

A Tree Atop the Mountain: Mobad Manikan and the Elusive Promises of Masculinity

Cameron Cross

University of Michigan

Introduction

Look! Have you ever seen, or heard from any wise man, such deeds as Ramin has done to me time and again? He's wearied my heart of sweet life! By the hands of Vis, her Nurse, and my brother, I forever burn in fire; confounded by these three sorcerers, no salve can ease this pain I'm in. Indifferent to chains and the brig, they fear neither Hell nor God; what should one do with three demons, who know not fear or shame, who brashly do whatever they want, who do not fear to be disgraced? Though I am king of world-kings, I know no one more wretched than me. What use this rule and lordship, when my days are black as pitch? I dispense justice to all, but I've a hundred complaints against my lot: men at war have seen my tyranny, but now a woman has become my tyrant. ([I] 60.31–41)¹

¹Citations are from *Vīs va Rāmīn*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Tehran: Šidā-yi Mu'āšir, 1377), using the shorthand notation (chapter.line). The original Persian passages can be found in the

Cameron Cross <kchalipa@umich.edu> is Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is interested in questions of genre, performance, subjectivity, and ethics, particularly as they appear in the romantic and heroic epics of the pre-Mongol era, but in conversation with other literary forms and traditions. His recent publications and works in progress include studies of the *Shāhnāmah*, the *Haft Paykar*, *Varqa & Gulshāh*, the *Kūsh-nāmah*, and *Vīs & Rāmīn*.

These are the words of one of the most enigmatic men in Persian literature: Mobad Manīkān, lord of Marv, king of Iran and Turan, sovereign of all lands from China to Kairouan.² Despite these lofty titles, it is clear from his lament that all is not well back at home. Mobad’s wife, Vis, has rendered him impotent with a magic talisman, and is now having an affair with his younger brother, the dashing Prince Ramin. As Mobad complains here to his minister, Zard, this turn of events has “bound” much more than his physical body: for a man whose symbolic authority stems from his connection to the law—the right to command, and the power to punish those who disobey—the scandal has brought the limits of his sovereignty into open view. Faced with these lovers who not only flout the law but laugh in the face of its adjudicator, Mobad stands to lose not only his bride but the right and authority to claim her; no wonder, then, that he calls the lovers’ actions demonic.

I begin with this passage because it brings us straight to the crux of Mobad’s authority and the site of its crisis: sexual power over women and political power over other men. Typically, one would expect these two dynamics, both classic emblems of patriarchal power, to complement and reinforce the other, but I will argue that this is not the case with Mobad. Indeed, it is the very tension between his dual role as man and king that lies at the root of his predicament, in that the demands of masculine honor impede him from carrying out his kingly duties, even as the exigencies of kingship undermine his status and position as a man. I hope in this reading to bring new insights into the complex negotiations of love, gender, and power at work in the tale of *Vis & Ramin*, and to offer an example against which we may consider this topic in the story’s generic neighbors and relatives. *Vis & Ramin* reminds us that these dynamic relationships are neither

Appendix, identified by Roman numerals; all translations are mine. I transcribe the proper names from this book (Mobad, Ramin, Vis, etc.) without diacritics, as they appear in Dick Davis’s English translation (Penguin, 2009).

²For a detailed discussion of Mobad’s dominion and Parthian lineage, see Vladimir Minorsky, “Vīs u Rāmīn: A Parthian Romance,” in *Iranica: Twenty Articles* (Hertford, Eng.: S. Austin, 1964), 164–65, 180–86.

as simple nor as stable as they may first appear, and must never be taken for granted.

On genre and gender

To provide a few words of context, *Vis & Ramin* is a narrative *masnavī* of about 9,000 verses, composed in Isfahan by Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī around the year 446/1054 under the aegis of the Seljuk Turks, who had wrested the area from Buyid control only a few years prior. The poem participates in a genre I would broadly call the romance—a story that recounts the adventures of two lovers who are forced apart by the hand of fate and its various deputies, only to be reunited (either in death or in marriage) at the end.³ Texts that engage with or invoke this model in some way or another include the “ideal” Greek novels of the Imperial period, such as *Callirhoe* and *Leucippe & Clitophon*, the Arabic *akhbār* about Majnūn and other ‘udhrī lovers, and European cycles like *Floris & Blancheflor*, *Aucassin & Nicolette*, and *Tristan & Isolde*. Iranians, for their part, seem to have told stories of this kind as far back as our documentation allows us to see: Chares of Mitylene, who accompanied Alexander the Great on his march to Persepolis, relates the popular “barbarian” tale of Odatis and Zariadres, who fell in love when they beheld each other in a dream.⁴ *Vis & Ramin*, like its famous cousin *Bīzhan & Manīzhah*, is part of this pre-Islamic Iranian tradition of love-stories; its roots go back to Parthian Iran of the first century CE, and it is one of the few medieval texts extant that was possibly rendered into New Persian from a Middle Persian source.⁵ Although *Vis & Ramin* follows the

³In conceiving of these generic kinds, I find J. C. Bürgel’s typology of the epic (“heroic” versus “romantic” helpful: see “Die persische Epik,” in *Orientalisches Mittelalter*, ed. W. Heinrichs (AULA-Verlag: Wiesbaden, 1990), 301–18; also “The Romance,” in *Persian Literature*, ed. E. Yarshater (Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988), 161–63.

⁴Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, ed. and trans. S. Douglas Olson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006–2012), sec. xiii.575a–f.

⁵This is the view of many scholars, although there is not unanimity on this point; see, for example, Gilbert Lazard, “La source en ‘farsi’ de ‘Vis-o Ramin’,” *T’bilisī Universitētis Šromebi* 241 (1983): 34–39; François de Blois, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey*, vol. 5: *Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 142 [163]. For a detailed discus-

basic structure of initial love, separation, and union that is common across this genre, it brings many unexpected twists to the convention, not least in the psychological attention it gives to the ostensible villain of the story, Mobad.

In terms of generic expectations, Mobad easily falls into the recognizable role of the “rival” or “obstacle” who stands between the hero and heroine.⁶ This is an ubiquitous figure in the romance genre; for example, ‘Ayyūqī’s *Varqah & Gulshāh* (w. ca. 420/1030), a romance that incorporates both Arabic and Helleno-Iranian narrative patterns, features two such characters: first Rabī b. ‘Adnān, who abducts Gulshāh on her wedding-night, then the King of Syria, who uses his immense fortune to bribe Gulshāh’s mother into marrying her daughter to him instead of Varqah.⁷ Despite the generic nature of this role, it nevertheless bears curious implications for those who play it, for it generates a character who is both *necessary* for the story to take place and *necessarily tangential* in its denouement. Mobad’s job, in other words, is to activate a story about the separation of two lovers; the plot cannot be set into motion until he intervenes, and it will not end until his claim has been neutralized in some manner, in this case with his emasculation, humiliation, and death. Mobad exists to be nullified—his job is to fail—for the minute he dies, the union of Vis and Ramin becomes legitimate and achievable, signaling the end of the story. What is fascinating and I daresay unique about this case is that, unlike Rabī b. ‘Adnān or the King of Syria, Mobad seems acutely aware of the constraints that his role as a stock figure has placed upon his political autonomy. This is not to say that

sion of this issue, see Cameron Cross, “The Poetics of Romantic Love in *Vis & Rāmīn*” (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2015), 26–36.

⁶Both Hidāyat and Gabrieli make this observation; see, respectively, “Chand nuktaḥ dar bārah-yi Vīs u Rāmīn,” in *Majmū‘ah-i nivīshṭah ‘hā-yi parākandah-i Šādiq Hidāyat* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1344), 487; “Note sul *Vīs u Rāmīn* di Faḥr ad-Dīn Gurgānī,” *Rendiconti della R. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche*, Ser. 6, no. 15 (1939): 382.

⁷It is noteworthy that Mobad subverts Vis’s mother Shahru using the same stratagem; for more on obstacles, abduction, and the possible connections between Greek and Persian romances, see Dick Davis, *Panthea’s Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2002), 50–51 and 72–75.

he has a meta-knowledge of himself as a fictional character, but rather that his story is all the more powerful precisely because he is forced to confront his innate contingency and grapple with the mysterious reasons behind it. He can sense, though he cannot fully explain why, that the obstacles that lie between him and his happiness, unlike those faced by Vis and Ramin, are necessarily and forever insurmountable for reasons somehow intrinsic to his own person, yet outside of his ability to control: *Though I am king of world-kings, I know no one more wretched than me*. Realizing his inherent and fundamental limitations—the condition of being “bound”—throws the givens of his masculine and kingly self into a state of existential crisis.

This bittersweet mixture of power and poverty in Mobad expresses itself on a number of levels, most pointedly in terms of the way it runs against the basic expectations of his male identity. As we saw above, Mobad identifies a direct correspondence between his private failure to control his wife and his public failure to rule his kingdom. Both forms of domination, the sexual and the political, are linguistically connected to the fundamental identity of being a man (*mard*) and its associated codes and practices—*mardī* and *mardumī*, similar to the link between *vir* and *virtus* in Latin.⁸ Mobad makes the same equivalence between the sexual and political spheres in another passage: “My troops, be they rank and file or high command, all call me a ‘non-man’—and if they do, I deserve it! What man am I, who cannot overcome [lit., ‘come on top of’] a woman?” (*sipāh-am gar kihān u gar mihān-and • hamah yaksar marā nā-mard khwānand / agar nā-mard khwānand-am sazāyam • chi mard-am man ki bā zan bar nayāyam*, 68.26–27). It is crucial to recognize that Mobad experiences and expresses his lack of autonomy in terms of his gender, that he has in some way failed at *being a man*—and most critics of

⁸The concept is similar to other words that denote (masculine) codes of virtue, such as *murūvat*, *futūvat*, and *javānmardī*, in contrast to the more “humane” values of *insānīyat* it usually means today; see Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāmah*, sv. *mardumī*. While such virtues are not fully dependent on or restricted to biological sex in *Vis & Ramin*—Ramin, for example, begs the Nurse to have mercy on him out of *mardumī* (*tū nīz az mardumī bar man bibakhshāy*, 40.95)—their constitution as essentially male is important to keep in mind for this study.

the poem, we shall see, will concur with his assessment. What is not so simple, however, is to reverse-engineer the proposition, and ask ourselves what would a *successful* practice of *mardumī* look like in this situation? What would Mobad need to do to succeed in this story that requires him to fail?

Unfortunately for the king, the answer is bleak: there is no “right” kind of manliness that could have saved him. Indeed, it is manhood itself—the property that promises dominion and autonomy to those who possess it—that forges the bars of his jail, trapping him inside social and institutional structures that curtail his ability to act, such that “the skin on his body was like a prison” (*chu zindān būd guftī bar tan-ash pūst*, 38.60), as the narrator says in a telling simile. In this way, we encounter an uncanny parallel between the story’s norms of genre and gender: just as Mobad keeps stumbling against his innate limitations as a figure paradoxically central and superfluous to the narrative, so too is he emasculated, paradoxically again, by his intrinsic power as man and king.

In search of an ideal

These are the considerations that lead me to describe Mobad as an “enigmatic” figure, not only to express the innate ironies and paradoxes of his character, but to emphasize the genuine murkiness and confusion that surrounds the question of *who he is* and *what he is supposed to be*. We find a fair range of answers on this front in the critical scholarship on *Vis & Ramin*. Interestingly enough, the first studies of the poem written in European languages, such as those of Graf and von Stackleberg in the late nineteenth century, were inclined to view Mobad as the tragic *hero* of the story, a noble king brought low by a single, fatal flaw; they were indeed rather put out by his humiliating demise at the hands of the conniving lovers, who not only dodge retribution, but are rewarded for their sins with a happy ending.⁹ Moving into the twentieth century (and as cultural attitudes

⁹Karl Heinrich Graf, “Wis und Râmin,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 23 (1869): 378; Baron R. von Stackelberg, “Neskol’ko slov o persidskom epose ‘Visa

changed), the king came to be seen as more deserving of scorn than sympathy. Critics now wholeheartedly agreed with Mobad's self-assessment—that his success as a king could not but reflect his worthiness as a man (and vice versa)—and armed with this circular definition, they arrived at the conclusion that he is a failure on both accounts, equally inept in bed and the battlefield. Gabrieli was nonplussed by Mobad's gullibility (*dabbenaggine*) as he wavered between hatred and love for his wife and brother; Minorsky found the king both “brutal” and “weak”; and Rypka opined that “the old man is a ridiculous, pitiful figure in the hands of the two lovers.”¹⁰ Southgate echoes these pronouncements a decade later, writing that Mobad “is often pitiful in his rage and despair” as he fulminates against Vis's repeated infidelities.¹¹ In contrast, Bürgel sees in Mobad not an excess of passion but a lack of it: he describes the king as “a cold moralist, always presuming on his seemingly legal claim, [...] completely incapable of loving her [Vis].”¹² Common to all of these readings of the king, whether as tragic hero, mercurial fool, or reptilian tyrant, is that there is something *defective*, something *wrong* about him that inevitably leads to his moral and political collapse.

This theme of defectiveness or incapacity plays out in interesting ways in Meisami's landmark study of the poem in *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Emphasizing the social context in which Persian romances were produced and circulated, Meisami argues that the themes and concerns of this genre overlap to a considerable extent with other

i Ramin’,” *Drevnosti Vostochnye* 2, no. 1 (1896): 10–23; cf. Minorsky, “Vīs u Rāmīn,” 190–91; Inga Kaladze, “The Georgian Translation of *Vis and Rāmīn*: An Old Specimen of Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 139.

¹⁰Minorsky, “Vīs u Rāmīn,” 187; Gabrieli, “Note sul *Vīs u Rāmīn*,” 177; Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. Karl Jahn (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), 178.

¹¹Minoo S. Southgate, “‘*Vīs and Rāmīn*’: An Anomaly Among Iranian Courtly Romances,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 1 (1986): 46–47.

¹²J. Christoph Bürgel, “The Romance,” in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988), 165. For a more detailed explication of this reading, see his “Die Liebesvorstellung im persischen Epos *Wis und Ramin*,” *Asiatische Studien: Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques: revue de la Société Suisse-Asie* 33 (1979): 75–76, 80–82, 88.

courtly forms, particularly the *qaṣīdah*. Just as the interplay of lyric and panegyric in the *qaṣīdah* can collapse the poem's beloved and the poet's patron into the same figure, so too does the romance explore the qualities of a good ruler through the figure of a good lover.

The protagonist's conduct as lover reveals his fitness, or unfitness, for kingship; this aspect of his qualitative, or ethical, identity depends directly on his capacity to be guided by love and to understand its nature correctly as encompassing, not merely private passion, but public order.¹³

This hermeneutic leads Meisami to draw perfect parallels between the private and public lives of the male characters in the Persian romance: a bad lover will be a bad king, while a man who learns to love properly will also rule properly. It is not surprising, then, that Mobad's public disgrace must reflect his unworthiness as a lover, made manifest in his bodily emasculation: "Mowbad's physical impotence with Vis (magically induced by a talisman) figures his moral incapacity, as it identifies his confusion of love, and of the lover's goal, with concupiscence."¹⁴ From this perspective, Mobad's failures are not limited to the physical nor even the political arenas, but amount to a fundamentally *moral* inadequacy on his part (the poor guy can't get a break!). Although I will offer an alternative explanation for this outcome, Meisami's point is well-taken that Mobad's impotence and cuckoldry are tightly bound to his position at the head of a social and political hierarchy;¹⁵ her work makes it clear that his case is a complicated one, caught up in the intertwined webs of power, gender, and love.

¹³Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 182.

¹⁴Julie Scott Meisami, "Kings and Lovers: Ethical Dimensions of Medieval Persian Romance," *Edebiyât* 1, no. 1 (1987): 5; see also Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 139.

¹⁵This perhaps explains why Vis, as a potential symbol of Iran, remains childless (despite a decade-long affair) until after the struggle between Mobad and Ramin to see who is her legitimate lover/ruler comes to an end. See Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998) 26–27 and 119–23 for a discussion of the same phenomenon in medieval French romances.

To respond to Meisami, the major drawback I see with her reading is that it continues the legacy of seeing the king as a relatively static figure whose chief significance lies in his place within a clearly defined symbolic order of ideal kingship. I suggest that when we read his story through the medium of his own speech, consider the specific circumstances surrounding his actions, and trace the processes that eventually lead to his demise, the certainties of his ideal roles begin to turn upon themselves, undermining their categorical stability. This is not to say that Mobad does not invoke the ideal equivalence between King, Lover, and (Perfect) Man that Meisami describes—that he certainly does—but that the difficulties he faces in attempting to *embody* all three figures at the same time render this equation far more problematic than the math would suggest. I imagine that, had he been able to read Meisami’s diagnosis, Mobad might have been tempted to ask her what she expected him to do to restore his authority and win Vis’s love; how could he have walked the path of Nizāmī’s Bahrām Gūr and transitioned from “kingship by will” to “kingship by law”?¹⁶ Unfortunately, Meisami does not see a way out for him, for, as she writes, the rotten core of his story is ultimately rooted not in his behavior, which can be adjusted through education and refinement, but in his *person* as “an inappropriate (not to say unnatural) partner for Vis.”¹⁷ Mobad’s dilemma, then, goes back to something intrinsic about him, to the fact that he is Mobad: there is no way he can “possess” Vis in love or in marriage—as his social position tells him he has the authority to do—that does not ruin that authority in the process.

Thus, we are brought back to the underlying quandary of our powerless monarch, “whose hopeless psychological situation,” Davis writes, “flickers wearily from patience to self-assertion to fury and back

¹⁶For a discussion of this concept, see Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 198ff; see also Julie Scott Meisami, “The Theme of the Journey in Nizāmī’s *Haft Paykar*,” *Edebiyât* 4, no. 2 (1993): 164–65.

¹⁷Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 139.

again.”¹⁸ Henri Massé, who translated *Vis & Ramin* into French, was also struck by the pathos of this predicament, stuck in a love that is “physically impossible and morally reprehensible”:

The poet has well noted the tragic nature of the love that has enslaved this old man to a woman too young [for him], as we read in his desperate speeches, his bitter reproaches to Vis, and his admonishments enlivened by a tender sadness; at the piteous cries of Vis’s mother, believing that her daughter is dead, Mobad responds with a certainty that is as dejected as it is passionate, a dialogue that counts among the best parts of the work.¹⁹

Here, both critics land upon what to my mind might be the most interesting question raised by our hapless king: what if the poem is not simply giving us a negative example of how *not* to be a successful man/king/lover, but in fact asks us to consider what it means to *inhabit* such roles, especially if one is condemned to perpetual failure? The psychological complexity of Mobad’s character has been occasionally addressed; an interesting example of this is found in a short comparative essay that highlights his knack at self-diagnosis and “guilt at being stirred by a daughter’s beauty.”²⁰ In addition, there are two studies of *Vis & Ramin* in Persian that utilize psychoanalytic theory in their analysis of the king. Zamān’zādah reads him, the father figure, as a symbol of the *id*, and concludes that the poem celebrates the victory of love over sin by killing off the sexually repressed Mobad and replacing him with the uninhibited Ramin; while Kahdūnī and Buḥrānī, drawing from Jung, argue that Mobad’s *anima* prevents him from connecting with his fully-formed masculine self, trapping him in a state of permanent immaturity in which he is prone to anger, anxiety, fear, self-sabotage,

¹⁸Dick Davis, “VIS O RĀMIN,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2005, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/vis-o-ramin>.

¹⁹Henri Massé, “Introduction,” in *Le Roman de Wis et Râmin* (Paris: Société d’Édition «Les Belles Lettres», 1959), 16.

²⁰Sudhir Kakar and John Munder Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex, and Danger* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 108.

illogical behavior, effeminacy, and vulnerability to womanly tricks.²¹ Although these readings employ new approaches to the study of Mobad, they arrive at the same conclusions we have seen before, infantilizing him as a defective man or reducing his character to a purely symbolic existence; my own questions about what he might tell us about masculinity itself remain to be answered.

This, in brief, is my take on the matter, which I will explicate in the following pages: the tale of Mobad offers us a profound glimpse into the anxious interior of normative power and authority, rooted in the male body and the symbolic orders it claims to inhabit. Yet Mobad encounters a glitch, so to speak: the normative “grammar” of masculinity, with all its givens, expectations, and promises, turns upon itself and collapses under the weight of its own (il)logic. Trapped inside a role that both promises him autonomy and blocks him from realizing it, Mobad is thus forced to gaze into the void of his own irrelevance, contemplating the ideological forces that unmake his persona even as they construct it.

A royal position

If a reader with no prior knowledge and were to pick up *Vis & Ramin* and start from the beginning, it would be quite natural for them to assume, as Graf and von Stackleberg did, that Mobad is the main protagonist of the story. The poem’s opening lines place the King of Kings at front and center of the narrative stage:

Among the evening-tales and reports, I have found it written from the chroniclers’ words: that there was once a king, blessed and successful in kingship. All kings were slaves to him; they lived in the world for his sake. ([II] 8.1–3)

This claim is illustrated by the splendid springtime banquet that immediately follows, confirming in its pomp and pageantry Mobad’s

²¹Javād Zamān’zādah, *Ravānkāvī-i šuvar-i ‘ishq dar adabīyāt-i fārsī* (Bethesda, MD: Iranbooks, 1994), 120–27; Muḥammad-Kāzīm Kaḥdūnī and Maryam Buḥrānī, “Taḥlīl-i shakhṣīyat-i Mūbad dar *Vis* va *Rāmīn* bar asās-i nazāriyāt-i Yūng,” *Muḥāli ‘āt-i Irānī* 15 (1388): 223–38.

position as the undisputed ruler of all lands. During this feast, the king's gaze falls upon Shahru of Media, the fairest of his vassals, and, taken by her beauty, he invites her to become his consort, "whether as wife or as lover" (*yā juft yā dūst*, 10.6). When Shahru declines the offer on account of her advanced age, Mobad presses the issue, suggesting that, if she is too old for love, let him have her daughter—should she ever have one—for "she would be fair of skin, like you" (*buvad dukht-i tū miṣl-i tū saman-bar*, 10.40); to this Shahru readily agrees, and the two exchange oaths to seal their pact. The narrator of the poem leaves us in no doubt that this is the moment when the seeds of Mobad's (and Shahru's) troubles are sown, as he cries out at the end of the scene, "Look what hardships they fell into, giving an unborn child into wedlock!" (*nigar tā dar chi sakhtī ūftādand • ki nā-zādah 'arūsī rā bidādand*, 10.54). We might detect the same message in the subtext of Shahru's rejection of Mobad's advances, when she tells him, "Shame and disgrace will grow in the world of any old person who plays at being young" (*har ān pīrī ki burnā'ī namāyad • jahān-ash nang u rusvā'ī fazāyad*, 10.29). Although she is ostensibly speaking of herself, this could well be a veiled critique of Mobad's interest in love, despite his mature age and exalted rank.²² If this anxiety is present, however, it is not enough to spark a challenge to Mobad's authority; as the King of Kings—the alpha male, so to speak—he seems to be acting within his socially accepted rights to initiate and agree upon a marriage proposal.²³ Thus this scene, in addition to laying the groundwork for the future conflict, also uncovers a point of tension latent within the established norms of

²²Such reservations about pursuing love at a certain stage or position in life are borne out by Kaykāvūs b. Eskandar in his *Qābūs-nāmah*, as he advises his son: "If you pursue love in your youth, you'll be all right in the end, for they'll look and know that you're excused, saying that you're young; but strive to never become a lover in old age, for the old man has no excuse. This sort of thing is easier when you're one of the common people, but don't even think about it if you're an old king, and make sure to never publicly attach your heart to someone else; for a king to lose his head in love in old age is very bad indeed." *Qābūs-nāmah*, ed. Ghulām Ḥusayn Yūsufī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī va Farhangī, 1390), 83; see also *A Mirror for Princes: The Qābūs Nāma*, trans. Reuben Levy (London: Cresset Press, 1951), 73.

²³ See Massé, "Introduction," 15.

male power and the potentially self-destructive implications of its assertion.

Years later, Shahru indeed gives birth to a daughter, Vis; but, either forgetting or ignoring her vow, she instead marries Vis to her (Vis's) brother, Viru, and just at this moment, Mobad's deputy Zard arrives at the court to fetch the king's new bride. Vis is horrified at the thought of marrying an old man and publicly rejects the proposition, saying, "I should mix with my brother like milk and wine; I don't want Old Mobad in some foreign land!" (*bisāzam bā barādar chūn may u shīr • nakhwāham dar gharībī mūbad-i pīr*, 16.39). However vocal in her protests, Vis cannot deny—nor can Mobad forget—the contract made so many years ago. This contract gives Mobad the right to press his claim on Vis, but it also puts him under a great deal of pressure, for as king and guarantor of the law, it is his formal duty to see that such contracts (especially those made with him personally) are upheld; to ignore such a violation would have serious consequences for his credibility. That he understands the implications of Vis's defiance is immediately evident when he first hears the news from Zard: "So much sweat poured from his face, you'd say his body had melted in the heat of his fury" (*zi bas khūy k-az sar u rūy-ash hamī tākht • tan-ash gufī zi tāb-i khashm bigudākht*, 18.3). The personal insult is bad enough, but there looms a larger danger, as Zard continues:

Viru has crowned himself *rūhā* and surrendered his heart to Ahriman along the way. All say "king" before his name and know no other king save him. They do not count you among the kings—some don't consider you a man! ([III] 17.45–48)²⁴

Such is Zard's report; but we, who were privy to the scene, have good reason to doubt its veracity. It was Vis, and not her brother Viru, who

²⁴The meaning of this title *rūhā* is uncertain; Minorsky posits a corruption of *rūjā*, "serenissimus"; Henning suggests *wrjā*, "powerful", and Boyce draws our attention to the Mandaean *Book of John*, which names the "Rūhā" as a local despot; see "Vis u Rāmīn," 176; *Vis and Ramin*, trans. George Morrison (Columbia University Press, 1972), 38; "The Parthian *Gōsān* and Iranian Minstrel Tradition," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1957, no. 1/2 (1957): 17.

refused Mobad’s summons, and her reasons were far from political. Nonetheless, Zard reads her rejection as an explicit declaration of war on the part of the Medes, which he announces publicly in front of Mobad’s court. Both Mobad’s personal honor and his political authority have now been compromised, and regardless of however he might wish to act, he is institutionally obliged to respond to the crisis. His lack of autonomy is underscored when we observe the reaction of his court nobles; it is clear that in their eyes, Mobad’s love-life is no longer a private issue (if it ever was), but a matter of concern for the kingdom at large:

The nobles in the king’s presence gnashed their teeth and said, “Why would Shahru, our ally, give the king’s wife to another man? How could Viru have dared to court a woman betrothed to our king?” And then they said, “From now on, our king will bring ruin upon the land of Media! [...] Fate has sounded the death-knell for all who live there, now that she who was one’s is now another’s!” ([IV] 18.22–25, 31)

At the risk of belaboring the point, it is worth reflecting on the choices available to the king at this juncture. Within this context of sedition and personal affront, one is hard pressed to imagine any other response from Mobad that could both save face and preserve his authority; were he to relinquish his claim on Vis now that his men are clamoring for blood, he would lose both Media and his credibility at home in a single stroke. This works against his chances as Vis’s suitor, however, for if he can only possess his bride by violence, he ensures that he will never win her affections: as Ramin will say to him later, “If you stay with her against her wishes, forget it; you’ll not enjoy her!” (*v-agar bī kām-i ū bā ū nishīnī • zi dil dar kun k-az ū shādī nabīnī*, 26.29).²⁵ Aware of this double-bind, Mobad is loath to respond as he knows he must; his first move is to ask Zard, “Did you see this with your own eyes, or did you hear it somewhere?”

²⁵Mīnūvī suggests the reading *zi dil dar kun k-az ū shādī bibīnī*, “Get it out of your mind that you’ll enjoy her!” See *Vis va Rāmīn*, eds. Magali T’odua and Alek’sandre Gvaxaria (Tehran: Bonyād-e Farhang-e Irān, 1349), 82, fn. 5.

(*bipursīd az barādar k-īn tū dīdī • bi chashm-i khwīsh yā jā`ī shinīdī*, 18.5), perhaps hoping against hope that it was all just a rumor. Zard glibly reaffirms his tale, concluding with a conspicuous request for orders: “I’ve told you what I saw, and now you know best, for you are the one to give orders, and I’m the one to obey” (*man ān guftam ki dīdam pas tū bih dān • ki tū farmān dihī man bandah farmān*, 18.19). Thus, willing or no, Mobad must march off to make war on his own subjects. Needless to say, this does not endear him to the local population, and it marks the beginning of a political collapse that was engendered through the exercise and defense of his own royal prerogative in laying claim to Vis.

As the claims on Vis’s body increase, Mobad’s position grows ever more precarious. After a protracted battle against Viru that gets him nowhere, the king eventually manages to “persuade” Shahru, with gold and the threats of divine punishment for breaking her sacred vow (the meaning of his name, “Mazdean priest,” seems suggestive here),²⁶ into surrendering Vis, with whom he returns to Marv in triumph. But as predicted, there is no joy in victory; his furious bride retaliates by having her Nurse curse him with the charm of impotence, and Ramin swoops in and takes his brother’s place as her lover. When Mobad first discovers the affair, he attempts to resolve the issue discretely, sensitive to the damage this latest scandal could have on his reputation; but when negotiations fail, with Vis declaring she will only stay with him insofar as it allows her to continue seeing Ramin (*turā az bahr-i rāmīn mī-parastam*, 48.27), Mobad exiles her to the home of her mother and brother, still evidently hoping to end the affair by separating the lovers, rather than punishing or killing them. This, too, does not resolve his problem, for Ramin defies his brother’s warning and takes up residence with Vis in Media. The

²⁶See Bürgel, “The Romance,” 165. A recent study of Mobad’s name and titlature sheds new light on his potential ties with the “false-priest” and “sorcerer-king” figures found in other ancient Iranian texts; see M. Rahim Shayegan, “Old Iranian Motifs in *Vīs o Rāmīn*,” in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, eds. Alireza Korangi, W. M. Thackston, Roy Mottahedeh, and William Granara (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 35–42.

threat to Mobad's authority has thus shifted from the enemy without (Viru) to the enemy within (Ramin), and as before, the frustrated king sees no other choice but to annihilate this danger, even if it means killing his own brother. As he asks his mother:

Can this be right? No sensible man would allow Ramin to court destruction with my wife and dishonor my royal position! How can two brothers share one woman? What in the world could be worse than this shame? [...] I must kill him for this, though it grieves me, for your eyes will shed tears like the springtime cloud. ([V] 51.7–9, 13)

Although he invokes the moral outrage of being cuckolded by his own kin, Mobad is careful to present this decision as a product of reason, not of anger. He does not *want* to kill his brother, but he *must*; the threat that Ramin poses to his authority is so great that this is the only reasonable thing to do. In other words, it is not Mobad who is acting, but his “royal position”; by this means the burden of fratricide shifts from the officeholder to the office itself. His mother, however, raises an equally convincing argument as to why he, or rather his “royal position,” should *not* act in this way. With Mobad impotent and childless, Ramin is the only one who will carry on the family line: “No sensible man,” she retorts, “would cut off his own two hands” (*hargiz • dū dast-i khwad naburrad hīch gurbiz*, 51.16)—a metaphor certainly evocative of self-castration. Mobad is thus left with two perfectly contrary routes that a “sensible man” in his place would (not) take, leaving him in the unenviable position that no matter how he acts, he will commit a *senseless* deed that will harm himself and undermine his royal line. The only escape from this quandary lies in the chance that perhaps someone other than Ramin is the real culprit here, a possibility that Mobad's mother is quick to seize upon. It is Vis and Viru of Media, she says, who are to blame; in her eyes, Vis has seduced both Mobad and Ramin and turned brother against brother. Her advice for her son, then, is to renounce Vis, reconcile with Ramin, and punish Viru for his treachery. Mobad immediately grasps at this straw and composes a letter full of rancor and vitriol

to Viru, deriding his lineage, sneering at his martial prowess, and promising an imminent and merciless retribution—an exemplary display of male posturing:

As long as you're in your palace and harem, you display well the skills of brave men; but when you meet warriors on the field, you flee like women do before men! [...] I'll make a field of the bodies of your dead, and drive a Tigris of blood through it! I'll bring out Vis without shoes or veil and parade her before the army like a dog. I'll so humiliate her that none will ever again oppose the noble! ([VI] 51.65–66, 85–87)

Despite their bluster, these threats cannot hide the systemic failure of Mobad's attempt to salvage his authority; though he is willing to redirect his ire from Viru to Ramin and back again (at the end of the day, it is not important who his enemy is, just so long as that enemy can be identified and destroyed), he cannot give up his claim to Vis; for as we recall, the conflict is rooted in the matter of his right to possess her, a claim that his position in society both entitles him to and demands that he uphold. With this claim now contested, the possession of Vis has become an indispensable pillar of Mobad's sovereignty. We thus miss the point if we read his threats as a reflection of a cruel or violent personality; rather, I would suggest that this is an example of Mobad doing exactly what is required and expected of him if he hopes to maintain his increasingly tenuous claim to male authority, in which the power and right to dominate plays a functional and foundational role. He thus fills the air with threats of violent retribution in a performance of kingship that arises from and attempts to hide the anxiety of not knowing what to do; this deep unease is apparent in the opening of his letter, in which he reveals his desperation to locate a concrete enemy against whom he may unleash his righteous anger: "Will you not say who commanded you to seek power and iniquity over me? Who gives you refuge? Who's your support?" (*bidū guft īn ki farmūd-at nagū`ī • ki bar man bīshī va bīdād jū`ī / panāh-at kī-st yā pusht-at kudām ast*, 51.48). It is as though Mobad himself cannot believe—as much as he would

like to—that the seemingly omnipresent threat to his kingship is reducible to a single individual.

These paranoid accusations only contribute to the growing confusion that spreads like a fog throughout the story’s atmosphere. When he receives the letter, Viru has no idea what crime it is that Mobad could be talking about, and is forced to wonder aloud: who is doing wrong to whom?

He said, “What strange words are these? *Against whom is his anger directed?* He sat my sister within his harem, then kicked her out in the middle of winter. It was he who struck, then he who cried foul: thus he has done two kinds of injustice. [...] He’s the one who sinned, and now he wants to punish us; such is one who has retreated from justice.” ([VII] 52.9–11, 14)

As we can see, Mobad and Viru are equally confused about the other’s intentions. The normative logic of masculinity—which originally led Zard to interpret Vis’s rejection as Viru’s rebellion—has turned upon its actors, forcing them to defend their honor from slights that were only possible within that logic. Now, with this latest (perceived) affront, Mobad and his allies are convinced that Media has staged a full rebellion, while as far as the Medes are concerned, the king has lost his marbles. The only thing certain in this game of blind man’s buff is that Mobad’s every attempt to shore up his rule only succeeds in further destabilizing it; ironically, his suspicions that a revolt is brewing under his nose may instigate a real one. Viru, no less a participant in this masculine performance, insinuates as much in his response to the letter, challenging Mobad to prove the truth of his spurious accusations by appearing on the battlefield. His reply bristles with *ad hominem* attacks, not only on Mobad’s right to rule, but indeed his manhood:

If we come out to the plain of battle, you’ll see for yourself how I’ll deal with you. I’ll wash your noble line with the quicksilver of my sword; I’ll be a man in deeds, not words. Neither lineage nor eloquence bear any value in the battlefield, where heroes

show their fury! Bring only your manhood (*mardī*), not words, for today only manhood will aid us! ([VIII] 53.37–40)

Viru's retort, daring Mobad to show the power he claims to have, is of course the one thing that forces the king to stop: "When the king read out this heart-wrenching reply, he halted his endeavors" (*chu shāh ān pāsukh-i dilgīr bar khwānd • az ān pāsukh bi kār-i khwīsh dar mānd*, 53.44). Mobad's bluff has been called; after their last scuffle, the king knows he cannot beat Viru in battle, and so he is forced to recant his accusation with the sheepish excuse that his nobles had goaded him into it (53.48). With this latest setback, Mobad has lost all outlets to the necessary step of exacting revenge and reclaiming his honor; now, regardless of whom he identifies as the wrongdoer, Ramin or Viru, it will paradoxically be *he* who does wrong in punishing him. The enforcement of justice, that keystone of kingly authority, transforms into an intrinsically unjust act.

This paradox will plague the king to the end of his days. The codes of masculine honor demand a swift and decisive response, but the choices are grim: either punish his brother and doom the family line, deflect the punishment to an innocent third party and undermine his legitimacy, or do nothing and watch his authority go up in smoke. I am reminded of a wonderful line in Bérout's *Tristan*, in which King Mark complains that the only way he can make his barons fear him is by driving them out, and with them the backbone of his authority: *Que nes enchaz fors de ma terre / Li fel ne criement mais ma gerre* [Unless I expel them from my land, the villains will no longer fear my power]; in a similar vein, Mobad is caught in a bind where the only way he can prove his power is by destroying it.²⁷ Despite his repeated efforts to perform the roles demanded of him by his "position" as a powerful man, Mobad has somehow found himself in the bizarre situation of having no one but himself to blame for his disgrace—the consequence of occupying a position where all reasonable action becomes intrinsically unreasonable.

²⁷Bérout, *The Romance of Tristan*, ed. and trans. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1989) vv. 3189–90.

As the reality of this Catch-22 settles in, we begin to see a curious unwillingness on Mobad's part to fully acknowledge the affair—the engine that both upholds and undermines his rule—even though it dominates his every waking moment. The king's refusal to believe Zard's news, or his misidentification of Viru as his rival (despite Vis's explicit statements to the contrary) are examples of this; in the same manner, he will play along in later escapades that continue to erode his status and dignity.²⁸ Attributing this to sheer naiveté, as some critics have done (see above), would almost be a blessing at this point—at least in ignorance there is bliss—but it seems that Mobad is quite aware of his torturous charade. When Ramin invents an excuse to visit Vis, “he knew that his words were false” (*bidānist ū ki guftār-ash durūgh ast*, 49.73), but lets him go anyway; when Ramin arranges a tryst with Vis in his presence, “he heard those whispered words, but *manfully* kept his heart in check” (*shanīdah kard bar khwad nā-shanīdah • bi mardī dāsht dil rā āramīdah*, 59.50). Mobad is not fooled by these tricks, but he is forced to buy into them as the only means of preserving his position. He needs Vis with him to maintain the appearance of sovereignty, but with Vis comes Ramin, breaking it down from within: as Mobad remarks in a poignant monologue, this dilemma forces him down a double path of knowing and not knowing, of forever seeking evidence of the affair but unable to accept it when it is found: “Before I became a lover, I was capable, wise, and perceptive in my affairs; now that I am in love, I have become so helpless that when I see, I cannot comprehend” (*zi pīsh-i āshiqī būdam tavānā • bi kār-i khwīsh-tan bīnā va dānā / kunūn dar āshiqī bas nātavān-am • chunīn gashtam ki gar bīnam nadānam*, 56.33–34). Clear in this lament is the fact that Mobad's fundamental identity has changed in some way; his becoming a lover marks a turning point in his story. We will revisit this important statement

²⁸Among the more famous of these, we could name the banquet where Vis and Ramin actively collude against Mobad (while the latter pretends not to hear); the “bed-trick” scene when Mobad discovers the Nurse in his bed instead of Vis, but then accepts Vis's explanation that he was drunk; and when Mobad discovers Vis stark naked in his garden, but allows himself to believe her story that the angel Surūsh carried her there in her sleep.

later on, but first, let us consider further what a normative application of kingship would entail in the first place, and why it could not but work against the purpose it is intended to realize.

Violence and authority

Mobad's structural inability to act stands in direct contrast to the ideal of absolute and unchecked power claimed by the monarchs of the Islamic Middle Period, and, more broadly, the norms of masculinity itself. Lest we think that this ideal is absent from *Vis & Ramin*, we are presented with such a figure in the poem's prologue, a panegyric to the Seljuk sultan Ṭughril Beg (r. 431/1040–455/1063). The story of Ṭughril's rise to power is peppered with tough marches through difficult terrain, tenacious battles against fierce enemies, and effusive generosity when rewarding his friends—all testaments to his indomitable masculinity. It is this quality, to cite the text, that distinguishes Ṭughril from his predecessors: "He is not like other kings, always in their cups," effuses the narrator; "he seeks his name in toil and struggle!" (*na chūn shāhān-i dīgar jāṃ-jūy ast • ki az ranj-āzmūdan nām-jūy ast*, 3.29). For Ṭughril, manliness (*mardumī*) is an end unto itself: "He desires nothing of this world save manliness; he fears God, but not any man" (*murād-ash z-īn jahān juz mardumī na • zi yazdān tarsad u az ādamī na*, 3.91). The authority to forgive and the capacity to punish—both managed by the threat of violence—lies at the foundation of *mardumī*; in his account of Ṭughril's conquest of Buyid Isfahan, the poet invokes both aspects of this quality:

Were the King not supremely just—so kind-hearted at the time of love and forgiveness—not two bricks of Isfahan would remain stacked; none would have tilled its fields for a hundred years. But he took the way of men (*mardumī*) and forgave both townsman and soldier; he crushed their crimes below his heel, so that nobody complained of his wrath. [...] An entrusted group had slandered the populace in the tax records; by his command, their tongues were cut out, their eyes, pierced with red-hot needles. ([IX] 5.4–7, 18–19)

Thus ʿUghrīl, the subject of Gurgānī’s panegyric, exhibits a kind of kingship in which effective rule is a product of inner manliness, girded by the threat of violence. Mobad’s speeches and behavior invoke this same time-honored model as his own ideal, but his attempts to enact it, to claim it as his own, complicates and questions its efficacy, showing how it comes laden with internal limitations. In theory, as long as the king sticks to his guns and adheres to (masculine) virtue, he will be successful; this is borne out by texts such as the *Shāhnāmah*, where kings usually fail out of an inner moral collapse, causing the *farr* to flee their visage and portending their imminent doom. In *Vis & Ramin*, however, the king is placed in a situation in which the application of justice will only undermine his right to adjudicate; he is therefore only able to mime the violence that he is expected to perform, to make his threats while fully aware that he cannot enforce them. For example, when he first learns of Vis’s adultery, he does not punish her himself, but rather asks that her brother do the dirty work for him, claiming that *his* justice, were he to mete it out, would be too terrible to behold:

If I had to discipline them, I would do them harm above all measure: I would burn Vis’s eyes with fire; I’d crucify her nurse. I’d drive Ramin from my city, and never speak his name again. I’d empty this world of disgrace, and cleanse my soul of the shame they have brought upon me. ([X] 47.38–41)

It is striking how these threats mirror the tortures inflicted by ʿUghrīl Beg on the ne’er-do-wells of Isfahan, but, as we saw in the case of Viru, Mobad dare not implement them, lest he destroy the very authority that requires him to act. His position in life is the symbolic embodiment of masculine power and authority; yet at every turn, it is precisely this symbolic, one might say overdetermined body of his that gets in the way, preventing him from enacting the agency he supposedly has and driving him inexorably towards the margins of the story.

The consequences of implementing a ʿUghrīlian form of control over

his rebellious subjects are made all too clear in the one and only scene when Mobad physically punishes his wife for her adultery. The episode begins (fittingly enough) with another assault on his kingdom: the Roman emperor has invaded the western border, and Mobad must ride out to meet him in battle. Hoping to keep his domestic troubles quiet, he orders Ramin to accompany him on the campaign, while Vis shall stay behind, guarded under lock and key in a distant fortress. Initially, the plan is a success. The king returns victorious, and it seems like he is a new man, his old prestige restored, “Having placed the kings of the world in fetters, he cried in triumph; ‘I am king of all kings!’” (*bi band āvardah shāhān-i jahān rā • bi pīrūzī ki man shāh-am shahān rā*, 64.8). But no sooner does he arrive at his capital than he learns that his brother has slipped away and joined Vis in her prison. Fuming and furious, he mobilizes his army to march on the fortress and put the traitor to death. Amidst the thundering war-drums, we see for the first time the army start to grouse under Mobad’s increasingly erratic rule:

Half of his army had not yet arrived from the march; they had labored for a year on that difficult road. The other half hadn’t loosened their belts; their travel-hats were still atop their heads. Against their will, they marched with him on the road to the Devils’ Grotto [the name of the fortress]. One said, “Our road’s not over—all this march is now about Ramin!” Another said, “We’re always on the road, just to keep Ramin away from Vis!” Another said, “Vis at home is worse for the king than a hundred Khaqans and Caesars.” ([XI] 64.18–23)

Mobad will not be deterred, however: roaring, growling, and bellowing in animal fury, he drives his exhausted soldiers straight to the castle and bursts into Vis’s chambers, where he is confronted by a scene painful to behold. Though Ramin has just fled the coop, the evidence of his stay is obvious: a rope fashioned out of silken garments dangles out the window, and Vis has torn her clothes, scratched her face, and poured dust on her head in grief. This is the moment when Mobad must take in the full reality of his situation and

confront his helplessness. No social norm, no religious interdiction, no threat of violence can affect his basic problem, that Vis will never be his, that Vis will never love him. Meanwhile, his honor is ruined, his army mutinous, and all the prestige he has won fighting the Romans is gone up in smoke. Confounded by this knowledge, the king can only ask his wife (in a final irony) what it is he should do:

The king cried, “Vis! Demon-spawn! May the curse of both worlds be upon you! You fear neither men nor God, nor do you shrink from fetters and prison! My advice and counsel are like spells to you, just as my chains and prisons are nothing in your eyes! Tell me—what must I do with you? What can I do but kill you? Speak!” ([XII] 64.135–38)

Brought to this state, the only recourse left to Mobad is violence—no longer rationalized in the language of justice and order, but a blind and primal fury at the futility of his attempts to govern his life. He seizes Vis by the hair, drags her along the ground, binds her limbs, and whips her, “over and over, upon her back, her haunches, her breasts and thighs, until her limbs split open like a pomegranate, and blood dripped from her like pomegranate seeds” (*pas āngah tāzīyānah zadsh chandān • abar pusht u surīn u sīnah va rān / ki andām-ash chu nārī shud kafīdah • v-az ū chu nār-dānah khūn chakīdah*, 64.175–76). He then turns on Vis’s nurse with even more violence (*z-ān bīshtar zad*, 64.181), thrashing them both until they fall senseless, then slams the door of the room and leaves them for dead.

In his version of the *Tristan* story, Gottfried von Strassburg tells us that when King Mark finally beheld the horrible truth of his wife’s infidelity, he was thrown out of the safe haven of doubt and ambivalence into a permanent state of “living death”;²⁹ the brutality of the king’s actions, so extreme that “a world was heartbroken” by the pain he caused those two (*jahānī dil bi dard-i har dū khashah*, 64.187), similarly marks the death of Mobad as a sympathetic

²⁹Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan: With the “Tristan” of Thomas*, trans. Arthur Thomas Hatto (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1967), 281.

character. Up to this point, his repeated efforts to maintain order and dignity are conveyed with a certain amount of pathos, given the inherent impossibility of his situation, and his many monologues, in which he wonders out loud what on earth he can do to deliver himself from his predicament, are some of the most profound ruminations on choice and agency we see in the story as a whole. But with this furious assault, spilling blood from Vis's body as though deflowering her the only way he can, Mobad has stepped into the character by which he is ultimately remembered (and which the story needs him to be): the raging, impotent obstacle-king who stands in the way of the love of Vis and Ramin.³⁰ As the narrator brings this climax to a close, he steps back from the bloody scene to reflect on how Mobad's story should serve as a warning to all lovers:

May no lover be rash and proud, for his fury will cast him into the fire. When a lover lacks patience, he will see no joy in pursuing love. Why would a lover show anger, when he cannot bear a moment away from his beloved? He loves the faults of his beloved, because through them he can forgive her. ([XIII] 64.198–201)

“He who is not a lover is not a man”

The lines quoted above raise a crucial aspect of Mobad's story, namely the intertwined roles of man, king, and lover in his character. As we recall, Meisami identifies the three roles as close analogues to one another: drawing from philosophers like the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, she argues that the “perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), through his knowledge of love, will ascend to temporal and spiritual supremacy. There are many passages in *Vis & Ramin* that affirm this idea, of which some are (notably) invoked in the context of Mobad, rather than his brother, the ostensible hero of the story.

³⁰By the end of the tale, Mobad is explicitly described as “evil-tempered” (*bad-khū*), the worst kind of defect that kings could have (*v-az īn badtar shahān rā nīst āhū*, 122.2). See also Southgate, “‘Vis and Rāmīn,’” 46–47: “The character of Mūbad suffers from an inconsistency towards the end of the romance, where Gurgānī turns the benevolent King into a tyrant to justify Rāmīn's insurrection against him.”

For example, when Ramin advises Mobad against loving Vis, the narrator embarks on a discursus on the nature of love and the role that strife (*sitīz*) and reprimand (*malāmat*) play in its occurrence. The heroic disregard of the advice of friends and the abuse of enemies is a pervasive theme in Arabic and Persian love poetry, signaling the purity of the lover’s devotion and his manly fortitude in the face of adversity:

Strife is the start of a man’s love; it warms the coldest of hearts.
And if a cloud rises up and rains stones instead of admonitions,
the lover fears not this stony rain, even if the stones were javelins.
All that gives rise to reprimand is a fault—save the practice of
love, which is noble. Nothing a naysayer could say will wash the
passion from a lover’s heart. What is a blaming scorpion to love?
He who is not a lover is not a man. ([XIV] 26.47–52)

True to the old adage, love is depicted in this passage as a kind of war, where taunts and reprimands fall and wound like a shower of spears. To persevere in such adversity requires an array of masculine virtues; he who cannot bear the suffering he is sure to experience as a lover should not get involved, no more than a coward should engage in battle, for failure on either front will reveal to the world his deficient masculinity. Conversely, those with the courage to engage in these pursuits will be ennobled by their efforts; the trials of public shame and disgrace are badges of honor for the lover. This martial presentation of love ties the work of the lover very closely to that of the king, for both are engaged in a kind of combat that requires an inexhaustible reserve of courage and fortitude to succeed (or die with honor in the attempt). It is curious, then, that this speech is applied to—or at least mentioned in the context of—Mobad’s connection with Vis. Even though he is, from a generic perspective, barred from inhabiting the role of the poem’s “hero” (that is, the lover), Mobad seems at times awfully close to stepping into it. For example, when Vis and Ramin escape his palace, Mobad is beside himself with grief; he quits his throne and begins to wander the countryside, calling out Vis’s name: “He sought a sign of Vis everywhere he went, but

he neither saw her nor heard any news. [...] For five months, he traversed mountains, forests, plains, and deserts, like a man out of his wits” (*nishān-i vīs har jā’ī bipursīd • na khwad dīd u na az kas nīz bishnīd* [...] / *bi kūh u bīshah va hāmūn u daryā • hamī shud panj māh chūn mard-i shaydā*, 56.7, 10). This image of the wandering madman naturally calls to mind Majnūn, the greatest of all lovers in Islamicate lore, who shuns all human company and roams the wilderness repeating Laylī’s name as though it were a sacred mantra. It seems that Mobad has given up his role as king and taken up the way of the lover; yet, as we can glean from his lament, he cannot quite divorce himself from his old persona:

He cried out, “Alas, for my fate! My countless soldiers, treasures, and belongings have been scattered to the winds for the sake of my heart, and now I am bereft of both lordship and love. [...] Why must I love with such sorrow? It’s better for an old man not to love. A child would age under such duress—look how wretched an old man has become! I chose a paradise from the world, and in her absence, I only see hell. Whenever I recall her cruel tyranny, my love and loyalty only increase. My state grows worse when I count her faults; you’d say I love her imperfections! My heart has grown blind in love, and sees no pleasure in this world. Before I became a lover, I was capable, wise, and perceptive in my affairs; now that I am in love, I have become so helpless that when I see, I cannot comprehend. ([XV] 56.19–20, 27–34)

It is worth noting that Mobad here exhibits many of the characteristics the narrator had invoked in his description of the ideal lover: he loves his beloved’s faults; his love grows all the more for his suffering; he has given up everything for her sake. We find, moreover, that Mobad is willing on numerous occasions to forgive both Vis and Ramin for their transgressions, for example when he says: “I’ll forgive her past sins, and never again mention them to her. For Ramin, too, I have only goodwill; he’s my brother, support, and refuge” (*gunāh-i raftah rā andar guzāram • digar hargiz bi rūy-i ū nayāram / bi rāmīn nīz juz nīkī nakhwāham • barādar bāshad u pusht u panāh-am*, 58.21–

22).³¹ None of these actions would be consistent with the image of a ruler who demonstrates his authority and right to rule through the application of violence; in such a scenario, the adulterous Vis would have been blinded and tortured, the treacherous Ramin exiled (as Mobad had once threatened to do). By abstaining from these actions, Mobad presents himself as one willing to do what lovers do, exercising the stoic fortitude that the poet claims is necessary for all lovers to show their manhood (we might recall the line cited earlier, where Mobad *manfully* keeps his heart in check). Yet, in so doing, Mobad's royal authority has suffered beyond repair—he is now a gross parody of the universal monarch, allowing himself to be cuckolded and led around the world by the lovers, unable to mete out justice, his orders bearing no more weight than the air that carries them. In this way, he is his own worst enemy: as much as he tries to embody both the figure of king and lover, as the text itself tells him he should be able to do, he fails at both and disgraces himself in the process. This is not because of any flaw in his ethics or moral character, but in those aspects that are intrinsically linked with his position as a literary figure who is plugged into multiple modalities of manhood. His story disrupts the fantasy of ennobling love, the promise that virtuous action in his personal life will automatically reflect upon his public status. As his brother Zard explains to him, these two sides of his personality are caught in a destructive loop, in which any action he takes as king can only harm his status as lover, and vice versa; as a result, his heroic but futile efforts to reconcile the two roles have left him paralyzed, and the kingdom battered:

I saw how you were in love, when Vis took her lovely face away from you: sometimes you were with the gazelles in the desert, sometimes with the fish in the sea, sometimes with the onagers in the plain, sometimes with the lions in the reedbeds. Have you forgotten that pain and torment that came to you—and us—from

³¹For other instances of Mobad attempting to reconcile with Vis and Ramin, see vv. 48.12–19 and 58.31–40, 71.

your love?³² You suffered from her, and we from you; how much anguish we endured! Remember the treaties and oaths you swore before the Creator! Don't break your vows, O king; that would not become you, and one day it will sting your soul. [...] If you plunge your dagger into lovely Vis, your pain from that wound will only increase! ([XVI] 68.123–29, 139)

Despite the logical truth of Zard's advice (like that of Mobad's mother), it pulls the king back into a quicksand from which he cannot free himself. He can't live with Vis, he can't live without her; the only "sensible action" left is to delay the inevitable as long as he can. Mobad's inability to resolve his crisis, regardless of what he tries, reveals the underlying impotency of his person and position: these two idealized figures of lover and king, presented as an overlapping set of practices and performances grounded in a bedrock of timeless masculine virtues, end up collapsing under their own weight. Disentangling these ideals from one another reveals masculinity as a variable and at times self-defeating constellation of practices, which may generate different logical frameworks for action depending on the hero's self-image of man-as-lover or man-as-ruler. The rupture of this homogeneous ethical core into multiple and mutually negating practices engenders a profound subjective crisis for the one whose subjectivity is wrapped inside an idealized, inflated, and larger-than-life projection of masculinity, that elusive "perfect man"; Mobad's inability to support these pressures in the end is finally made manifest in that most simple and yet most terrifying threat to manhood itself: impotence, a state in which the mind wills something of its body and the body cannot rise to the task. It is thus not just Mobad, but the symbolic image of "man" in which his person is invested, that cannot make good on his promises, leaving the king with no option but to fill the void with an empty performance of the role, all the time staring in the face of its (and his own) falsehood. This portrait is remarkably

³²Zard here uses *mā*, which Morrison translates as "I," but I think the word allows for a more general reading as well, perhaps referring to the kingdom at large. The "humble" *mā* is rarely used in the poem. See *Vis and Ramin*, trans. Morrison, 200.

sensitive to the psychology of despair, that moment when even the loftiest of men must confront the fundamental contingencies of their identity, realizing that they are no more in control of their fortunes than those over whom they claim to rule. They are as trees perched upon mountains: towering above all, yet helplessly rooted to the edifice that raised them there.

A tree atop the mountain

I borrow this metaphor from a scene in *Vis & Ramin* itself, the penultimate time that Mobad makes a major appearance.³³ This scene brings us full circle back to the springtime feast where his story began: once again, the king assembles the major characters of the story together in his palace gardens and entertains them with a banquet. He commands the court minstrel to sing; the minstrel bows and recites:

I saw a grown tree atop the mountain, a tree that scours the rust from anxious hearts; a tree whose head was raised to Saturn, who had taken in its shadow the whole of the world. Its beauty was like the sun's, and the world was hopeful of its leaves and fruit. Below it ran a limpid spring, with nectar for water and pearls for sand. Tulips and roses were in flower by its side, and violets, mallow, and hyacinth had bloomed. A Gilani bull grazed by its bank; at times it drank the water, at times it champed the flowers. May the water of this spring be forever flowing! May its tree be ever fruitful! May its bull be ever young! ([XVII] 69.17–23)

The song, of course, is a metaphor for the tale of Mobad: a great king of limitless power and boundless dominion, yet unable to do anything but watch as Ramin, the Gilani bull, munches contentedly in his garden.³⁴ The final line of the song, a wry parody of the *du'ā* that typically marks the conclusion of a *qaṣīdah*, wishes Mobad a

³³The final time is his death scene.

³⁴An engaging analysis of the minstrel's song and its significance to the poem is found in C.-C. Claude-Claire Kappler, "Présence du mazdéisme dans le roman de Gorgāni, *Vis o Rāmīn*," *Dabireh* 1 (1991): 39–54.

long and helpless life as Ramin happily consumes what is his. In this allegory within the allegory of the garden-as-kingdom, the rise and fall of Mobad becomes clear: if the garden was once a site where Mobad's glory was confirmed, it has now become a carnival where all the conventions of courtly panegyric can be openly twisted to mock the king to his own face, in his own court, and by his own minstrels.

This is the final straw: furious and humiliated, Mobad leaps to his feet, draws his dagger, and demands that Ramin forswear all further relations with Vis. It is a final test of his personal and kingly authority: no letters, no intermediaries, no room to wiggle out or back down—just a direct order from king to subject, from one man to another. The gambit does not end well:

Nimble Ramin seized the king's two hands; you'd have said a male lion had seized a fox! He gleefully threw him into the dust and snatched the Indian dagger from his hand. The king was drunk and senseless from wine, his perception broken, his power gone. *He could not realize what Ramin had done; he had no memory of Ramin's cruelty.* Many kinds of trouble and torpor arise from love and drunkenness, affecting reason; if these two burdens had not weighed on Mobad, no sort of evil would have befallen him. ([XVIII] 69.51–56)

Thus concludes Mobad's effective reign, to quote the famous verse: not with a bang but a whimper. Although he will play a small part in the poem's conclusion, he comes across as the cardboard character the critics have made him out to be, either petty and cruel, delighting in Vis's suffering at the hands of Ramin, or grim and ruthless, prepared to fight to the death when word reaches him of Ramin's usurpation of his throne. But in truth, his fate had been sealed long ago, and his symbolic deposition now is merely the confirmation of a secret long unspoken but obvious to all. Though his physical death is yet to come, it might be said that Mobad's character, like Gottfried's Mark, who fell at last into a "living death," is essentially killed off

here, in a state that neatly captures the trajectory of his story: a once-mighty king now broken and senseless, hurled to the ground by a force he cannot fully identify or comprehend, still wondering where it all went wrong.

Through the figure of Mobad, *Vis & Ramin* contributes to a broader discussion around love, power, and masculinity in unique and provocative ways. Unlike Jamshīd of the *Shāhnāmah*, whose decline and fall is readily ascribed to a collapse of his inner virtue, or the lover-kings of Nizāmī's romances, who succeed (Bahrām) or fail (Khusraw) in realizing the ideal symmetry between man, lover, and ruler, the story of Mobad Manikān raises serious problems about the internal coherence of normative masculinity in the first place. In Mobad, we learn that the practice of being a man can paradoxically unman its practitioners, thanks in no small part to the overdetermination of its idealized self-projections. In attempting to adopting the simultaneous positions of king and lover—both of which are presented in the text as paragons of masculinity—Mobad blows their synchronicity apart; although his narrative suggests a steady march of self-sabotage and self-destruction, I hope to have shown that these processes are actually driven by imagined and socially constructed selfhoods *far bigger and beyond his physical self*, proclaiming his agency even as their shackles wind ever tighter around his body. If Mobad's narrative function is to act as the catalyst of a love story that inexorably pushes his own body towards the abyss, this same action is replicated in the unstable dynamics of his masculinity that set off its collapse from within. *Vis & Ramin* provides us with a fascinating example in Persian literature where these inherent vulnerabilities are allowed to show through, challenging the myth of the ideal man: no master of his domain, but a prisoner of his skin.

Appendix

([I] 60.31-41)

و یا از هیچ داننده شنیدی
دلَم را سیر کرد از جان شیرین
ز دست دایه و ویس و برادر
برین دردم نیفتد هیچ دارو
نه از دوزخ نه از یزدان بترسند
که نَز شرم آگهی دارند و نَز بیم
نترسد زانکه آب او بکاهد
ز خود بیچاره تر کس را ندانم
که روزم همچو قیرست از سیاهی
مرا از بختِ خود صدگونه فریاد
کنون گشته زنی بر من ستمگر

نگر تا تو چنین کردار دیدی
که چندین بار با من کرد رامین
همه ساله همی سوزم بر آذر
بماندستم به دست این سه جادو
نه از بند و نه از زندان بترسند
چه شاید کرد با سه دیو دُزخیم
کند بی شرم هر کاری که خواهد
اگر چه شاه شاهان جهانم
چه سودست این خدانندی و شاهی
همه کس را به گیتی من دهم داد
ستم دیده ز من مردانِ صفدر

([II] 8.1-3)

ز گفتِ راویان اندر خبرها
به شاهی کامگاری بختیاری
ز بهر او به گیتی زنده بودند

نوشته یافتیم اندر سمرها
که بود اندر زمانه شهریاری
همه شاهان مرو را بنده بودند

([III] 17.45-48)

به دل در راه داده اهرمن را
جز او شاه دگر باشد ندانند
گروهی خود به مردت می ندارند

لقب کردست روحا خویشان را
به نام او را همه کس شاه خوانند
ترا نَز شهریاران می شمارند

([IV] 18.22–25, 31)

همه دندان به دندان بر بسودند
زنِ شه را به دیگر کس سپردن
زنی را کاو زنِ شاهنشهِ ماست
برآرد شاهِ ما از کشورِ ماه
که چیزِ آن فلانِ اکنون فلانِ راست

بزرگان که پیشِ شاه بودند
که شهرو این چرا یارست کردن
چه زهره بود ویرو را که می‌خواست
همی گفتند ازین پس کامِ بدخواه
منادی زد قضا بر هرچه آنجاست

([V] 51.7–9, 13)

نگه کن تا پسندد هیچ هشیار
کند بدنام بر من گاهِ شاهِی
چه باشد در جهان زین ننگِ بدتر
که گردد چشمِ تو ابرِ بهاری

مرو را گفت نیکو باشد این کار
که رامین با زنم جوید تباهی
یکی زن چون بُود با دو برادر
که من زان سان کُشم او را به زاری

([VI] 51.65–66, 85–87)

هنرهای یلان نیکو نمایی
گریزی چون زنان از پیشِ مردان
به هامون بر برانم دجلهٔ خون
پیاده چون سگان در پیشِ لشکر
نجوید دشمنی با مهتران کس

همی تا در شبستان و سرایی
چو در میدان شوی با هم‌نبردان
کنم از کشتگانِ کشورت هامون
بیارم ویس را بی‌کفش و چادر
چنان رسوا کنم وی را کزین پس

([VII] 52.9–11, 14)

مرو را این همه پرخاش با کیست
برون کرده به دی ماهِ زمستان
بدان تا باشد از دو گونه بیداد
چنین باشد کسی کز داد برگشت

همی گفت‌ای عجب‌چندین سخن‌چیزت
نشاند خواهرم را در شبستان
هم او زد پس همو برداشت فریاد
گناه او کرد و بر ما کینه‌ور گشت

([VIII] 53.37–40)

تو خود بینی که با تو چون کنم کار
کنم مردی به کردار و نگویم
در آن میدان که گردان کینه ورزند
که ما را مردی است امروز یاور

اگر پیش آییم بر دشت پیگار
به آب تیغ گوهر را بشویم
چه گوهر چه سخن دانگی نیرزند
به یک سو نه سخن مردی بیاور

(IX] 5.4-7, 18-19])

به گاه مهر و بخشایش نکو دل
نکردی کس به صدسال اندرو کشت
به شهری و سپاهی بر ببخشود
چنان کز خشم او یک تن ننالید
رعیت را به دیوان غمز کردند
به دیده میل سوزان در کشیدند

اگر نه شاه بودی سخت عادل
صفاهان را نماندی خشت بر خشت
ولیکن مردمی را کار فرمود
گنہشان زیر پا اندر بمالید
گروهی را که مردم می سپردند
به فرمانش زبان هاشان بریدند

([X] 47.38-41)

گزند افزون ز اندازه نمایم
وزان پس دایه را بر دار دوزم
دگر هرگز به نامش برنخوانم
ز ننگ هر سه بزدایم روان را

اگر فرهنگشان من کرد بایم
دو چشم ویس با آتش بسوزم
ز شهر خویش رامین را برانم
بپردازم ز رسوایی جهان را

([XI] 64.18-23)

به سختی راه یکساله بریده
کلاه راه از سر نانهاده
ره اشکفت دیوان برگرفتند
کنون این ره تمامی راه رامست
که رامین را ز ویسه باز داریم
به خان اندر ز صد خاقان و قیصر

سپاهش نیمی از ره نارسیده
دگر نیمه کمرها ناگشاده
به ناکامی همه با وی برفتند
یکی گفتی که ره مان ناتمامست
یکی گفتی همیشه راهواریم
یکی گفتی که شه را ویس بدتر

([XII] 64.135–38)

که نفرینِ دو گیتی بر تو بادا
نه نیز از بند بشکوهی و زندان
چو خوار آید ترا زندان و بندم
بجز کشتن چه شاید کرد بر گو

شهنه گفت ویسا دیوزادا
نه از مردم بترسی نه ز یزدان
فسوس آید ترا اندرز و پندم
نگویی تا چه باید کرد با تو

([XIII] 64.198–201)

که تندی افکند او را در آتش
نبیند خرمی از مهرکاری
که از دلدار نشکبید زمانی
ز بهر آنکه تا زو درگذارد

مبادا هیچ عاشق تند و سرکش
چو عاشق را نباشد بردباری
چرا تندی نماید مهربانی
گناه دوست عاشق دوست دارد

([XIV] 26.47–52)

بتفسد زو دل ارچه سرد باشد
به جای سرزنش زو سنگ بارد
وگر باشد به جای سنگ ژوبین
مگراز عشق ورزیدن که نیکوست
هوا را از دل عاشق نشوید
هر آنک او نیست عاشق نیست مردم

ستیز آغازِ عشقِ مرد باشد
وگر میغی ز گیتی سربرآرد
نترسد عاشق از بارانِ سنگین
هر آنچ از وی ملامت خیزد آهوست
به گفتاری که بدگویی بگوید
چه باشد عشق را بدگوی گزدم

([XV] 56.19–20, 27–34)

سپاه و گنج و رختِ بی شمارم
کنون بی شاهی و بی دل بماندم
مرا این عشق با این غم چه بایست
نگر چون زار گردد مردم پیر
که با هجرانِ او دوزخ بدیدم

همی گفתי درینا روزگرم
ز بهر دل سراسر برفشاندم
به پیری گر نبودی عشق شایست
بدین غم طفل گردد پیر دلگیر
بهشتی را ز گیتی برگزیدم

چو یاد آرم به دل جور و جفایش
بتر گردم چو عیش برشمارم
دل من کور گشت از مهربانی
ز پیش از عاشقی بودم توانا
کنون در عاشقی بس ناتوانم

بیفزاید مرا مهر و وفایش
تو گویی عیب او را دوست دارم
نبیند هیچ کام این جهانی
به کار خویشتن بینا و دانا
چنان گشتم که گر بینم ندانم

([XVI] 68.123-29, 139)

چو او از تو برد این خوب چهرش
گهی با آهوان بودی به صحرا
گهی با گور بودی در بیابان
فرامش کردی آن درد و بلا را
ترا زو بود و ما را از تو آزار
از آن پیمان و زان سوگند یاد آر
مخور زنهار شاها کت نباید
گر این خنجر زنی بر ویس دلبر

ترا دیدم که چون بودی ز مهرش
گهی با ماهیان بودی به دریا
گهی با شیر بودی در نیستان
که از مهرش ترا بودست و ما را
چه مایه ما و تو خوردیم تیمار
کجا کردی و خوردی پیش دادار
یکی روز این خورش جان را گزاید
شود زان زخم درد تو فزون تر

([XVII] 69.17-23)

درختی رسته دیدم بر سر کوه
درختی سرکشیده تا به کیوان
به زیبایی همی ماند به خورشید
به زبیرش سخت روشن چشمه آب
شکفته بر کنارش لاله و گل
چرنده گاو گیلی بر کنارش
همیشه آب این چشمه روان باد

که از دلها زداید زنگ اندوه
گرفته زیر سایه نیم گیهان
جهان در برگ و بارش بسته امید
که آبش نوش و ریگش در خوشاب
بنفشه رسته و خیری و سنبل
گهی آبش خورد گه نوبهارش
درختش بارور گاوش جوان باد

([XVIII] 69.51-56)

سبک رامین دو دست شاه بگرفت
ز شادروان به خاک اندر فگندش

تو گفتی شیر نر روباه بگرفت
ز دستش بستد آن هندی پرندش

تو گفתי شیرِ نر روباه بگفرت
ز دستش بستد آن هندی پرندش
گسسته آگهی و رفته نیروش
نماند اندر دلش آزارِ رامین
پدید آید همی از عشق و مستی
مرو را هیچ گونه بد نبودی

سبک رامین دو دستِ شاه بگرفت
ز شادروان به خاک اندر فگندش
شهنشه مست بود از باده بیهوش
نبودش آگهی از کارِ رامین
خرد را چندگونه رنج و سستی
گر این دو رنج بر موبد نبودی