
About the cover



postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2022).
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-022-00237-z>

In this image, a monstrous trickster, the Akvān Div, carries off the hero Rostam. The illustration's context exemplifies the dense intercultural connections of premodern Islamicate literature. While the manuscript was executed between 1616 and 1620 in Istanbul, the text is Sharif Amedi's 1510 Turkish translation



of Abu al-Qāsem Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeḥ* ("Book of Kings"), undertaken in Egypt for the Mamluk Sultan Qānūh al-Ghawrī. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* itself is a vast Persian epic, completed c. 1010 in northeastern Iran. It narrates the reigns of fifty Iranian monarchs, from the creation of the world until the Islamic conquests of the seventh century. One of the poem's central characters, Rostam is an immensely strong champion constantly embroiled in familial and political tragedies as well as struggles against the *div*, monstrous parahumans who dwell at the margins of civilization. When Rostam first confronts the Akvān Div, the demon thwarts him with its shapeshifting and sorcery. Exhausted, the hero lies down to sleep, upon which the Akvān Div cuts away the earth on which he has been lying and lifts him into the air. The demon then asks if Rostam would prefer to be hurled against a mountain or into the sea. Anticipating the demon's treachery, the hero says that he chooses the mountain—and so is tossed into the sea. After narrowly escaping a swarm of hungry sea monsters, Rostam swims back to land and returns to his quest. In the course of this adventure, Ferdowsi offers an uncharacteristic observation on the nature of fantastic creatures—By '*div*,' he writes, 'you should understand "evil person," someone who has no thanks for God. Anyone who strays from the path of mankind, count him among the *div*, don't count him among humans' (Ferdowsi 1992, 296-297). Just because we don't regularly encounter metamorphosing ogres, Ferdowsi suggests, doesn't mean that literature about such beings can't be used to think through questions on the nature of humanity. At the same time, no other legendary creature in the poem receives such a gloss, leaving audiences free to develop their own engagements with its fictive and fantastical contents. (Image courtesy of the Spencer Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collections)

Reference

Ferdowsi, Abu al-Qāsem. 1371 [1992]. *Shāhnāmeḥ*, volume 3, edited by Jalāl Khāleqi-Motlaq. New York: Bibliotheca Persica.

Sam Lasman
Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.
E-mail: sl2080@cam.ac.uk