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Fashioning Persian Identity: Asadi's Staged Dispute between a Zoroastrian and a Muslim

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the earliest surviving specimens of Persian debate poetry (*monāzara*), a genre which deals with controversial topics such as the Persians' supremacy over the Arabs or the superiority of Islam over Zoroastrianism. Focusing on one panegyric by the poet Asadi Tusi (1010–70), this paper contextualizes such debates in a cultural *milieu* of eleventh-century Persia. It shows how poets, as an indispensable part of the court hierarchy, participated in constructing a new identity for Persians by formulating a Persian standpoint on controversies of the day.

Keywords

Zoroastrianism – Islam – Persian poetry – interreligious polemics – Arabs – Persians – conversion – Sho'ubiyya movement – *monāzara*

A popular genre in Persian poetic tradition is the *monāzara* (or *monāzera*), a disputation or debate between two entities, objects, ideas, or persons (Keyvāni, 199–203; Pourjavady, 99–100, 627–32; Seyed-Gohrab 2020; de Bruijn 2006–7; Abdullaeva 2009, 2012; Tafazzoli 1997/1376, 256–59; Reinink and Vanstiphout 1991; van Gelder 1987, 1991; Belhaj 2016). The genre goes back to pre-Islamic times, when disputes were written in various languages. After the conquest of Persia and the start of the conversion of Persians to Islam in the

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seventh century, debate poems came into vogue in the intellectual *milieu* and at the élite courts of the Abbasid period (750–1258). At gatherings organized at the courts or mansions of the aristocracy, religious leaders of various communities were invited to debate controversial religious subjects (Griffith; van Berkel; Bauer, 172–82). Such contests took place between members of the Zoroastrian communities and Muslims or Muslims and Christians, Manicheans, or Jews. These debates, which belong to the genre of apologetic literature, have survived in both Middle Persian and New Persian.¹

The fact that disputations became popular during this period shows how religious communities in the early Islamic Middle East responded to the rise of Islam. The Arab-Islamic invasion of Persia created a very complex situation for Persians as they processed the socio-political transformation and the integration of Islam in their lives. Organizing debate gatherings (*majles*) between members of different religions, including Zoroastrianism, enabled Persians as new converts to reflect on their previous religion and how it contrasts with the new religion. What are the praiseworthy qualities of each religion, and how could they be confident of the advantages of Islam? Moreover, such debates enabled the Persians to publicly renew their conversion, emphasizing that they are true Muslims and that they have distanced themselves from Zoroastrianism. Such regular debates also enabled Muslims to gain knowledge of the other religions, creating an interreligious dialogue. At Islamic courts, information about Zoroastrianism was freely available, especially because Persian converts occupied key political positions. Analysing *Mādayān ī Gizistag Abālish* (The Book of the Accursed Abālish), a dispute between a Zoroastrian priest and a heretical dualist (*zandik*) at the court of the caliph Ma'mun (r. 813–33), in which the latter acts as judge and takes the side of the Zoroastrian priest, Sahner gives examples (68) of Zoroastrian converts at the Abbasid court, observing that rulers such as Ma'mun knew a good deal about Zoroastrianism as some of those converts served him and other Abbasid rulers as viziers—most famously, the brothers Fazl b. Sahl (d. 818) and Hasan b. Sahl (d. 850–1). Jealousy and court intrigues led to accusations that some of these converts were crypto-Zoroastrians. While Fazl b. Sahl was accused falsely (and unsuccessful) of remaining a Zoroastrian, Māzyār (d. 840), the Qārenid prince

1 Sahner has recently discussed (61–83) *Mādayān ī Gizistag Abālish* (see below), of which the oldest manuscript has been dated between 1322 and 1371 and is preserved at the University Library in Copenhagen. According to Sahner (64), this copy is “relatively short, filling only ten folios, and is written in a clear, legible hand. Along with the Pahlavi, there also exist versions in Pāzand (Middle Persian written in Avestan script) and Parsi (Middle Persian written in New Persian script).” This text shows the concerns of the people at a historical moment in Iranian culture.

of Tabaristan, represents an opposite case. After being overthrown by a rival, he fled to Baghdad to ask for the caliph's help. Ma'mun agreed to support him if he would convert to Islam. Māzyār accepted, but, after his return to Persia, he rejected Islam, and "resumed practicing Zoroastrianism, and reportedly harassed local Muslims" (Sahner, 68–69).

As we shall presently see, against the backdrop of actual debates between individuals at the courts, the genre of the literary debate emerged, which in a stylized fashion depicted the differences between religions and proclaimed the superiority of one religion over another. Persian debate poems would remain popular through the eleventh century, during which Persian poets addressed Islamic religious supremacy in a context of Arab ethnic hegemony in order to create a new identity for Persian Muslims.

The Poet, His Life and Work

Asadi Tusi (1010–70) served at the court of the Daylamite Abu Nasr Jastān.² He is among the few poets whom we know to have copied another author's manuscript, namely Abu Mansur Movaffaq Heravi (*fl.* 980–90)'s *Ketāb al-abniya 'an haqā'eq al-advīya* (The Book of the Foundations of Real Properties of the Remedies), which he did in 1055–56. In 1065–66, he moved to Nakhjavān, where he completed the epic *Garshāsp-nāma* (Book of Garshāsp), dedicating it to the ruler of Nakhjavān, Abu Dolaf Shāybāni (de Blois 2000; Sādeqi 2003–4/1384; Seyed-Gohrab and McGlenn, 27–28). In addition to this epic of nine thousand couplets in the *motaqāreb* meter, he wrote a dictionary of Persian, the *Loghat-e Fors*, which defines unfamiliar vocabulary in the Persian poetry of Khorasan for the people of Arrān and Azerbaijan.³ It is the oldest extant dictionary, preserving a large number of couplets from tenth-century poets. Perhaps the oldest manuscript is in the unique miscellany *Safīna-ye Tabriz* (The Vessel of Tabriz), dated 19 July 1321.

2 The most comprehensive biography is still that of Khaleghi-Motlagh 1977/1356, 643–78; as well as Foruzānfar, 438–55; de Blois 2004, 77–79; Abdullaeva 2009, 70–73; I have collated my information mostly from Khaleghi-Motlagh 1987, 699–700. See also Sādeqi 2017/1396, who indicates that, according to Rezā-Quli Khān Hedāyat, Asadi lived from 1010 to 1070, though it has been shown that Asadi lived for many years after 1070.

3 In this period, it was sometimes claimed that the people of this area could not fully understand the Persian of Khorasan. In his dictionary, Asadi not only listed uncommon words used in the Dari language of Khorasan, but also employed Persian words used in Transoxiana, many of which were borrowed from Eastern Iranian languages, citing poetry from both the tenth and the eleventh centuries to demonstrate their use.

Asadi's originality as a poet is evident in his *Garshāsp-nāma* and five debate poems (*munāzarāt*). The debates are couched in the form of *qasida*, which, in Khaleghi-Motlagh's words is "unprecedented in Arabic or New Persian." These debates deal with "Bow and Arrow (*Neyza ō kamān*)," "Day and Night (*Shab ō ruz*)," "The Sky and the Earth (*Āsmān ō zamīn*)," "Arabs and Persians (*Arab ō Ajam*)," and "A Zoroastrian and a Muslim (*Mogh ō Mosalmān*)." As we will shortly see, the gist of the last two debates is that a Muslim Persian is superior both to a Zoroastrian and to an Arab Muslim. Although these disputes are sometimes regarded as an example of pro-Sho'ubiyya statement, the reality is more complex. The Sho'ubiyya movement promoted the equality of non-Arabs, especially Persians, with Arabs in the fields of religion and literature, from the ninth century to the eleventh century.⁴ In Asadi's debates, being of Persian stock is a precondition for a loftier culture and religion.

Asadi often employs archaic language in his poetry, which sometimes makes it hard for a modern reader to appreciate. Khaleghi-Motlagh is right that Asadi is more concerned with the poetic value of his versification than with the story line. One reason why his *Garshāsp-nāma* failed to present Garshāsp as a greater hero than Ferdowsi's Rustam was Asadi's obsession with descriptions, pieces of didactic and homiletic nature, and his prodigious use of rhetorical figures, rather than with telling the story, a quality in which Ferdowsi excels in every respect. It should be mentioned that these elements make Asadi's poetry superior in term of poetic merits (Omid-salar).⁵

This paper aims at analyzing Asadi's dispute between "A Zoroastrian and a Muslim," contextualizing it within the socio-political and religious *milieu* of the time. To my knowledge, historians of Persian literature have not analyzed this debate. Studies on Persian debate poetry make only passing references to the poem, without paying attention to the cultural and literary value of such apologetic writings and the purposes of such poems. Broadly speaking, Asadi's dispute poems belong to the type of debates organized in the *majles* culture of the Abbasid era (Brookshaw).⁶ At the Abbasid court, such debates took place not only as a ritual performance confirming Islam as the pre-eminent religion but also to address the challenges Islam was facing as a new religion. Such debates integrate politics with religion, addressing questions of ethnicity

4 On the Sho'ubiyya, see also Goldziher; Gibb; Richter-Bernburg; Mottahedeh; Agius; Norris; Crone; Pourshariati; Dabiri; Savant; Webb.

5 Notwithstanding the editor Yaghmā'i's opinion, there is no trace of the Pahlavi language in *Garshāsp-nāma*, since Asadi—like his great predecessor Ferdowsi—had no familiarity with the tongue.

6 The collection of articles edited by Lazarus-Yafeh, Cohen, Somekh, and Griffith offer excellent insights into these gatherings in the medieval Islamic world.

and loyalty. In addition, these debates were a courtly entertainment in which poetry was recited to entertain the courtiers and to elicit praise for the virtuosity of the poet, who could display his originality and mastery in a strictly conventional poetic tradition.

Asadi's *Monāzaras*

Although Khaleghi-Motlagh edited and published the disputation in 1978, European scholars such as Carl Hermann Ethé (1844–1917) and Evgeniï Èduardovich Berthels (1890–1957) had already devoted attention to them (see Berthels, 11, 20–22; Ethé; Khaleghi-Motlagh 1977/1356, 671–78; Abdullaeva, 2009, 73–75). We do not have any earlier texts devoted to questions of conversion and the superiority of one religion or ethnicity over another. A few older debates in verse form appear in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma* as parts of a larger narrative. The *Shāh-nāma* includes debates between the prophet Mani and a high-ranking Zoroastrian priest and between a Zoroastrian priest and Mazdak. But Asadi's *monāzaras* are different, belonging to the efflorescence of Persian literature in the eleventh century, which introduced new genres, themes, and motifs in the production of a Persian Islamic culture. Asadi is original in introducing such debates, which are integrated within a *qasida* form. The debates constitute the opening section (*nasib*) of the *qasida*, which is followed by the *gorizgāh* and *madih*. These *nasibs* are quite long, longer than the praise section, whereas a common Persian *nasib* does not commonly exceed fifteen couplets. The dialogue form creates suspense, especially by giving the first turn to the adversary, which invites the audience to anticipate his rival's response. To my knowledge, Asadi's disputes between a Zoroastrian and a Muslim, and a Persian and an Arab, were not imitated by later generations of Persian poets. One thirteenth century *masnavi*, entitled “Hekāyat-e shāhzāda-ye Irān-zamin bā ‘Omar-e Khattāb (The Tale of the Prince of Iran with ‘Omar b. al-Khattāb)” (Fereydun b. Marzbān, fols. 137–44⁷), presents a debate over how to rule an empire between the captured son of the last Sasanian shah Yazdegerd III (r. 632–51) and the second caliph ‘Omar (r. 634–44) (Sahner, 65). The poem opens with ‘Omar addressing the captured prince, assuring him that he is safe and asking he wishes. The prince responds, “Find me a ruined village.” ‘Omar gives the order to seek such a village in the entire Persian empire, but they cannot find one. The caliph asks the prince, “Why do you want a ruined village?”

7 The manuscript I cite contains 558 couplets, while another version has 473 couplets, but I have no access to the latter. For the location of similar manuscripts, see Dālvand.

Choose a thriving one.” The prince says that his intention was to give ‘Omar a lesson in how to rule until the day of reckoning.

It is not clear whether the Zoroastrian and Muslim in Asadi’s poem are based on specific individuals of his time. The text is purely literary, the persona is imaginative, and the poem is designed to be performed not only as a pastime for courtiers, but also to reinforce and renew power relationships. Such poems are certainly a warning not to err in religion and not to be tempted to return to Zoroastrianism, as some individuals did.⁸ Information about the poem’s audience is lacking, but it was probably performed for Persian Muslim courtiers who wanted to hear a set of Zoroastrian beliefs, as a nostalgic glimpse of a by-gone culture, and to see how Zoroastrian norms, rituals, and values contrasted to those of the new religion. Asadi’s other debate that we will consider here, between a Persian and an Arab, makes it clear that the Persians are superior to the Arabs and are better Muslims. The two poems complement each other. Yet, Khaleghi-Motlagh’s characterization of these debates as anti-Sho’ubiyya is problematic, when we consider that the Arab is defeated by the Persian and that prejudicial traits are associated with the characters of Arabs.

It is also not clear whether there is any historical reality behind the narrative. The Zoroastrian is just a literary figure in this poem, but the poet is probably imagining him as a high-ranking personage, as was common in other debates in which Zoroastrians participated. Asadi bases his debate on the power of argumentation. At the beginning, he states that the loser must convert to whichever side has the more persuasive arguments. As we know from various sources, high-ranking Zoroastrian priests were excellent debaters. This may be one reason that Asadi refers to the power of argumentation. In *Abālish*, as Sahnner indicates (67), the key debater is the famous priest Ādurfarnbag, the Zoroastrian leader in Baghdad, who compiled the *Dēnkard* and was the author of a large collection of legal *responsa*—many of which address the challenges

8 In other debates, the fear of conversion to other religions dominates. In *Mādayān ī Gizistag Abālish*, the main protagonist is Abālish, who was a good Zoroastrian until he erred in his doctrine and became a dualist (*zandīq*) and starting disputing with people. As Sahnner states (66–67), “Abāliš’ fall from grace occurred during a visit to a fire temple called ‘Pušt.’ The text tells us that he came there seeking to take the *wāj*—the priest’s blessing before the meal—but no one was available to help him. Therefore, he left the temple and bumped into a man who was possessed by Wrath (Pahl. *xešm*), one of the most powerful demons, sometimes associated in Zoroastrian lore with Arabs and Islam.” He comes to Baghdad and it is here that Ma’mūn and the *qāzi* of Baghdad, assemble “a motley crew of debaters to challenge Abāliš, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians.”

of living under Islamic rule—and an authority on the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* and the *Shkand-Gumānīg Wizār*.

Asadi's poem contains one hundred and eight couplets and is structured around the superiority of fire over earth as claimed by Zoroastrians, giving several convincing arguments about the validity of Zoroastrian beliefs and rituals. In many debates, there is a judge who sides with one of the parties, but here there is no judge and the rhetorical structure indicates that the Muslim is going to win. The Muslim is allotted thirty-seven couplets, while the Zoroastrian gets twenty-eight.⁹ The conversion of the Zoroastrian to Islam is a marker of Islam's triumph. It is symbolic for a Zoroastrian to be defeated at such an aristocratic Persian gathering, not only showing the superiority of Islam over Zoroastrianism, but also emphasizing the lofty intellectual aptitude that the followers of the new religion had acquired. And yet, Asadi, who authored the epic *Garshāsp-nāma*, which preserves part of pre-Islamic Persian culture, safeguarded also the memories of Zoroastrian past. Although the Muslim Persian wins over the Zoroastrian, the poet has succeeded in making a statement about Zoroastrianism, placing it at the center of a courtly debate four hundred years after the Arab Muslim conquest.

The Zoroastrian begins with arguments in praise of fire, from lines four to thirty-three.¹⁰ The Muslim commences his counter-arguments by focusing on the qualities of the earth, from lines thirty-four to seventy-one. The two parties have almost equal numbers of lines. Couplets 72–73 emphasize the shortcomings of the Zoroastrian in presenting his arguments, followed by praise of Islam as the true religion (*din-e haqiqat*) and its prophet as the best of prophets. Asadi started his *Garshāsp-nāma* with an encomium on God (eighteen couplets), followed by praise of the prophet with references to his nocturnal ascension (twenty couplets), while chapter three is devoted to extolling Islam (in thirty-eight couplets) as the true religion (Asadi, 1–5). In this *monāzara*, couplets 74–75 function as the *gorizgāh*, in which the poet mentions the patron's name. Here he refers to the just king (*shāh-e ādel*) and then to the vizier, Abu Nasr Ahmad b. 'Alī:

9 In *Abālīsh*, the caliph Ma'mun sides with the Zoroastrian priest. In other instances, as reported in Mas'udi's *Moruj al-dhahab*, he executes people of other religious convictions, as in the story of ten Manichæans whom he orders to spit on the portrait of Prophet Mani and, when they refuse, he orders their execution.

10 On the significance of fire in Zoroastrianism, see Boyce.

Know that this excellence of mine	مرا چنین هنر از فر شاه عادل دان
comes from the just king,	
And from the grace of the select judge,	دگر ز فضل گزین قاضی افسر احرار
the crown of nobles,	
The grand and noble Abu Nasr Ahmad	جلیل سید ابونصر احمد بن علی
b. 'Ali,	
The chief of all viziers, the candle of	سر همه وزرا شمع دهر و فخر تبار
time, and the pride of the tribe.	

ASADI, 87¹¹

In this poem, Asadi chooses to symbolize Zoroastrianism with fire and Muslims with earth, two of the four elements of Empedocles (c. 490–30 BCE) (Seyed-Gohrab 2010, 90–101; Lewis, 199–226). Through this characterization, he creates space for himself to show his poetic skills, devoting twenty-nine couplets on various characteristics of fire and showing how he can connect fire to other elements (earth, water, and wind), as well as to the role of fire in Zoroastrianism. The same applies for the earth, which he associates with Islam in thirty-seven couplets. Stating at the beginning of the poem that the arguments of each side will determine which religion is superior, Asadi establishes that intellectual knowledge and poetic skills are essential. The fact that the poet chooses convincing poetic arguments as yardsticks for the superiority of one religion is present in Persian poetics. The power of persuasion lies in the use of metaphors which the literary theoretician 'Abd al-Qāher al-Jorjāni (d. 1078 or 1081) called *takhyil* (“make-believe”), to be applied in argumentative discourse (Heinrichs 1991, 180–82).¹² Heinrich terms this “poetic argumentation,” which is based on literary devices such as the analogy and the simile. These literary tools are used to rouse the audience’s imagination, to evoke emotions, and even to stir them to action. A lucid example is Rudaki’s (860–940) poem, which the twelfth-century Nezāmi 'Aruzi utilizes (1996/1375, 49–54) in his *Chahār-maqāla* (Four Discourses, 1155–57) to emphasize the power of argument by telling how Rudaki’s *qasida* moved Nasr II b. Ahmad (r. 914–43) to return to Bukhara after many months in Herat. Many notables tried to convince the ruler to return, but none could persuade him until Rudaki composed a poem, accompanied by music, evoking nostalgically the memories of Bukhara and stimulating the senses of his audience to such a degree that when he reached the sixth verse, the amir descended from his throne and, without boots, mounted his

11 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

12 Heinrich discusses this in the context of Arabic prose, but such argumentative discourse is equally applicable to poetry; see also *idem* 2000.

steed and galloped in the direction of Bukhara. Here, the power of argument is connected to senses, nostalgia, and music to have the utmost effect. In later centuries, philosophers such as Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–74) developed further this idea, emphasizing that the power of conviction is superior to the naked truth (Landau, 16). By focusing on the elements fire and earth, Asadi narrows the subject-matter to exhibit his virtuosity in contriving new images, metaphors, and rhetorical devices. In this *monāzara*, Asadi's style differs from other notable early poets, such as 'Onsori (c. 961–1039), Farrokhi (d. c. 1037), and Manuchehri (d. c. 1040), who had an inimitably simple (*sahl-e momtane'*) style. Asadi's *qasidas* have an even more convoluted style than his *Garshāsp-nāma*.

This is not to say that the *Garshāsp-nāma* is not itself a learned poem. Yaghmā'i gives Asadi the epithet of *hakim* ("the sage"), with regard to the *Garshāsp-nāma*—an honorific given to great poets such as Sanā'i and Sa'di (de Bruijn 1983, 22)—since the epic is not a simple story of historical myth, but, rather, the poet sought to "cultivate literary maxims, showing how to use Persian words, and explicating ethical, didactic, and social prescriptions. One third of the epic is certainly on wisdom, homily, and instructions of life, of which no one is needless" (Asadi, 2). Yaghmā'i observes further that Asadi's source for this epic was Middle Persian material which he accessed directly, indicating his knowledge of this language.

The association of fire with Zoroastrianism and earth with Islam has symbolic implications. While Persian poets usually praise fire, especially when they describe the sun, here, the depiction of fire—however positive the allusions—is meant to humiliate Zoroastrianism and to stress the superiority of earth. Moreover, in Islam, fire is associated with Satan. In the rich mystical literature, Satan claims to be made of fire and, therefore, superior to mankind. When God created Adam and asked the angels to come and admire his creation and to prostrate themselves before Adam, Satan refused. According to the Qur'an (7:12), when God asked Satan, "What made you disobey Me?" Satan replied, "I am better than Adam, for You have created me out of fire and Adam out of clay." Asadi's cultured audience knew that Islam had introduced such negative associations with fire. Thus, his association of Islam with the earth is a clear allusion to the Qur'anic dispute between Satan and God. Satan was an angel of propinquity, lovingly serving God for thousands of years, but when God created Adam, Satan fell from grace and was even cursed (Awn; Seyed-Gohrab 2017; Gösken, 101–2).¹³ The fall of the fire-bred Satan and the

13 Gösken discusses (101–2) fire as a metaphor denoting divine inspiration based on Rumi's *Masnavi*. In this passage, the poet depicts how human beings are absorbed in God after having annihilated all their human attributes.

triumph of the earth-born Adam is an analogy for the fall of Zoroastrianism and the rise of Islam.

Foruzānfar observes that the Sho'ubis considered fire superior to earth. He gives examples of both Persian and Arabic poets such as Bashshār b. Bord (714–84) and Ferdowsi (Foruzānfar, 452; Harb, 10).¹⁴ Although Asadi imitates Ferdowsi in his epic, he has apparently a different idea regarding the symbolism of fire and earth. Foruzānfar cites two couplets from Ferdowsi's introduction in which the poet depicts the creation of the world based on the four primal elements. After praising God and intellect, the poet begins to describe fire, which he contrasts with the earth:

A luminous fire was set up on high	یکی آتشی بر شده تابناک
Amongst wind and water, above the dark earth. ...	میان باد و آب از بر تیره خاک ...
The earth had no lofty position;	زمین را بلندی نبد جایگاه
It was a center obscure and black.	یکی مرکزی تیره بود و سیاه

FORUZĀNFAR, 452

Foruzānfar believes that Asadi opposed Sho'ubi beliefs and therefore praised the earth (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1977/1356, 675). In other words, praising fire had become a distinct marker, pointing to Sho'ubi affiliation, while the earth had become a marker of Islam. Nowhere does Asadi refer to the Qur'anic view of earth or the reason Adam and Eve were banished from paradise to the earth, as stated in the Qur'an (2:36; 7:24–25; 20:123). Nor does he reference the Qur'an's contrasting description of man being reduced to the "lowest of the low" (95:4–5) and the return of the soul to the original abode.¹⁵ Ferdowsi's depiction

I am the fire, if you have any doubt or suspect,	آشمن من گر ترا شکست و ظن
Experiment and put your hand on me!	آزمون کن دست را بر من بزن
I am the fire, if you have any doubt,	آشمن من بر تو گر شد مشتبه
Then bring your face to <i>my</i> face for an instant.	روی خود بر روی من یک دم بنه
RUMI 1990–95/1364–69, II, ll. 1355–1356;	
tr. WILLIAMS 2020, 87	

14 Early Arabic poets with a Persian ethnic background used provocative poetry praising pre-Islamic Persian culture or even sometime using intentionally Persian words in their Arabic poems with deliberate political implications. See Harb (10), who gives examples from the poetry of Abu Novās (d. c. 815) in which the "religious and ethnic aspects of Persian and Zoroastrian identity contrasted and distinguished from that of Arab. ..."

15 The full verse reads: "Certainly, We created man in the best form. Then We rendered him the lowest of the low" (Qur'an 95:4–7).

of the Creation is based on Islamic tradition in which everything is made of the four elements. Yet, the pre-Islamic Persian story of creation differed, “where man is produced by the ‘first of the spirits’ Ohrmazd, in five parts, body (*tan*), vital soul (*gyān*), spiritual soul (*urwān*), spiritual form (*ēwēnag*) and immortal spirit (*frawahr*). The Pahlavi *Bundahišn* says that the body of the first man, Gayōmard, was made of metal (*āyoxšust*), and that the first human couple was produced from his seed, which had been preserved in the earth after the attack of the evil spirit, Gannāg Menōg” (Williams, 149).

The ideas Asadi unfolds in this particular *monāzara* can be found almost identically in his *Garshāsp-nāma*. (This also removes any doubts regarding the authenticity of the poem, voiced by Foruzānfar [438–91; 452 n. 1].) Asadi identifies himself with the Muslim narrator by using the pronoun “I.” Here, the Muslim says of Adam and Satan:

The earth is the <i>qebla</i> [direction of prayer]: due to the significance of Adam's clay, The angels prostrate before it, the prophets go on pilgrimage to it. In their origins, Satan is made of fire and Adam of earth. Look, which one of the two is better, and think of him.	زمی است قبله که از معنی گل آدم فرشتگانش بده ساجد، انبیا زوار از آتش ابلیس آدم هم از زمین در اصل نگر ازین دو که به زان دو آن همان انگار
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KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1978/1357, 84
ll. 43–44

These lines highly resemble his descriptions in his *Garshāsp-nāma*, not only in terms of image and metaphors, but also in terms of the choice of words and phraseology:

What should matter to a Zoroastrian, if the fire is better: Eblis is made of fire while Adam is of earth. Look, which of the two individuals is better, That's sufficient sign which of these two [elements] is better.	گر آتش به آمد بر مغ چه باک از آتش بد ابلیس و آدم ز خاک ببین زین دو تن به کدامین کسست همان زین دو بهتر نشان این بسست
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ASADI, 9 ll. 32–33

This is not an isolated example. Many lines of the *monāzara* have corresponding phrases and metaphors in *Garshāsp-nāma*. In the *monāzara*, images are

often squeezed into one couplet, while in the epic, they are elaborated. For instance, the following image of the earth as a mother is found in one couplet in the *monāzara*:

The earth is like a mother: plants
are like her breasts
The living creatures are as children
[nourished] at her side.

چو مادری است زمین مر ورا چو پستان نبت
چو بچه جانوران او گرفته شان بکنار

KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1978/1357,
84 l. 46

And in the *Garshāsp-nāma*, two couplets:

The earth is like a love-seeking mother;
All the plants are like her breasts.
She has created many thousand children
in differing forms
Whom she nourishes at her side.

زمینست چون مادر مهرجوی
همه رستی ها چو پستان اوی
بچه گونه گون خلق چندین هزار
که شان پروراند همی در کنار

ASADI, 9 ll. 10–12

For Asadi, the earth is superior to the other elements, which he also emphasizes in an extensive description of over forty-five couplets in the *Garshāsp-nāma*, concluding, “look which of the other elements has the virtues of the earth [listed above]” (Asadi, 10 l. 45). His recycling of metaphors and images in his *monāzara* makes his style convoluted. Yet, in his “Dispute between Earth and Sky,” there is no winner. The poem’s narrator declines to judge between the arguments. Instead, he introduces Time as the judge, who proposes to strike a peace:

When their dispute was dragging on,
suddenly,
Time came between them saying,
“Why quarrel? ...
You both should strike peace and till
eternity be loyal
In peace and do not molest each other
through disloyalty.”

چون جنگشان درازبید ناگهان زمان
آمد میانشان در و گفت این جدل چرا ...
صلح آورید هر دو و بر صلح تا ابد
دائم وفا کنید میازید زی جفا

KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1978/1357, 101 ll.
52, 54

Coming back to the debate between “A Zoroastrian and a Muslim,” the Zoroastrian starts his arguments by describing a rich catalogue of fire images derived from the Persian literary tradition, positing the superiority of fire due to its association with warmth and the life-giving sun. He notes that the fire’s heat causes clouds to exist and the wind to blow, it causes trees to fruit and seasons to change, colors to appear, and life to enter the world. Then, the Zoroastrian refers to the role of fire in the religious rituals of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism: Indians burn their dead in fire, while Zoroastrians believe it possesses a sacred value, as their priests girdle themselves before it. The fire is, therefore, the Zoroastrians’ *qebla* because of its central position in the cosmos, illuminating the world, giving warmth to the world, and even giving life to creatures.¹⁶ The Zoroastrian says that he sees the sun in the heat of fire and the sun performs miracles in the world; therefore, he sees the sun as a prophet. The sun’s warmth makes animals move, while at sunset, serpents become active. Such references to the sun as the stimulus for movement and even the invoker of the soul are part of medieval biological philosophy. Persian treatises on the development of the embryo say that during the nine months of gestation, the embryo is under the influence of the nine spheres. The fourth month, when the soul enters the body, is associated with the sun. The Zoroastrian emphasizes that, without fire, the other three elements cannot subsist. Moreover, the fire plays a role during the resurrection and the hereafter, defining how one individual is spared, while another is punished. Afterwards, the Zoroastrian mentions historical events in which fire is associated with the prophets, citing how Abraham was thrown into the fire, but it became miraculously cold. He won over his adversaries and became a prophet (Renard). The Zoroastrian also refers to the role of the fire in material culture, by mentioning how it is used to melt silver and gold and to create fragrances by burning ambergris and aloe-wood. Towards the end, the Zoroastrian proudly states that God has sent the sun like a prophet to perform all these miracles and this is why he worships fire, “If all these virtues belong to the fire and the sun, / my *qebla* is better, do not deny all these” (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 1978/1357, 83, line 33).

In his refutation, the Muslim argues that the earth occupies the lowest position among the four basic elements because of its humbleness: it is not a flaw, but rather a virtue. The answers the Muslim gives come from common knowledge of the fire’s negative qualities. For instance, in refuting the positive role fire played for Abraham, he states that the same fire burned his tongue

16 In this poem, both the Zoroastrian and the Muslim use the Islamic Arabic term *qebla* (direction of prayer), which is not strange as it is in a Persian Islamic context. The term is also used in other Zoroastrian texts; see, for example, Williams, 153.

(though it appears that Asadi confuses here Moses for Abraham). Moreover, the Muslim adds, if God spoke to Abraham through the fire, he also spoke to Noah through the earth to generate the deluge. Fire is associated with infidels, as it burns them in hell, says the Muslim. It is certainly a miracle that the earth is suspended in the middle of the heavens while the earth is the heart of the world, everything revolving around it. The Muslim refers to the creation myth and how God created Adam from earth and asked Satan, made of fire, to prostrate before a handful of clay. For several couplets, the Muslim elaborates on the earth as a mother who gives birth to creatures, offers them food and shelter, and takes care of them. The Muslim refers to the cliché metaphor of the earth as a guest-house and God as its host. Asadi then employs an original image, presenting the earth as a court and all creatures as servants coming and going and bowing in prayer. In another metaphor, the poet compares the heavenly spheres to a court and the earth to the king. The constant movement of the spheres is likened to the activity of servants at a court. Even the seasons of the year are the earth's servants, for the earth bestows them with robes of honor in colors befitting them: plain white for the Winter, green for Spring, a two-colored garment for the Summer, and yellow silk for Autumn. The Muslim also describes the earth as an epistle and the trees as the letters of speech written upon it. The centrality of the earth is depicted through the metaphor of the point, from which perfectly straight lines lead to the celestial spheres precisely as though drawn by a pair of compasses.¹⁷ The earth is also the substance from which human beings are made. In the poem, the Muslim states that humankind will rise again from the earth on the Day of Resurrection. To refute the Zoroastrian's arguments about the superiority of the sun, the Muslim also lists

17 Asadi is referring here to the position of the earth according to medieval Islamic cosmology. The earth is the lowest of the nine celestial spheres. The geocentric idea is described here as a dot in the middle of the spheres. A description of this cosmology is offered by Nezāmi 'Aruzi:

Now you must know that this world, which lies in the hollow of the Heaven of the Moon and within the circle of this first Sphere, is called "the World of Growth and Decay." And you must thus conceive it, that within the concavity of the Heaven of the Moon lies the Fire, surrounded by the Heaven of the Moon; and that within the Sphere of the Fire is the Air, surrounded by the Fire; and within the Air is the Water, surrounded by the Air, while within the Water is the Earth, with the Water round about it. And in the middle of the earth is an imaginary point, from which all straight lines drawn to the Heaven of the Moon are equal; and when we speak of "down," we mean this point or what lies nearest to it; and when we speak of "up," we mean the remotest heaven, or what lies nearest to it, this being a heaven above the Zodiacal Heaven, having naught beyond it, for with it the material world terminates, or comes to an end.

NEZĀMI 'ARUZI, 1996/1375, 7–8; tr. BROWNE, 4–5

several flaws of the sun. For instance, he states bombastically that the sun is preoccupied with the earth as it revolves around it. He notes that the sun blinds the eye of a person who stares at it. He then depicts the earth with familiar images as God's outspread cloth, while the sun is its candle, illumining the earth's plains and oceans. He adds that the spread cloth is not there for the candle, but vice-versa, so that the earth can be fecund.

This set of imagery and cultural allusions to fire and to the earth, created in an associative fashion, is not really based on doctrinal dichotomies between Islam and Zoroastrianism. Rather, it is a catalogue of images for literary argumentation which the poet utilizes arbitrarily to praise earth and dispraise fire. Although the poem's title, "A Dispute between a Zoroastrian and a Muslim," suggests hostility, the argumentation is far from unfriendly. The two sides remain civil and the Zoroastrian gives in easily and accepts the Muslim's rebuttal about the superiority of the earth.

It may, at first sight, seem remarkable that a poet, who is entirely committed to Islam, writes an epic of nine thousand couplets on a pre-Islamic Iranian champion and composes odes to Zoroastrianism and the excellence of Persians. Indeed, his other *monāzara*, "The Dispute between an Arab and a Persian" is far more controversial for its depiction of the differences between the two parties. The poem is also less civil as the intention of each side is to magnify the wicked traits of the other to establish their own superiority.¹⁸ The setting is a Persian courtly gathering. When an Arab hears someone listing the superiority of Persians over the Arabs, he becomes angry and shouts:

One of those present grew agitated
and shouted: "What is a Persian?
Pride belongs to Arabs! O ignorant
idiot!"

آشفتم یکی زان همه و گفتم عجم چیست
فخر اهل عرب را رسد ای ابله نادان

KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1978/1357, 69 l. 4

In return, the Persian calls the Arab a madman and likens Arabs demeaningly to demons in the desert and camel-drivers. Then, the Arab lists the virtuous traits of the Arabs in twenty-one couplets, alluding to the rich vocabulary of the Arabic language, the classical Arab poets, hospitality, courage, horse and camel husbandry, the kinship of the Prophet Mohammad, the language of the Qur'an, and the location of God's house in Mecca. The Persian, who is identified with the poet, responds in some seventy couplets, listing deleterious traits

18 I have analyzed this poem in Seyed-Gohrab 2020. For a full annotated translation and an analysis of the poem, see also Abdullaeva 2009.

of Arabs as thieves, as those who bury their baby girls alive, and as those who treated Mohammad disrespectfully and even hurt him (Giladi, 185–200).¹⁹ The Persian even states that the ancestors of the Arabs, Mohammad, and the source of the Arabic language itself all go back to Persian roots. The Persian is exaggeratedly persistent in allocating everything to Persians. Such ideas were not unique to Asadi, for, centuries earlier, Ebn Qoteyba had complained of Persians who claimed kinship with the prophets:

They [the Persians] also lay claim to the prophets, saying that only four of them—Hūd, Šāliḥ, Shu‘ayb, and Muḥammad—were Arabs. This claim is an empty boast: it has no substance and is a flagrant injustice to the Arabs.

EBN QOTEYBA, 24; tr. Savant and Webb, 25

The speaker then refers to Persians as learned people as evidenced by the impact of the philosopher Abu Bakr Mohammad b. Zakariyyā Rāzi (known in Latin as Rhazes, c. 854–925 or 935) and by great poets such as Rudaki (860–940), ‘Onsori, ‘Asjadi (*fl.* eleventh century) and Kesā’i (c. 953–1001), as well as the glory of pre-Islamic Persian culture, with mythic kings such as Kayumars, Hushang, and Jamshid, and heroic champions such as Sām, Garshāsp, and Rostam.²⁰ Afterwards, he complains of the Arabs’ treatment of Persian pilgrims who journey for thousands of kilometers to perform the pilgrimage but are then stripped of their dress and provisions and even robbed of their shoes. The Persian continues to praise the agreeable climate of Persia with its fertile soil, rivers, and mines of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli; the pleasant fragrance of the land and the diversity of its fruits and foods. He describes Persians as wearing silk and brocade, while the Arabs wear cotton. He also contrasts the eating habits of the Arabs with those of the Persians, stating that the Persians eat fowl and lamb, but the Arabs eat snakes, locust, mice, and dead lizards (see Zimmt; Daryae; Jamshidi).

This litany of pejorative traits is used to highlight the differences between Muslim Persians and Arabs, emphasizing the former’s superiority and sophistication of their ancient culture. Asadi appropriates Islam for the Persians and rejects the idea that the Arabs, especially the tribe of Qoraysh, are exceptional.

19 Reference to the practice of infanticide as an Arab tradition, associated particularly with the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Arabia, appears repeatedly in Persian poetry until modern times.

20 Interestingly, he assesses the collected work of Rudaki at one hundred and eighty thousand couplets, whereas the number that have survived the teeth of time is considerably less; see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1978/1357, 119.

The poet emphasizes that being a good Muslim is based on piety and fear of God—not ethnicity—and stresses that Islam is a religion of equality.

If we interpret the poem based on Foruzānfar's previously-mentioned argument—that fire is a marker of Sho'ubis and the earth is an identifier of anti-Sho'ubis—it becomes clear that Asadi is celebrating here his identity as a Muslim Persian, turning his back on Zoroastrianism. In Khaleghi-Motlagh's view:

Asadi is actually the best example of those groups of Persians who, when they turned their backs on their ancestors, and gradually became firmly rooted in Islamic beliefs and convictions, did not abandon the racial fanaticism of the first generation. To exercise their fanaticism in the field of the new religion and culture, they rather found a new motivation to gallop on this road. Applying the analogy of a wet-nurse who is kinder than a mother, they saw themselves more Muslims than the Arabs.

KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH 1977/1356, 677

The *monāzara* as a literary form has a function in a community. As Rezaei Yazdi states, it is a

debate between competing discourses which engaged in opposing, informing, appropriating, and complementing each other. ... It forms the frame narrative through which the foreign and the indigenous, the traditional and the modern, the religious and the national, the rational and the inspirational coexist, intersect, repel, attract, overlap, and, most importantly, inform each other. The narrative features of the *munāzirah* reflect the social dialogue among disparate yet complementary ideologies.

Indeed, narrative overlap is a salient feature of the *munāzirah*.

REZAEI YAZDI, 20

While, in the dispute between a Zoroastrian and a Muslim, the emphasis lies on the literary and philosophical power of the speakers, in the debate between the Arab and Persian, one may argue that the poem consists of a compendium of traits employed by the aristocracy and possibly other hierarchies in eleventh-century Persia to characterize Arabs, drawing on previous literature, as well as on oratories from the culturally-learned and political élite. Without the approval of his audience, the poet could never achieve his goal—that is, to compose a long panegyric in which the patrons admire the poet's wit and eloquence in conveying social, political, and religious sentiments. One of the tasks of the courtly poet was to underscore and preserve the exploits of the subject being praised. By choosing the compositional structure of a debate

in his long opening, the poet opts for a dialogical approach, allowing several personæ in his poem to convey their rival ideologies. These voices create tensions, contestation, and provocation with the aim of convincing the judge to select the most successful debater. The judge's verdict reveals the ideology of the court, expressing the court's religious beliefs and cultural modes. Although these courts promoted Islam, the ideologies expressed in such debates do not necessarily convey conventional Islamic rules, but rather create a space to express the court's version of Islam. Thus, in one lengthy courtly prose debate between wine and the rose, the wine wins and the courtiers raise a toast to its victory (Seyed-Gohrab 2013, 84–85).

The *monāzara* is polyphonic inasmuch as there are perhaps four personæ present: the proponent, the opponent, the judge, and the poet himself. The last two may be combined. The words and phrases put in the mouth of the opponent express ideologies that rival those of the proponent. Even the linguistic style of these persona may differ to signal tensions and differences. The position of the judge is also complicated as he commonly appropriates and voices the general sentiments of the community. In Asadi's poems, the poet openly sides with the Persian against the Arab and the Muslim against the Zoroastrian, removing the boundary between the author and the narrator. In both of these poems, the poet responsively sides with the winner, imbuing victory with an authoritative aspect. Positioning himself as a judge gives the poet another layer of authority, establishing a direct connection with the patron and the audience. In fact, as a feature of the genre, the *monāzara* blurs the boundary between the author and narrator, but in Asadi's poems discussed here, the author voices his presence to define his narratorial direction.

Another feature of a *monāzara* is the lack of chronicity:

It is of course possible to establish a specific chronology for an individual *munāzīrah* in many cases, but it is not possible to wholly impose narrative time, in the sense of a completed plot, on it, for as a genre the *munāzīrah*, though informed by and premised on modern temporal categories, has its own internal temporal logic. The time of the *munāzīrah* is anchored in a present that is fragmented and inconclusive. This present is the meeting place of the past and future epochs which, though summoned as temporal spans, are deployed as contemporaneous conditions. Their contemporaneity is mediated through the universal time of Islam. In this temporal orientation, the wretched present is a time teeming with idealized past memories and equally idealized future possibilities whose realization is possible through resorting to the timeless teachings of Islam.

Applying this essential feature of the *monāzara* to Asadi's two poems, it becomes clear that the author is creating an idealized constellation of traits for Persians when he is confronted with an Arab, romanticizing the past and hoping for an idealized future. His poems form a juncture of past and present, rejection and acceptance to consolidate a new faith with ancient ethnically-Persian identity. In the intersection of the present—caught between past glory and uncertain future—the poet creates a narrative space to invite dialogic, polemic, and even contrary ideas to meet, with the aim of suggesting a new identity. As Sahner rightly states (63), “with few exceptions, Zoroastrians failed to launch a targeted apologetic response to Islam in the post-conquest period, comparable to that of Christians.” The question is to what extent the contents of Asadi's debates reflect a Zoroastrian apologetic response to Islam or whether this debate is purely a means to show how Persian Muslims have accepted a new identity in which being both a Persian and a Muslim formed a central connecting bond.

The debate between an Arab and a Persian is very different from the debate between the Zoroastrian and the Muslim. In the former, the poet assumes a strict anti-Arab attitude, which contextualizes the poem within the discourse of the Sho'ubiyya movement. Assessing the two *monāzaras*, it becomes clear that the dispute between the Zoroastrian and the Muslim is more a literary enterprise than a religious doctrinal dispute, while the debate between the Persian and the Arab is a fierce Sho'ubi piece, claiming a central position for the Persians in the Islamic world. Asadi's affiliation to Shi'ism is not evident, although at several points in the Arab and Persian *monāzara* he refers (60–61) to the first imam 'Ali b. Abi Tāleb and his sons Hasan and Hoseyn. Together, these *monāzaras* introduce a new identity for Persians in which pre-Islamic Persian tradition is an integrated part of the Muslim Persian culture, which is quite distinct from that of the Arabs.²¹

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21 The Sho'ubiyya movement was very diverse in the Persian cultural sphere, as poets such as Mahyār Deylami (*fl.* tenth century) and Bohtori wrote in Arabic praising pre-Islamic Persian glory, while Ebn Qoteyba (828–89) wrote an entire book on the “Excellence of the Arabs (*Fazl al-'arab*),” adding more nuance to the discussion. Although he is fierce in his judgement of the Persians, he distinguishes between the Persians in Khorāsān and those from other parts of Iran.

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