

**Political Authority and Tragedy in the Shahnameh: A  
Study of the Shahnameh on the Basis of Hegel's  
Theory of Tragedy**

Ali Sadeghi\*

**Abstract**

The paper aims to study the Shahnameh on the basis of Hegel's theory of tragedy. For Hegel, political authority was closely related to tragedy and the two formed a unique worldview that helps us understand Greek society and polity in a new way. It is hoped that by studying the Shahnameh on this basis, we may be able to come to a better understating of Iranian society and polity.

**Keywords:** Shahnameh, Tragedy, Political authority, Rostam.

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\* Associate Professor at Tarbiat Modares University. Tehran, Iran;  
sadeghi\_uk@yahoo.com

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## **Introduction**

The Shahnameh has often been studied from a purely literary point of view. These studies have, in most cases, lacked a philosophical/theoretical framework within which to analyze the issues raised in the text. This paper aims to take some steps towards filling this gap by studying the notion of tragedy in the Shahnameh on the basis of Hegel's definition of this term. It will be argued that the concept of political authority, which plays an important role in Hegel's definition of tragedy, is of central importance in understanding the Shahnameh. More specifically, the relationship between these two notions in the Shahnameh will be analyzed.

Moreover, Hegel's scattered references to Persian literature in general and the Shahnameh in particular have not been analyzed largely for the obvious reason that Hegel scholars have generally lacked the linguistic abilities to study these texts in the original. Again this paper aims to fill this gap. In true dialectical fashion, therefore, the paper will bring Hegel's theoretical/philosophical analysis to understand one of the most important Persian literary texts and it will bring an in-depth knowledge of this text to cast light upon references made by Hegel to the Shahnameh (Hegel, 1975:186,1097-8).

Previous studies of the Shahnameh have often misunderstood the notion of tragedy or have at times, misinterpreted the text to fit some present-day concern. Eslami-Nodoushan, for example, writing in the 1960s compares Rostam, the greatest hero of the Shahnameh, to the Communist Vietnamese fighters fighting American forces in Vietnam! He considers both to be freedom fighters (Eslami Nodoushan, 1351/1972). Writing in the 1980s Saidi-e Sirjani gives a portrait of Esfandiyar as a prince that had both political and religious authority, thinking, it seems, mainly of the events taking place in Iran in the 1980s. (Sa'idi Sirjani, 1377/1998:86) Minovi thought the text to be the one to unite all Iranians and give them a sense of identity (Minovi,

1358/1980:106-138). An earlier generation writing in the 1930s considered the Shahnameh as the text upon which Iranian nationalism was based and Rostam as the nation's hero of all times. Bahar hoped that the Shahnameh could be used as a rallying point to give Iranians a new sense of self-confidence that will lead to much needed economic and social development. (Bahar,1379/200:56) Scholarly though many of these works are, they all lack a theoretical framework within which to study the Shahnameh. Here, it is hoped, that Hegel's philosophical reflections on tragedy can provide us with the theoretical tools necessary to study the text.

The notion of tragedy is sometimes used in a loose sense to mean a story that has a sad ending. Here the term is used in the specific sense in which Hegel defines it.

### **Hegel and Tragedy**

A. C. Bradley once wrote, "Since Aristotle dealt with tragedy, and, as usual, drew the main features of his subject with those sure and simple strokes which no later hand has rivaled, the only philosopher who has treated it in a manner both original and searching is Hegel".(Bradley, 1950:69) However, Hegel's theory of tragedy cannot be easily determined partly because his writings about it are scattered in a number of his books and lectures. The main sources used here are parts of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, and *The Philosophy of History*.

"In *Phenomenology*, we learn that history can be understood as a dialectic of particular and universal: man seeks recognition of his own particular self from all men; he seeks universal recognition of his particularity."(Mills, 1998:243) The *Phenomenology* itself may be seen as an attempt to map out the route by which the Western man's (self)consciousness has arrived at modernity and the French Revolution. In the ancient Greek world, it is the spiritual work of art that constitutes the

essence of self-consciousness. "The national Spirits which become conscious of their essence in the shape of a particular animal coalesce into a single Spirit. Thus it is that the separate beautiful national Spirits unite into a single pantheon, the element, and habitation of which is language." (Hegel, 1977:439)

The relationship between tragedy and religion is of central concern for the purposes of this paper. The earliest forms of religion and consciousness are tied to nature. These people used wood, stones etc to make idols. This is the simplest and lowest form of religious consciousness. But as Hegel says "(T)he Greeks worshipped God as Spiritual". (Hegel 1956: 244). For them consciousness was no longer bound fully in nature; it had now become partly free.

Free people use language to express its consciousness. This consciousness comes on the scene when a people have matured enough to leave behind the worship of natural objects. Unlike stones and wood, language is a self-conscious existence. To express oneself in language means that one has gone beyond the bounds of nature to experience the freedom of spirit. Hence the Greek self-consciousness takes the form of literary works. For Hegel therefore, tragedy is itself a form of religious consciousness. The Greek tragedies are an important part of this body of literature.

In section A of chapter six of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel discusses his favorite Greek tragedy, *Antigone*, in some detail. However, before entering the discussion about the play, he gives his overall analysis of the Greek political life. The polis is an ethical world. Here "...individuality has the meaning of *self-consciousness* in general, ...the ethical substance is *actual* substance, absolute Spirit realized in the plurality of existent consciousnesses; this spirit is the community which, when we entered the sphere of Reason in its practical embodiment, was *for us* absolute essence, and here has emerged *on its own*

*account* in its truth as conscious ethical essence."(Hegel, 1977:267) Spirit is now as actual substance, a *polis* and as actual consciousness the citizens of this *polis*.

Hegel argues that the ancient Greeks did not have an *abstract* notion of the state. For them, the *polis* is the arena of moral choice. "Of the Greeks in the first and genuine form of their Freedom, we may assert, that they have no conscience; the habit of living for their country without further [analysis or] reflection, was the principle dominant among them." (Hegel, 1956:253)

There is, however, an inherent duality at the heart of the Greek *polis*. On the one hand, the *polis* is based on human law, which is the reflection of the free will of the citizens. Men to the entire exclusion of women dominate the public sphere. As such human law is essentially masculine. The term 'free citizen' does not include women and slaves.

"Confronting this clearly manifest ethical power there is, however, another power, the Divine Law." (Hegel, 1977:268) For Hegel, the Greek Spirit was based on two elements, nature and spirit. However, in time the original mythology, which was closely tied to nature was turned into something closer to spirit. The Titans are, according to him, "merely physical, natural existences, from whose grasp sovereignty is wrested." (Hegel, 1956:245) The overthrow of Titans by the race of Zeus implies the degradation of nature. The sphere of the divine law is the family, which is also the sphere of women.

The family is, for Hegel, "a *natural* ethical community".(Hegel,1977:268) It is the sphere of natural existence and is the ground of the unconscious. While in the Greek *polis* men take an active part in public affairs, the women are confined to the realm of the family. Hence the divine law whose sphere is the family is essentially feminine. It is the woman's responsibility to carry out the divine law concerning

burial. In this case, it is Antigone's responsibility to bury his brother despite Creon's orders that such an act would be viewed as a crime.

In *Antigone*, therefore, we witness the clash of the two laws, the divine and the human. Antigone represents the former whereas Creon is the upholder of the latter. Each side takes the one particular law to be absolute and in this way shows the limits of his/ her own position. What is of particular importance for the argument of this paper is that first of all political and divine authority are separate in the Greek *polis*. They have their different spheres in the life of the community. As will become clear in the following pages this did not apply to the ancient Persian society. There, the divine and the state laws were not separate. This had very important implications that will be explored below. Secondly, the tragic view can be identified by the lack of a unitary all-embracing authority. The absence of such an authority in the *polis* allows for the existence of tragedy. Its presence is the hallmark of the Persian/Zoroastrian civilization. However, as will become clear this outlook comes about with the religion of Zoroaster. The pre-Zoroastrian civilization is much closer to the tragic worldview.

Hegel describes the central conflict of the play in these words: "Since it sees right only on one side and wrong on the other, that consciousness which belongs to the divine law sees in the other side only the violence of human caprice, while that which holds to human law sees in the other only the self-will and disobedience of the individual who insists on being his own authority."(Hegel, 1977:280) As is well known Hegel gives special prominence to the sister-brother relationship. But this aspect of his argument is not relevant to the discussion that follows in this paper. What is however of great importance here is that Antigone's action is a direct challenge to the political authority of the *polis* and is seen as a crime in the context of the play.

It is clear, therefore, that the nature of authority is central to tragedy. Human law is the law of the *polis*; it is based upon the free choice of the citizens. Its essence is free subjectivity. The divine law, however, has a very different basis. It is essentially pre-political.

In his monumental work on the *Phenomenology*, H.S. Harris writes "Hegel understands Greek Tragedy as the political means through which the perfect balance of the spiritual *truth* was maintained. Thus the *Antigone* is a political parable about what happens when the "true" relations of the sexes is violated. We can find in it, therefore, both the truth of the Greek *polis* and the logic of Greek political history."(Harris, 1997:208) To live under the rule of one law and ignore the other involves committing a crime.

The hero(ine) who commits a crime must be conscious of his/her guilt. Only in this way can the character become a hero(ine). Suffering is hence essential to tragedy. The hero(ine) has to suffer in order to show that he/she is thereby conscious of his/her guilt. Hegel quotes Sophocles "Because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred."(Hegel, 1977: 284)

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel returns to the subject of ancient tragedy and studies it in more detail. However, his main theoretical perspective remains the same. He writes: "The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*; while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aims and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its moral life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in *guilt*."(Hegel, 1975: 1196) Tragedy, therefore, refers to a conflict in which both sides have some justification. In other words, each side represents a certain principle that is seen as just in its own right, but then in the story, these two principles come into conflict. Politically and

philosophically, this is significant. As already mentioned, it implies that there is no single set of norms and rules by which we can live. Truth is not one. In the West, this is clearly different from the world-view advocated by Socrates and later in another form by Christianity, which assumes truth to be one. For Socrates as well as for the devout Christian, there is only one truth and we can find it. The difference between these two is that whereas the former emphasizes reason as the means of discovering the truth, the latter, bases his/her hope on the love of Christ and the Church. This unitary world-view is at odds with the tragic one. In tragedy, the conflict is not between right and wrong, but between two different principles that both equally claim to be just. What is, therefore, central to the notion of tragedy is how truth is defined. If we have a system that defines truth as single and unitary, every conflict in this system, becomes a fight between right and wrong and we as the spectators of this collision are expected to take the side of right and virtue and oppose injustice and wrong-doing. This leaves no room for tragedy.

There is another element that is central to tragedy. Hegel writes: "However justified the tragic character and his aim, however necessary the tragic collision, the third thing required is the tragic resolution of this conflict. By this means eternal justice is exercised on individuals and their aims in the sense that it restores the substance and unity of ethical life with the downfall of the individual who has disturbed its peace." (Hegel, 1975: 1107) Tragedy is therefore closely linked to the notion of justice. What tragedy affirms is the ethical order of a society. The *polis* was based on a moral order or *Sittlichkeit* as Hegel calls it. This is the ethical framework within which the citizens of the *polis* live; it is what gives meaning to their lives. The ethical order is a reflection of the will of the citizens. Its laws are not external commandments but have their source in the will of the citizens themselves. Tragedy is an affirmation of this *Sittlichkeit* and the political life of the *polis*. That is why the

resolution of the conflict is as important as the conflict itself.

The tragic resolution shows the particularity of the aims pursued by each side in the story. The idea that each side has some justification implies that the combatants are one-sided and do not see the justification in the position of the other side. As already argued in the *Phenomenology*, both have their own justification. (Kitto, 2011:129-34) But both are also one-sided and fail to see the justification in the position of the other. What tragedy supersedes is this one-sided particularity. What is affirmed is the universality of the ethical order. So tragedy is not moral relativism. What prevents it from falling into relativism is precisely the ethical order of the *polis*. "Only in the downfall of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which engulfs both sides, that is, omnipotent and righteous Destiny, steps on the scene".(Hegel, 1977:285)

Historically speaking, what is superseded here is the Greek *polis*. The inherent contradictions of the *polis*, which tragedy makes explicit are in the last analysis what bury it. The opposition of the divine and the human law is such that no one law can reign supreme. This, as will be seen below, is very different from the situation in the Persian Empire where the king's authority rules unchallenged. However, in the West too, the collapse of the Greek *polis* is followed in time by the establishment of the Roman Empire where, at least before the Empire's conversion to Christianity, the emperor holds ultimate authority. In this sense, the destruction of the *polis* paves the way to a centralized empire that is, in certain respects, similar to the Persian one.

Fate is an important aspect of tragedy. For Hegel, there is clearly a difference between the concept of fate in epic and in tragedy. In the former, fate is an external concept; it is an external force that undermines the consequences of the hero's actions. The hero aims to do one thing but ends up doing

something very different. He cannot control the consequences of his actions that are in fact determined by fate. In tragedy, however, the hero's fate is not external. This goes back to the issue of the ethical order that has been mentioned. The laws of the ethical order are not external. They reflect the will of the citizens of the *polis*. Hegel writes: "What a man has really to fear is not an external power and oppression by it, but the might of the ethical order which is one determinant of his own free reason and is at the same time that eternal and inviolable something which he summons up against himself if once he turns against it." (Hegel, 1975:1198) In tragedy, therefore, fate is not an external phenomenon but is partly internal. The hero supports one particular law and ignores another. This inability to see the universal is hence, the basic flaw of all tragic heroes. By focusing on one particular law, they therefore go against the ethical order of the *polis* and hence turn that order against themselves. Fate, which is thus the resolution of the conflict and the restoration of the ethical order, is hence not a wholly external phenomenon as in the epic but is partly internal to the hero. "A truly tragic suffering ... is only inflicted on the individual agent as a consequence of their own deed which is both legitimate and, owing to the resulting collision, blameworthy, and for which their whole self is answerable" (Hegel, 1975, 1198)

Hegel's understanding of tragedy can, therefore, be summarized in the following manner. (Roche, 1998) Tragedy is drama, based on a conflict in which the two conflicting parties both have some justification for their positions. Each sees and acts upon one particular law and ignores the other laws of the community. Each is hence, particular and fails to appreciate the universal. The conflict, however, is resolved by the downfall of those who have ignored the universal ethical order. Justice triumphs and order is restored. Tragedy, therefore, assumes the existence of an ethical order in the community that is disturbed by the one-sidedness of the conflicting parties and is finally

restored, when the parties meet their tragic ends. It is this ethical substance of tragedy, which is fundamental to it and is often ignored in discussions about tragedy. Without this ethical order, tragedy is impossible and the drama reduced to the absurd.

In Greek tragedy, according to Hegel, the voice of the ethical substance of life is heard through the chorus. It is this that reminds us of the ethical order within which the play is set and whose triumph at the end ensures the restoration of justice. It is this that gives meaning to the play. However, as Hegel remarks "...the chorus is essentially appropriate in an age where moral complications cannot yet be met by specific valid and just laws and firm religious dogmas, but where the ethical order appears only in its direct and living actuality and remains only the equilibrium of a stable life secure against the fearful collisions to which the energies of individuals in their opposing actions must lead." (Hegel 1975: 1211)

For Hegel, the flaw in the tragic hero's character is directly linked to the tragic notion of fate, which is hence not an external force.

The rest of the present paper will try to study the notion of tragedy in the Shahnameh on the basis of Hegel's analysis of this concept. Three stories will be studied and their presentation follows the order in which they appear in the Shahnameh: the stories of Sohrab, Seyavoush, and Esfandiyar.

### **Shahnameh and Tragedy**

Each of the three stories dealt with here is unique in its own way. They do, however, have this in common, that in none of them is the choice of action an easy decision. When Rostam confronts Div-e Sapid, the decision to fight and destroy the Div is easy to make. It is obvious what he should do. But in each of the three stories discussed here, the decision as to what course

of action to take is very difficult, for the heroes involved and the decisions taken, lead to disastrous consequences. At times, it even becomes difficult to distinguish the hero from the anti-hero. The story of Sohrab is one such case.

Sohrab is Rostam's son from an affair that the latter had when he had gone to Semengan in search of his horse, which had been stolen. Sohrab grows up to become a strong young fighter, like his father. When he learns who his father is, he decides to go to Iran in search of Rostam, so that the two of them can overthrow the governments of Iran and Touran and rule the two countries together. Afrasiyab, the king of Touran and the archenemy of Iran, however, wants to use Sohrab to get rid of Rostam and so sends some of his lieutenants with Sohrab to ensure that the son does not get a chance to recognize his father. (Matini, 1984) Once again, as in the story of Oedipus, the inability of a father and son to recognize each other has disastrous consequences for both. However, in the Persian story, the result is the opposite of the Greek one. Rostam kills his son unknowingly. (She'ar and Anvari, 1363/1984)

When Sohrab attacks Iran, the king, Kavus Shah, fearing defeat at the hand of this new warrior orders Rostam, who is in some sense, always a weapon of last resort, to go and fight Sohrab. Two soldiers in Sohrab's camp can identify Rostam. One is accidentally killed (and this brings into focus the whole question of the relationship between accident and necessity). The other, an Iranian captive, Hojir refuses to identify Rostam when he sees him. He is probably thinking of the security of Iran, for to admit to the presence of Rostam means to admit to the fact, that the Iranian army must have been desperate to employ its weapon of last resort. This, Hogir thinks, may encourage Sohrab to attack the Iranian army. However, Ferdowsi also adds:

*He[Sohrab] pressed Hojir once more about Rostam*

*And hoped his words would satisfy his heart,*

*His fate was written otherwise, alas*

*And that command may not be changed by man* (Ferdowsi, 1987: 97).

Finally, the two meet on the battlefield and Sohrab is killed. However, before he dies he reveals to Rostam his real identity and the two finally recognize each other. After Sohrab's death, Rostam decides to commit suicide but is prevented from doing so by his friends from the Iranian army. It is interesting to note that, whereas Oedipus takes out his own eyes once he realizes what he has done, Rostam is prevented from killing himself. This means that the story, from a strictly Greek point of view, is probably not a tragedy. The hero, though heartbroken, is physically intact. Does tragedy not involve the downfall and the ruin of the hero? Where is the evidence for this as far as Rostam is concerned? Or is Sohrab the real hero of the story in which case we have to ask ourselves what Rostam's role is.

Sohrab acts out of a son's love for his father and wants his father to achieve what he deserves. Sohrab wants to give the crown of Iran to Rostam. In his eyes, Rostam and not Kavus deserve to be the king of Iran. And in many ways, the reader may sympathize with Sohrab. Yet Rostam too is acting on a sound principle. He is trying to prevent a dangerous enemy of his country from defeating and occupying it. So whereas Sohrab is acting out of family love, Rostam bases his action on the principle of state security. As in *Antigone*, the two laws of family and state come into conflict. But unlike in the case of *Antigone*, there is no overriding ethical order, which resolves the conflict and restores justice.

The Persian concept of kingship was such that the king's claim to authority was based upon God's approval and backing. The notion of *Farrahe Eizadi* or the idea that the king has somehow been appointed by God and has his *authority*, was the basis of the Persian concept of kingship. The king's claim to have been appointed by God means he can essentially act like

God. He has God's authority on earth. This idea is given official recognition in the Zoroastrian religion. The king, therefore, monopolizes all authority, religious as well as political. Under this form of kingship, all political rebellions are at the same time religious ones too. There is no divine authority independent of the king to which one can appeal.

The notion of the *Farrahe Iezadi* has far-reaching implications for Iranian culture. If the king's authority is God's authority, then the conflict between divine law and state law which was at the heart of *Antigone* is automatically resolved. Under the Persian concept of kingship, tragedy, the way Hegel defines it and the way the Greeks understood it, becomes almost impossible.

Sohrab's love for his father does not have the backing of the divine law. In *Antigone*, it was taken for granted that family love has the backing of the divine order and so the conflict, was between the divine law and the law of the state. In the Persian concept of kingship, however, the two authorities reside in the same person, namely the king and so actions that are based on feelings of family love are not based on any authority. Love in the *Shahnameh* is lonely. Sohrab's love for his father is "punished" by a father who is acting out of consideration for state interests. In a world in which the state and the divine authority reside in the despotic person of the king, love is the only humane thing in the world. But in a despotic world there is no room for love and in the person of Sohrab, it bleeds to death on the battlefield. If there is a tragedy in Iranian history it is the inability of love to triumph.

The notion of love is central to the *Shahnameh*. Indeed one can go so far as to say that the *Shahnameh* is the greatest love story in the Persian literature. However, love is not just confined to the attractions between the two sexes, but is explored in all its different forms: the love of a son for his father, the love of a mother for his son, the love of a hero for his

brother (Esfandiyar partly acts on this love when he decides to fight Rostam). Humanity, earthly love and *pahlavani* (heroism) are the issues in the Shahnameh. Ferdowsi was a great humanist for whom earthly love was the only thing that tried to give a humane face to an otherwise forlorn despotic life. The hero is not a brute with superhuman physical strength, he is a human being, courageous enough to dare to love humanity in a despotic society. To love, in such a society, demands a courage of heroic proportions. In this sense, Nezami is much closer to Ferdowsi than Rumi. The latter, despairing of earthly love, seeks it in the beyond. Rumi has despaired of human love and humanity. Ferdowsi is the champion of humanist love. This becomes clearer in the next story, Seyavoush.

There is evidence to suggest that the story of Seyavoush held a particularly important place in ancient Iranian society. There were ceremonies marking the *sough* (mourn) of Seyavoush every year. It is clearly one of those fundamental myths that tell us a great deal about a people, its fears, anxieties, hopes, and dreams. Seyavoush has often been seen as the symbol of youth and truthfulness/naivete as opposed to his father, Kavus, and his father in law, Afrasiab, who are both old, cunning and selfish. The questions to be asked here are. Is this story a tragedy in the sense in which Hegel uses the term? What is the relationship between tragedy and political authority in this story?

Seyavoush is the young prince of Iran who is brought up by Rostam and joins the Court at the beginning of the story. His stepmother, Soudabeh wishes to seduce him and so convinces the king to send the young Prince to the harem, among other things, in order to find him a good wife. The prince is reluctant to go and tells his father:

... *I am*

*The servant of the king and bow my head*

*To his commands; whomever he should choose*

*Is suitable; the lord of all the world*

*Disposes of his slaves as he would wish (Ferdowsi, 1992:15)*

Seyavoush rejects Soudabeh's seductive attempts. In anger, Soudabeh turns to the king and accuses Seyavoush of having foul designs on her. Confused, Kavus orders trial by fire for Seyavoush. He comes out of this trial triumphant and vindicated. He is then told by his father to lead the army against Touran. An enemy willing to compromise, however, faces Seyavoush. Indeed as a gesture of his goodwill, Afrasiyab sends one hundred of his close kin as hostages to Seyavoush. The latter writes to his father:

*He's[Afrasiyab] sent as hostages a hundred of*

*His kin to me and Rostam comes to ask*

*The king to pardon him-as would be right*

*For one of your benevolence, whose face*

*Is witness to the kindly heart within(Ferdowsi, 1992:49)*

To this plea for mercy Kavus answers:

“Raise a huge fire, fetter these low Turks’ feet

With massive chains, and fling their wealth in the flames-

Don’t keep a single jot of it; then send

These captives here to me because I mean

To chop the heads off from their bodies now.” (Ferdowsi, 1992:51)

Seyavoush sickened by such cruelty, leaves Iran and goes to Touran and is initially received well by Afrasiyab. He even marries the daughter of the king. However, in time Afrasiyab becomes afraid of Seyavoush and finally orders his death. Rostam only comes into the story after Seyavoush is dead. He now enters the story as the man who wants to avenge the death of Seyavoush. He kills Soudabeh and attacks Touran, killing

many enemy soldiers. Briefly put, this is the story of Seyavoush. The question now is can this story be seen as a tragedy?

Seyavoush defies his father and refuses to send the hostages to his court, acting on the principle of regard for the humanist principle, which forbids him to send the hostages where they will be killed without a trial. It seems that he, like Antigone, chooses the divine law instead of the state law. But the state here is the tribe. This is not a polis whose laws are the reflections of the will of the citizens. It is a tribal state in which the organizing principle is the rule of the *rish-sefid* (tribal elders). The tribe is governed by the elders because, in this community, the most prized possession is experience. Wisdom is in fact defined as experience. A young person is referred to as *jahel* (ignorant). To be young is to be ignorant; all wisdom comes with old age. In a conflict between father and son in this community, it is clear who should win; the son must be destroyed to uphold the principle of tribal life and polity. The destruction of the father would amount to undermining the foundations of the tribal political structure. In this sense, there is no tragic resolution because there is no ethical order above the two principles that the two sides act upon.

In the Greek tragedy there was the ethical order of the polis that was expressed by the chorus. But no such order exists in the tribal society and that is why we do not find an equivalent of the Greek chorus in the Shahnameh. At some points, where a judgment seems called for, it is the poet himself that comes forward and as if filling in for the non-existent chorus, makes some general remarks about the unreliability of fate and how one can never trust her. Such vague comments are no substitute for the ethical pronouncements of the chorus. What happens here in the Shahnameh, is that one principle triumphs over another; age and experience destroy youth and "ignorance". Justice is restored not by the restoration of a universal ethic that

goes beyond the particularity of the positions of both parties, but by one particular position destroying the other and once again asserting its right to be universal. So from the beginning, the conflict was not between two particulars but between one side which claimed to be universal and the other that had rebelled against this to assert a new (divine) rule. The divine rule is presumably new because it is Zoroastrian. We know that most of the myths of the *Shahnameh* are pre-Zoroastrian, and that the newcomers were not looked upon favorably by the elders. After all, they too were sons rebelling against their fathers. The idea of the conflict between divine law and the rule of the elders could not belong to the tribal religion, which sanctified the rule of elders. Therefore, the death of Seyavoush may be seen as a reassertion of tribal order.

The story can also be seen as an expression of a secret wish by the elders at least that the new Zoroastrian religion should fail. Revealed religion, ultimately goes against the tribal culture undermines the political legitimacy of the tribal rule. Whereas the latter is based on the idea of the rule of experience/traditions through the elders, the former sees the source of wisdom not in what the old say, but find it in the teachings of a transcendent God that speaks to us through a text. The text comes to replace traditions as the source of authority. The complexity of the relationship between political authority and tragedy becomes even more clear in our final story, that of Esfandiyar.

Esfandiayr is the son of Goshtasp, the king of Iran. He is both the crown prince and the guardian and hero of the new Zoroastrian religion. In one sense, therefore, he is the embodiment of both political as well as religious authority. And yet, though close to political authority, he does not possess it. The king fears that the young and ambitious prince may be planning a coup to gain power and so throws him into prison. When the armies of Touran attack and defeat seems imminent, Goshtasp, fearful for his throne, releases Esfandiyar whose

military prowess is beyond doubt, from prison and gives him the job of driving the invading armies out of Iran. This, the young prince accomplishes successfully and in the process, proves himself a hero comparable to Rostam. The king now sees the danger to his throne from Esfandiyar as never before and feels that the army prefers the prince to the king as well. Goshtasp, therefore, gives the prince the most difficult mission of his life: to go to Sistan and arrest Rostam and bring him to court. Already Esfandiyar sees the absurdity of the order, for Rostam has performed a tremendous amount of service to the Iranian court. He points this out to his father. But the king has clearly other intentions. He can trust neither of the two heroes and feels that opposing the two on the battlefield can only be to his advantage, whatever the outcome. Indeed, he has been told by the court astrologer, that Esfandiyar will not come back alive.

The battle of Rostam and Esfandiyar is in a sense, the battle between love and authority. The king's political authority is also religious. Esfandiyar makes it clear that if he disobeys the king, he will be condemned to hell in the next world. Obeying the king, therefore, is politically and religiously an imperative. The king has usurped all authority. The people, therefore, do not form a polis; they are ra'yyat (non-citizens with no political power). A people who are rayyat do not constitute a polis. There is here no ethical order in the Greek sense, which can restore justice; only love can oppose authority. This is the real reason why love plays such an important role not just in the Shahnameh but in all Persian poetry.

Rostam feels a great deal of love for Esfandiyar, who is in many ways a young version of himself. Perhaps the Prince reminds him of Sohrab. That is why fighting the prince is so difficult for him. It is as if he has to kill Sohrab, once again. Rostam's pain can hardly be exaggerated. And yet he cannot agree to Esfandiyar's demand, which is, of course, the king's

wish, and submit to being taken to court on foot and in chains. His defiance is very meaningful. It is an open rebellion against authority, religious as well as political. Rostam's action is, therefore, not based on any specific authority. The only possible basis left for him is hence a belief on his own worth as a *pahlavan* (hero). Rostam is, therefore, trying to assert the nobility of the *pahlavan*, the worth of the individual against that of authority. Nobility of character and love cannot come to a synthesis with authority. One or the other must win.

Esfandiyar too feels a great deal of respect, if not love, for the old hero of bygone times. Yet he is the embodiment of authority and cannot act on any other basis. As professor Clinton notes " As a pious Zoroastrian he [Esfandiyar] believes that the commands of his father, the shah, have the force of the divine decree. If he disobeys him, he will suffer eternal torments in the afterlife." Ferdowsi, 1999:18)

Esfandiyar, like Sohrab, proves to be a very difficult foe to overcome. Here too, as in the fight against Sohrab, Rostam has to resort to trickery and "unconventional means" to kill his opponent. In the story of Sohrab, Rostam, when brought down by Sohrab, lies by saying that according to Iranian traditions a fighter must bring down his opponent twice before he can kill him. Here, however, he resorts to a very different tactic to kill Esfandiyar, and this has important implications for the story.

On the first day of the battle, Rostam and his horse are wounded and tired. Esfandiyar's victory seems almost certain. Rostam suggests that they rest for the night and resume the fight the following morning, hoping thereby to gain some time to think and recover from his wounds. Esfandiyar answers

*O ancient, willful rogue! I have observed  
You in the fullness of your glory, and I've  
No wish to see you in decline. I'll shield*

*Your soul for one more night. But when you've reached*

*Your home, do not attempt some clever ruse.* (Ferdowsi, 1999:105)

Rostam sees no other way but to “attempt some clever ruse”. Zal, the father of Rostam, who has been brought up by Simorgh, suggests that they should ask for its help. Simorgh descends from the air and plucks out the arrows from the bodies of Rostam and his horse and heals them by pressing its feathers on their wounds. The mythical bird then shows Rostam how to overcome Esfandiyar with an arrow made of tamarisk aimed at his eyes. And this is, of course, precisely the way in which Rostam kills Esfandiyar. But the question remains what does Simorgh represent and why does it help Rostam kill Esfandiyar?

Simorgh as a mythical bird is no doubt part of the divine order but if this order is Zoroastrian then the bird should help not Rostam but Esfandiyar. At any rate, it should not help the enemy of the king who, according to the new religion, holds religious authority. Here is where the Shahnameh becomes problematic and no easy comparison with Greek tragedy or epic is possible, for in the latter the king, be it Agamemnon or Creon does not monopolize religious authority and the religion is not monolithic, so different divinities can support different sides of a war. In Greek tragedy, as was argued above, the overriding ethical authority belongs to the polis. The Shahnameh's world is a very different one. Here there is confusion as to what the divine order is and how it relates to the political order. There are at least two different worldviews here. According to Zoroastrian mythology, the King has a religious authority and Esfandiyar is the hero of the new religion. Zoroaster himself has fed pomegranate seeds to Esfandiyar which has rendered his body invulnerable or “brazen-bodied”( Ferdowsi, 1999:105). But Rostam too has his divine backing. His *babr-e bayan* (which Clinton translates as “coat of mail and tiger

skin”) (Ferdowsi, 1999:94)<sup>1</sup> is clearly a mythical shield that seems to have some divine backing. (Khaleghi Motlagh, 1988) Simorgh is clearly a divine figure and its siding with Rostam is very meaningful. Simorgh is a pre-Zoroastrian mythical bird that helps Rostam kill the hero of the new religion.

Rostam is clearly a pre-Zoroastrian hero who after the change of religion in Iran becomes a relic of bygone times. He does not convert to the new religion and in fact, with the aid of an ancient divine power, the Simorgh, kills the protector of the new religion. He, therefore, becomes a superfluous hero and is killed almost immediately after the story of Esfandiyar.

## Conclusion

In Greek literature, tragedy according to Hegel involved a conflict between two different principles. These were often, the political and religious authorities as seen for example in *Antigone*. However, the Iranian concept of kingship, which was sanctified in the religion of Zoroaster, did not distinguish between political and religious authority: they both belonged to the king. It became impossible, therefore, to experience a conflict between the divine and the political authorities. It is, therefore, difficult to see how there could be tragedy in Persian literature, given the predominance of Zoroastrianism.

However, the matter is more complicated than that. There are at least two divine orders in the *Shahnameh*, the first is a tribal mythological religion in which for example Simorgh is a mythological/divine bird or Rostam’s *babr-e bayan* has some form of divine backing. However, in this tribal religion, traditions are sacred and the sanctity of the rule of the elders is assumed. A young rebellious hero, like Sohrab, has no chance of calling on the support of the divine powers. Hence the opposition between the religious and the political authorities is ruled out. The rule of the elders constitutes both the political as well as the religious authority.

The second divine order is that of the Zoroastrian religion, which sanctifies the authority of the king and recognizes him as the holder of the political office and religious authority. Here too the conflict between the religious and the state law, which is central to Hegel's definition of tragedy, is ruled out. In either case, the result is essentially the same. The young hero who like Sohrab or Seyavoush rebels against political authority has no hope of receiving the backing of the divine powers. He, unlike Antigone, cannot invoke the divine law in support of his position. The case of Esfandiyar is different for he does not rebel against the king but obeys his order and yet is doomed. He consciously cites the laws of the state and the divine to legitimize his action against Rostam. Yet the reader is left with the impression that Esfandiyar is not fully convinced by his own arguments. In his debate with his father, before leaving the court to fight Rostam, he makes it clear that he considers his mission to be foolish if not unethical. The fact that Rostam with the aid of Simorg kills Esfandiyar, turns the story of the Shahnameh itself into an anti-Zoroastrian text. However, what needs to be emphasized here is that both the attitudes of Rostam, as well as the doubts in the mind of Esfandiyar, imply the existence of a humanist ethical code of behavior, which rejects the political and religious authorities at the same time.

The Shahnameh is essentially a celebration of this ethical code. More specifically, it is a celebration of love, which is an assertion of what it means to be human in the harsh climate of despotism. Love is the only thing that can put a humane face on life and yet in the person of these young princes, it bleeds to death on the battlefield. This is the real tragedy not only of these three stories but also of Iranian history in general.

### **Endnote**

1. *ibid* p 94

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