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### The Reluctant Warrior: Semiotic Notes on the Story of Zāl in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*

*Zāl is the embodiment of the heroic culture which shapes and determines the conduct of the Shāhnāmeḥ heroes from Manūchīhr through Rustam's death. For Zāl to attain that level of moral authority, the poem semiotically endows him with innate wisdom symbolized by his white hair at birth. By the end of the story, when he is still a relatively young man, he has gained the authority to change the ruling dynasty by choosing and crowning kings at will (e.g. his crowning of Zav and Kayqubād). Zāl's story is thus a tale of transformation that seamlessly fits into the overall narrative of the Shāhnāmeḥ. It helps the poem's narrative make the transition from the age of ancient kings in whom heroism, royal authority, and magical potency are combined, to the era of a different line of rulers who govern by royal authority alone. This process moves in two parallel lines: the transfer of the magical wisdom of the primordial kings to the person of a sage who functions as the embodiment of sagacity and prudence, and the transfer of their heroic aspect to a great warrior who serves as the country's "chief hero," its jahān pahlawān. With the exception of Kaykhusraw, whose character has very strong supernatural and religious dimensions, every important legendary king after Manūchīhr has a sage on whose advice he depends (e.g. Zav, Kayqubād and Kaykāvūs have Zāl, Gushtāsp has Jāmāsp, and Alexander has Aristotle). The king also has a warrior who holds the office of the jahān pahlawān (Kaykāvūs and Kaykhusraw have Rustam, Luhrāsp has Zarēr, and Gushtāsp has Isfandiyār).*

**Keywords:** *Shāhnāmeḥ*; Persian Literature; Zāl; Semiotic Analysis; Narrative Logic

The *Shāhnāmeḥ* has paid a penalty for being Iran's national epic—the penalty of being neglected as a literary masterpiece. With few exceptions, most western studies of the poem have been focused on its pre-Islamic or Indo-European aspects, or alternatively on its relationship—real or imaginary—to oral tradition.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. Davidson, *Poet and Hero*; Yamamoto, *The Oral Background*. Two notable exceptions are Dabashi, *The Shahnameh*; and Davis, *Epic and Sedition*.