnī against Shīʿī, lending the *ʿAlī nāma* a voice quite different to that of the *manāqib khʷānān* vying against the *faḍāʾil khʷānān*. Such an endeavour, in turn, fits our solidifying picture of a poet making diverse efforts to this effect throughout his engagements with Shīʿī intellectual traditions, jettisoning much of the reasoning and rhetoric of exclusivist Sunnī-Shīʿī binaries. [22]

As suggested above, part of the motivation for this nonconfrontational stance may be simple self-preservation, but another component thereof may be found in Rabīʿ's use of the phrase *khāṣṣ wa ʿāmm*—"the elite and the masses." Though it often occurs within the *ʿAlī nāma*'s narrative to describe large crowds, *khāṣṣ wa ʿāmm* (or *ʿāmm wa khāṣṣ*) is also regularly em- [23]

ployed by Rabīʿ to refer to his own audience (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 88, 102, 6169, 9437). The phrase expresses clearly the poet's ambition to preach his message expansively, but this choice of terminology also engages consequentially with long-established currents in Shīʿī thought. When Rabīʿ was writing, the terms *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm* and variants thereof had been used by Shīʿī writers for many centuries to refer to Shīʿīs and Sunnīs respectively, with distinct derogatory implications for the latter (Antoon 2014, 128–32). Such terminology is part of a much broader discourse in which Shīʿism, long-accustomed to being the faith of a minority, was constructed by its adherents as the preserve of a chosen, enlightened few. At the very least this Shīʿī 'elite' guarded truths that the misguided majority of Muslims had forgotten, while in some circles Shīʿīs were imagined as a community radically, morally and even cosmically apart, its members distinguished from the contemptible 'masses' by attributes ranging from legitimate birth to having been created from the same luminous substance as the imams themselves before the making of the world (Vilozny 2017, 57–109; Dakake 2008, 177–89). Rabīʿ's explicit avoidance of such ideas, addressing his poem repeatedly to *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm* alike, is thus another example of his systematic eschewing of anti-Sunnī rhetoric, but it also makes plain the purpose thereof: to proclaim ʿAlī's virtue to as broad an audience as possible. Like Qawāmī Rāzī's ingratiating negotiations with his Sunnī patrons, Rabīʿ is clearly not preaching to the converted, but seeks to craft a vision of the imam that might persuade non-Shīʿīs.[16]

[24] The aspiration to a trans-sectarian audience is also voiced in Rabīʿ's approach to another term: *majāz*. The word denotes figurative, non-literal use of language, and had long been acknowledged as a fundamental component of poetry in both Arabic and Persian. It is therefore quite remarkable that we find Rabīʿ condemning *majāz*, declaring the *ʿAlī nāma* to be a work that tells the truth as clearly as possible, and one in which such indirect language accordingly has no part (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 9413–21). This attitude is embodied in the relentlessly unadorned style of the *ʿAlī nāma*; many readers have decried the lack of poetic ambition in Rabīʿ's lines, though they do not always acknowledge that this simplicity is in keeping with Rabīʿ's own stated purpose (Omidsalar [1388] 2009–2010, 11–12; Afshārī [1389] 2010–2011, 26). The term *majāz*, meanwhile, is also used in the *ʿAlī nāma* to describe the lies and hypocrisies of ʿAlī's enemies (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 2270, 7397, 9649). Though Rabīʿ does not directly contrast his own *majāz*-free speech with the *majāz*-filled discourses of his villains, the contrast is nevertheless unmistakeable in his literary and sectarian contexts alike, tying his critique of *majāz* firmly to the *ʿAlī nāma*'s other central antagonisms.

[25] The attack on insufficiently plain-speaking poetry has plenty of potential targets among different Muslim groups in Rabīʿ's vicinity, most obviously the diverse esoteric traditions that flourished in this period. Alongside the beginnings of a highly allusive and complex Ṣūfī poetic tradition in Persian, intricate esoteric and initiatic systems were in use amongst Shīʿīs of various persuasions, and it is therefore highly likely that the abhorrence of *majāz* in the *ʿAlī nāma* fits into the poem's wider pattern of adjusting and mellowing Shīʿī discourses.[17]

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16 A corollary to this conclusion, of course, is that the apologetic strategies surveyed here are just that, and need not entirely reflect Rabīʿ's own theological views.

17 That Rabīʿ refers to the hidden meaning of deceptive speech as *bāṭin*—a term strongly associated with Shīʿī esoteric groups, whose detractors referred to them as the *bāṭiniyya*—further indicates that he has such groups in mind (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 9838). This attitude may, in part, reflect a specifically Twelver position; esoteric systems in this period were much more central to Ismāʿīlī and Nuṣayrī Shīʿism, while Twelvers (and Zaydīs) largely kept them at arm's length.

The *ʿAlī nāma*'s hostility to elaborate symbolisms renders irresistible a comparison with the other great Shīʿī Persian poetic corpus of the era, the works of Nāṣir-i Khusraw. There is no indication that either poet was aware of the other's works, but the contrast between Rabīʿ's plain style and Nāṣir-i Khusraw's dense

Alongside these intra-Shīʿī concerns, however, Rabīʿ's hostility to *majāz* also connects back to his hostility to Ferdowsi. The *Shāh nāma* is filled with the kinds of elaborate description that the *ʿAlī nāma* eschews (as are later epics), while Ferdowsi, like Rabīʿ, also invokes notions of hidden meaning in contexts of poetic self-justification. Unlike Rabīʿ, however, these interjections are not refusals of such devices, rather Ferdowsi highlights his usage thereof to defend elements of his narrative that might otherwise be dismissed as unbelievable, idle fantasy. Both in his introduction to the *Shāh nāma* and in preface to some of its more flamboyantly supernatural episodes, Ferdowsi bids his reader remember that there is more to these stories than the literal (un)truth of what they describe, and that behind their demons and dragons lie meanings and lessons that are entirely real (Ferdowsi 1988–1997, 1:11–12; Davis 2006, 8; Omidsalar 2001, 261–62). In condemning *majāz*, Rabīʿ thus undermines precisely the concept whereby Ferdowsi vindicates the value of his more outlandish narratives—those most open to being rejected as lies.[18] The condemnation deepens Rabīʿ's polemic against the *Shāh nāma*, and more specifically deepens his contention that such poetry cannot impart wisdom (*khirad*), an argument already present in his opening address (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 95). This contention, in turn, audaciously contradicts the claims to be bestowing wisdom that suffuse both the *Shāh nāma* and many successor epics (Ghaḍanfarī [1369] 2017–2018; Askari 2016, 133–70).[19]

[26] In Rabīʿ's rejection of *majāz*, then, we find the meeting point of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s avoidance of exclusionary Shīʿī discourses and its hostility to Iranian themes. Just as Rabīʿ's reluctance to condemn Sunnīs is driven by the desire to construct a trans-sectarian address to both *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm*, so his denunciation of the *Shāh nāma* casts Ferdowsi's work as incomprehensible and incapable of conveying wisdom; his avoidance of a conventionally miraculous ʿAlī similarly reflects a suspicion both of the fantastical battles of the epic tradition and of a Shīʿī imamological literature that constructs luminously supernatural imams as a rebuke to those who do not follow them. Rabīʿ's very different management of his poem's two core antagonisms is thus underpinned by a supreme concern with the efficacious communication of truth.

Sedition, Salvation and a Wronged Princess

[27] By contending that the *ʿAlī nāma*'s attitudes to Sunnīs and to Iranian themes are driven by didactic concerns, we are compelled to ask what it is, exactly, that Rabīʿ is trying to tell his readers. The poem's forcefully homiletic tone fits well into the era of its composition, which saw a diverse growth of experimentation in the use of Persian poetry as a medium for religious instruction (de Bruijn 1983, 164–71). Nonetheless, the above has repeatedly drawn attention

web of philosophies and images encapsulates different Shīʿī groups' disagreements over the nature of the imams' truth.

18 It should be noted that here again the *ʿAlī nāma*'s relationship with Ferdowsi is quite different to that of al-Qazwīnī's *manāqib khʷānān*; it is born not of a kind of arms-race of the wondrous, but of a polemic regarding what kind of truth should be told and how.

19 Omidsalar points out the nuanced semantics of 'lies' as a descriptor of poetry in this period, noting that lying is often identified as essential to the beauty and success of poetry, and so arguing that Rabīʿ's comments in this regard need not be derogatory ([1389] 2010–2011, 46–49). As Omidsalar acknowledges, however, poets can elsewhere be found exalting their own truthfulness above Ferdowsi's and, as we have already seen, condemning the latter's deceitfulness by comparison (Ethé 1970, 23–30; Tetley 2009, 5–6; Omidsalar [1393] 2014–2015, 23), and it is in this company that Rabīʿ sits much more comfortably. While his lines about the *Shāh nāma*'s fictitiousness might perhaps, in isolation, be read as complimentary, within the context of the *ʿAlī nāma* as a whole they inhabit a pervasive moral framework of virtuous truth beleaguered by wicked deceit.

to ways in which Rabīʿ distances himself from how his fellow poets and his fellow Shīʿīs alike undertake to instruct their readers, such that the mode of instruction that he himself pursues merits careful consideration.

The question of Rabīʿ's didactic goal takes us directly to that of his subject matter. His chosen narrative focus is the great battles of ʿAlī's caliphate—the Camel and Ṣiffīn—and he remarks at the poem's end that he would have gone on to recount the battle against the Khārijīs at Nahrawān had there been time to do so (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 11207). At first glance this choice seems obvious; after all, a rival epic to the *Shāh nāma* must needs contain battles. Conversely, however, there are other battles that Rabīʿ could have chosen, battles that would certainly have been more germane to other Shīʿī literatures in praise of ʿAlī, and might well have cast the imam as a more conventionally triumphant epic hero. This is another point where the poem diverges from *dalāʾil* literature, the bulk of which is devoted to earlier events in ʿAlī's life, most of them occurring during the lifetime of the Prophet. Such a context is inherently far more productive ground for legitimising narratives; not only is Muḥammad himself on hand to declare ʿAlī's special status and to confirm signs of divine favour, but more generally the career of the last prophet is a ready arena for the happy victory of pious enlightenment against unbelieving wickedness. The prophetic battles offer plenty of ʿAlī's warrior heroics, such as the standard *dalāʾil* of his extraordinary hurling of the fortress gate at Khaybar and of his being repeatedly chosen to carry the Prophet's banner (al-Mufīd 2008, 60–166; al-Ṭabarsī 2004, 193–207), all of them meted out against comfortably non-Muslim foes. [28]

Such unambiguous triumphs present a stark contrast with ʿAlī's beleaguered caliphate and the internecine sedition of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. As loci classici of the trauma of inter-Muslim conflict—*fitna*—these events seem a counterintuitive canvass on which to glorify the majesty of Arabic Islam at the expense of Iranian unbelief. Moreover, their contentious nature poses significant difficulties both for Rabīʿ's concern not to antagonise Sunnīs and for Shīʿī devotional purposes. As noted above, these battles pit reverence for ʿAlī in stubborn opposition to reverence for many of the Prophet's companions and for his wife ʿĀʾisha, inevitably risking provocation of Sunnī readers. Meanwhile, unlike the simpler dynamics of good martyred by evil found in ʿAlī's son al-Ḥusayn's death at Karbala, the stalemate at Ṣiffīn threatens to produce an inglorious, anticlimactic scene of the infallible imam being outwitted by his wilier opponent. Accordingly, neither the Camel nor Ṣiffīn feature much in the prodigious corpus of Shīʿī devotional poetry in Arabic preceding Rabīʿ (Shubbar 2001, 2:234–97). [29]

Beyond the main events narrated, the *ʿAlī nāma*'s portrayal of the imam is also unusual in terms of the kinds of roles it allots to ʿAlī. Though Rabīʿ is at pains to encourage readers to derive wisdom from his story, one is quickly struck by how rarely such wisdom seems to come from the mouth of the imam himself; this ʿAlī is not a sage who delivers instructive counsels to the reader. The poem is at variance here with the Persian epic tradition in general and with the successor epics in particular, the heroes of which regularly deliver and undergo lengthy instruction via a variety of erudite teachers and mysterious documents (Gazerani 2015, 65, 154–56). It is at variance, too, with Shīʿī imamological literature, in which ʿAlī appears as a supreme rhetorician, as a Solomonic dispenser of enlightened justice, and as a source of improving aphorisms, the last of which were already being translated into Persian verse by at least one of Rabīʿ's contemporaries (al-Mufīd 2008, 199–304; al-Sharīf al-Raḍī 2008; de Blois and Storey 1939–1997, 5:335; Stetkevych 2019, 215–30). By contrast, the ʿAlī of the *ʿAlī nāma* rarely speaks at length, and when he does so it is usually only to assert his rights as [30]

imam, with scant representation of the expansive knowledge and eloquence accorded him in other Shīʿī sources of the period. Of his many sermons in the poem, most are reduced to a few summary lines, while the longest by far is an apocalyptic prophecy (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 234–52, 2154–2223, 10665–72).

[31] Much of the above offers a long list of what the *ʿAlī nāma* lacks. Rabīʿ presents a poem about ʿAlī which contains little in the way of condemnation of Sunnīs and exaltation of the Shīʿa, of wondrous, status-affirming deeds of the imam, of the wisdom of the imam's teachings or even of lament for the imam's martyrdom, and one that meanwhile disavows the rich descriptive idioms of both Ferdowsian epic and esoteric writings. The result is a highly unusual piece of Shīʿī literature, neither elegy nor quite panegyric, but one that nonetheless conveys intensely Shīʿī doctrinal concerns. These are imparted not through miraculous proofs or lengthy discourses of imamology, but through the sequential shape of the poem's narrative and the recurring character of its constituent episodes, both of which are immersed within the Persian epic medium. It is to these narratological features that we shall now turn.

[32] The *ʿAlī nāma*'s narrative may best be summarised as a constant exchange of violence and persuasion between the righteous and the corrupt. Its many battle scenes are dominated by an ongoing, symmetrical trade in deaths between the pious and the wicked: a virtuous hero from ʿAlī's army will slay one of their wayward opponents, whose death will then be avenged by another, such that another virtuous hero will have to avenge his comrade's death in turn (e.g., Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 7535–7677, 8012–8333). An almost achingly dialogic poem, a great portion of its lines describe not martial heroics but the exchange of words and letters, as character after character is either enticed away from ʿAlī's cause or exhorted towards it. Great parts of this schema will seem highly formulaic if not tedious to many readers, particularly given the repetitious lack of descriptive ambition (the simile "like the wind"—*chū bād*—to convey speed is used well over 200 times). Nevertheless, as a whole this back-and-forth of guidance and temptation, martyrdom and triumph, presents a dramatisation of the phenomenon that the Camel and Ṣiffīn embody above all others in the Muslim historical imagination: *fitna*. Beyond the simple good-versus-evil dynamic of many of its individual scenes, as a whole Rabīʿ's poem offers a rich interrogation of human failure, of the individual's and the umma's enduring capacity to be corrupted by confusion and temptation. A few characters—foremost amongst them Muʿāwiya and Marwān—are cast as perpetually wicked, but as such their chief role is to mislead other characters, to whom Rabīʿ meanwhile offers tragically missed opportunities of salvation, for example the initially loyal follower who is dissuaded from fealty to ʿAlī by his wife (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 3445–56). This human capacity for alternate guidance and misguidance is nowhere more vivid than in the person of ʿĀʾisha, who during the events leading up to the battle of the Camel is an almost comic figure in her fluctuations between one position and another; she veers back and forth between those who counsel her towards righteousness, such as Umm Salama, and wrongdoers who lure her towards disaster, changing her mind every time she hears new advice (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 460–798) (though this portrait of the Prophet's wife is hardly flattering, it commutes full responsibility for her misdeeds to her tempters, deftly absolving Rabīʿ from making harsher judgements upon so revered a figure).

[33] The figure of the imam who stands in the midst of this turbulence is one of frustrated power. He is not overcome, reaching the story's end counterintuitively (for Shīʿī imamography) alive and counterfactually triumphant, but his powers, both as the true imam and as a peerless warrior, are unable to stem the sedition that keeps so many Muslims from following him. While

dalāʾil literature contains accounts of multitudes being converted to Islam by ʿAlī's words and deeds, in the *ʿAlī nāma* such events are replaced by the often all-too-fleeting conversions of figures like ʿĀʾisha. Though ʿAlī occasionally addresses his foes or enters the battle, more frequently he delegates, sending messages and messengers who are usually neither fully obedient nor fully obeyed, while even on the battlefield he must sometimes resort to subterfuge, creeping into the enemy camp at night or disguising as one of his followers, rather than more familiar displays of chivalric might (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 7920–56, 8666–8781). Rabīʿ's restriction of the imam's speech is opposed to the central role of speech, indeed of *majāz*, in corrupting the faithful, even as it is choice (*ikhtiyār*)—and thus the capacity for wrong, wrongfully persuaded choice—that is opposed to the divine designation of the imam (*naṣṣ*) the denial of which is the beginning of *fitna*. In contrast to Muʿāwiya and his *majāz*-spinning cronies, ʿAlī, the warrior-imam, conveys God's truth "at the point of Dhū'l-fiqār" (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 80). The tragic frustration of this ideal, meanwhile, is evident from the first instance in the poem of ʿAlī's fabled sword being drawn—not against his enemies, but against a mob of would-be-supporters whose sudden entrance surprises him (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 193–200).

[34] This depiction of the imam, his rights and his struggles, is evidently inseparable from the *ʿAlī nāma*'s epic form. The sustained narrative of the epic, quite unlike Arabic poetic models, allows the representation of the ongoing exchanges and changes of fortune and heart that underly the poem's vision of *fitna*. Rather than simply listing examples of ʿAlī's greatness, its extended, episodic character enables a complexity and distance in ʿAlī's relationship with individual moments of action, enabling in turn its portrayal of the frustration of his powers. Meanwhile, the poem invests in the epic staple of the heroic confrontation, be it of arms or words, as its antidote to the obfuscations of dialectic. That this vision of martial struggle might persuade "at the point of Dhū'l-fiqār" where theological argument cannot, is the starting point of Rabīʿ's endeavour to deliver a Shīʿī message of ʿAlī's singular legitimacy without the polarising apparatus of Shīʿī religious scholarship. More broadly, the fresh literary terrain of Persian epic supplies valuable distance from more established genres of imamography, creating space for the *ʿAlī nāma*'s unconventional image of the hero-imam to take shape.

[35] Evidently, none of these manifold utilities of the epic medium to Rabīʿ's purposes engender any love for Ferdowsi; quite the reverse. In the *ʿAlī nāma*, the epic exchange of force is imbued with an all-pervasive moral charge: each blow is struck either for good or for evil; each character—fluctuate though they might—is at any given moment on the side of right or wrong. In the face of such fierce moral polarity, the affront of the *Shāh nāma* is its capacity for moral ambiguity: in battles between Rustam and Suhrāb or Isfandyār, even between Yazdagird and the Arabs, Ferdowsi invites our empathy for both sides (Ferdowsi 1988–1997, 5:418–26; Davis 2015, 7–10). Despite their many differences, here the *ʿAlī nāma* strikes a similar chord to the anonymous *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*, with both works finding theological fault with Ferdowsi's compassionate bewilderment in the face of inscrutable destiny. While Joseph's story replaces uncomprehending resignation with an eminently trustworthy God who ensures that all ends well, the *ʿAlī nāma* rejects the even-handedness of the *Shāh nāma*'s fatalism in favour of ever-present divine judgement.

[36] It is clear that Rabīʿ's condemnation of Ferdowsi is integral to his appropriation of the epic form, a task which is driven in turn by the goal of communicating Shīʿism in a Sunnī-dominated world. Thus conceived, the non-Muslim, Iranian antagonists of the poem are largely abstract concerns of poetic convention, in contrast to the very real Sunnīs with whom

it seeks to converse. This, however, is not quite the whole story. The last part of this study will explore two points where Iranians and Zoroastrians escape these framing concerns of literary style to enter into the vicissitudes of the *ʿAlī nāma*'s narrative.

[37] The first of these intrusions pivots upon a single word: *gabr*. The word can simply mean "unbeliever," often a synonym for the Arabic *kāfir*, but it can also specifically denote Zoroastrians (Shaki 2012; Bausani 2012). The term *gabr* is used over 150 times in the *ʿAlī nāma*, serving as one of Rabīʿ's preferred epithets for his villains, particularly Muʿāwiya and Marwān, who together account for the majority of its occurrences. The ambiguity of the term's meaning, combined with the scale of its usage, bids us enquire to what extent Rabīʿ is encouraging us to see his villains as Zoroastrian in some sense, incorporated into the same antagonism whereby he associates the *Shāh nāma* with a putative *Mugh nāma* – "The Book of Magians" (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 2979, 2991). In light of this question, then, it is telling that Rabīʿ does not use *gabr* as an entirely interchangeable synonym for *kāfir*.[20] *Gabr* occurs in the poem some six times more frequently than *kāfir*, a remarkable anomaly in a text that is usually so resolutely Arabicising in its diction. Moreover, the uses to which *kāfir* and *gabr* are each put are carefully, consistently differentiated. *Gabr*, as noted, is an ubiquitous descriptor for Muʿāwiya and his cronies, often serving as an epithet. This is a role that is never played by the word *kāfir*. While ʿAlī and his allies occasionally refer to Muʿāwiya as *kāfir* (or engaged in *kāfirī* – "unbelief"), such descriptions do not come in the narratorial voice of Rabīʿ himself, and the word is never used as a direct epithet. Meanwhile, over half of the uses of the word *kāfir* occur in the context of characters allied to ʿAlī recalling the warning of the Prophet that whosoever makes war on ʿAlī has become an unbeliever (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 161, 1472, 1770, 2026, 2647, 4297, 7362, 8846, 9166, 9269).

[38] Muʿāwiya, then, is evidently a *gabr* in a different manner to that in which he is a *kāfir*. His *kāfirī* unbelief—unbelief expressed in the binding, technical language of religious scholarship—is loudly, scripturally implicit, denoted by the repeated citation of a prophetic hadith that gives a criterion for such unbelief that Muʿāwiya unquestionably meets. Nevertheless, the label remains crucially implicit when contrasted with Muʿāwiya's ubiquitous and direct identification as *gabr*, a hair's breadth of distance that serves an apologetic purpose, leaving the final conclusion of Muʿāwiya's technical unbelief up to the reader, and affording the poet a modicum of deniability. Meanwhile, the affixing of an Iranian aspect to the sacrilegious wickedness of Muʿāwiya and his fellows enhances a set of resonances already observed throughout Rabīʿ's poem between these characters' narrated wrongdoing and the poetic wrongdoing of Ferdowsi, with both united in the *ʿAlī nāma*'s cardinal sin of deceiving (and thus causing *fitna*) with *durūgh* and *majāz*. Just as Muʿāwiya's and Marwān's status as *gabr* avoids a more hazardous designation as *kāfir*, so their usurpation of ʿAlī's caliphate and the tragic consequences thereof are embedded within a symbolic web of Iranian, quasi-Zoroastrian sedition, rather than being tied to the ongoing institution of the Sunnī caliphate, the ruling ʿAbbāsid caliphs and those who follow them.

[39] The mirror image of these equations appears in the poem's only episode featuring an Iranian character (excluding one passing mention of Salmān): Shahrbānū, the Sasanian princess who was captured during the Muslim conquest of Iran, and who became the wife of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī. Shahrbānū appears only briefly in the *ʿAlī nāma* and, most unlike Muʿāwiya, does not speak at all, nor does Rabīʿ dwell upon the usual focus of her celebration by Shīʿīs, being her status as the wife and mother of imams (Amir-Moezzi 2010, 45–100; Savant 2013, 102–8).

20 In other early New Persian sources, *kāfir* is regularly used to describe Zoroastrians (Savant 2013, 206).

Instead, the princess makes a surprise appearance towards the end of Ṣiffīn, when ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb's pious widow petitions ʿAlī to give her the body of her husband, who has been killed while fighting for Muʿāwiya. ʿAlī provisionally agrees, but first tells her of how, years before, her late husband was possessed by a vengeful mania following the assassination of his father by a Persian slave, and murdered Shahrbānū's two brothers, Bahman and Hurmuzd, as they prayed. The blood-money for these murdered Muslims is still due, and ʿUbayd Allāh's widow must first ensure that it is paid (from Muʿāwiya's treasury, naturally) before the body is handed over. The widow duly abides by ʿAlī's request, and Shahrbānū, after long patience, at last receives restitution, which she passes on to her bereaved sisters-in-law (Rabīʿ [1389] 2010–2011, 8363–8428, 8829–49).

[40] As well as its value as an early exemplar of Shīʿī interest in Shahrbānū's story (Rabīʿ [1388] 2009–2010, xxvii–xxix), this brief episode dramatically enriches the *ʿAlī nāma*'s schema of identity. In the face of a spectral, Zoroastrian Iranianness that hovers over all that is wicked and deceptive in the poem, here we have three Iranian Muslim characters who are not only on the side of righteousness but suffer for it, suffering that Rabīʿ recollects and relocates into the heart of the anguish of Ṣiffīn. They stand as clear visions of a sincere Iranian Islam, one that is assaulted, like the imam himself, by wayward *gabr*-cum-Muslims, and finally sanctified and given justice through Shahrbānū's metonymic place amidst the imam's continued struggle.

Conclusion

[41] The end of the *ʿAlī nāma* is one of its most frustrating elements, offering as it does a highly unusual reshaping of the historical narrative, but one that is sometimes hard to follow and appears unfinished, or at least somewhat rushed (Rabīʿ claims to have been pressed for time, [1389] 2010–2011, 11207). Several of the poem's closing episodes are narrated extremely quickly (the last battle is over in ten lines), even as the segues from one episode to another are often laconically sudden. The main events are as follows: after the arbitration at Ṣiffīn, Muʿāwiya faces total annihilation by ʿAlī's forces, escaping only through a pathetic display of self-abasement ([1389] 2010–2011, 10537–660). ʿĀʾisha re-enters the story to petition ʿAlī for better treatment, then betrays him to seek sanctuary with Muʿāwiya, claiming that ʿAlī's soldiers have assaulted her, a claim that is humiliatingly disproven when these soldiers turn out to be women in disguise ([1389] 2010–2011, 10705–881). Muʿāwiya, meanwhile, shows himself viciously unrepentant by murdering ʿAlī's lieutenant Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, mocking his victim's undying loyalty as he does so: "Call on ʿAlī now, then, and see if he saves you from this!" ([1389] 2010–2011, 10882–927, 10890). ʿAlī demands justice but is thwarted, manipulated by Muʿāwiya into executing scores of the latter's henchmen in his stead ([1389] 2010–2011, 10928–1150). Muʿāwiya's last military gambit is to call upon the Christian Byzantines (*rūm*) for help; these "forces of the cross" duly send an army, which ʿAlī summarily defeats ([1389] 2010–2011, 10687–704, 11190–202).

[42] Rabīʿ's long portrait of the imam battling against *fitna* thus arrives at a triumphant finale, in defiance both of the historical record and of a robust Shīʿī tradition of martyrological climaxes, but not entirely at the expense of the grim shadows that extend the length of it. On the one hand, the denouement presents a final deliverance: ʿAlī's victory against Muʿāwiya is now also a victory against actual non-Muslims, rescuing the reader at last from the woes of inter-Muslim strife (woes that reach their peak in the depraved episodes immediately preceding the defeat of the Christians). On the other hand, the sudden appearance of this new adversary

from the west highlights the ominous constraints by which Rabīʿ's ʿAlī has been consistently afflicted. Just as Dhū'l-fiqār is first drawn in error at the *ʿAlī nāma*'s beginning, so at its close we see this heavenly weapon used needlessly to massacre hapless lackeys while the true villain escapes. Muʿāwiya cannot, in the end, be wholly defeated, be he a figure of Sunnism or of Zoroastrianism, and Rabīʿ must reach abruptly for a scapegoat ex machina over whom his imam can be cathartically victorious with no strings attached.

[43] The preceding analysis has offered an incipient map of the inventive complexity of Rabīʿ's engagement with his literary and sectarian contexts. There is a growing scholarly realisation that Muslim devotional literatures can no longer be dismissed as mere 'pious flattery' (Ogunnaike 2020, 2–5), and the *ʿAlī nāma* exemplifies the wealth that such literatures have to offer, standing as a monument to Shīʿī creativity during the Sunnī revival.[21] The poem delivers an unique account of ʿAlī's supreme right as imam that damns Muʿāwiya and Marwān while accommodating Sunnīs, and ostracises the *Shāh nāma* while immersed in the possibilities of its mimetic resources. Persian epic is cast as the quintessence of the deceitful *majāz*-spinning that dooms the umma, but it also supplies the direct cut-and-thrust of narrative that conveys the self-evident truth of ʿAlī's warrior-heroism. Iranian Zoroastrianism serves as a sinister imaginary that cloaks the poem's sectarian force, even while Rabīʿ is careful to affirm Iranian Muslims' escape route into the saved Shīʿa of the imām, and inflicts final defeat upon a different foe altogether. Far from expressing a blunt opposition of Arabic and Islamic (and Shīʿī) against Persian and Zoroastrian, this is a poem that engages and tests the multiple identities of its author and of its audience, the shifting of its lines of antagonism mirroring the tension it depicts between the splendour and the tragic limits of the imam's heroic might.

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21 As for the *ʿAlī nāma*'s significance as an early, almost-lost Persian epic, it is difficult to improve on Hemmat and Lee's recent assessment of another such work: "To dismiss such works because they do not, individually, survive in many manuscript copies would be to dismiss precisely what was creative and experimental in medieval Islamic literary culture" (Ibn Abu'l-Khayr 2022, 4).

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