CHAPTER 4
A Fierce Fidelity: Ferdowsi and His Archetype

We know beyond reasonable doubt that the prose Shāhnāmeh commissioned by Abū Mansūr was set to verse by Ferdowsi. I believe that this Shāhnāmeh was Ferdowsi’s only source. However, some scholars have argued that before he obtained a copy of the prose Shāhnāmeh, Ferdowsi had already begun to versify individual epic tales that either were present in the oral tradition or existed as independent textual narratives. What he did, they suggest, is retell his newly found archetype in verse, while incorporating his previously versified stories into that archetype’s narrative. The result, according to this view of the poem’s history, was an epic that wedded the narrative of Abū Mansūr’s prose Shāhnāmeh with a miscellany of other epic tales from Iran’s oral tradition and other literary sources. Others believe that the poet largely followed his prose source faithfully, and that any indications of multiple sources must have existed in his prose archetype, and entered his verse from that source alone.

It’s simply not possible to conclusively judge the degree of Ferdowsi’s adherence to his prose antecedent without an extant text of that source. However, an educated guess can be made from existing evidence. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the best argument in favor of the view that Ferdowsi’s Shāhnāmeh had a single source is al-Tha‘alibī’s free Arabic translation of Abū Mansūr’s Shāhnāmeh. This translation, which we call the Ghurar for the sake of brevity, shows verbatim agreements with Ferdowsi’s verse in numerous places, implying that both books depended on the same source. We also have Ferdowsi’s own statements about his faithfulness to the text of his archetype, which we shall discuss in greater detail presently. I find Muhammad Taqi Bahār’s assessment of the situation quite convincing:

It is certain for me, having carefully studied the verses of the Shāhnāmeh that Ferdowsi did not make up anything in this book….He tried to
versify the very book to which he had access, which he considered to be a collection of histories, narratives, and national epic tales, quite literally; and to show off his poetic prowess in elaborating upon these stories and in his use of beautiful images and wise didacticisms. It is not the case that he took different tales willy-nilly and wove them together as he wished. . . . There may be no doubt that there was a literary text in front of our poet that was compiled in an orderly fashion from ancient sources … Ferdowsi’s allusions to the dihqān or to Āzād Sarv, or to Māhū or Bahrām must have existed in his archetype, which he has reproduced verbatim.⁴

Ferdowsi’s commitment to textual sources has been acknowledged by every important scholar of the epic since the nineteenth century. Like Bahār, Theodor Nöldeke believed that Ferdowsi’s sources were purely textual He pointed out that when the poet writes that he had “heard” a certain tale, he was really narrating a story which he had actually read.⁵ Shahbazi also stresses Ferdowsi’s dependence on his literary sources, and observes:

Another indication of strict adherence to the sources is the fact that in the chapters derived from Abū Mansūr’s prose work which were likewise used by Thaʿālibī, the correspondence is so exact as to prove Ferdowsi’s method: we see him as a historian rather than a poet with license for modification or alteration.⁶

In the extensive introduction to his edition and translation of the Shāhnāmeh, which was published between 1838 and 1878 in Paris, the French Orientalist Jules Mohl (1800–1878), recognized Ferdowsi’s adherence to his prose archetype. However, he also opined that the poet included tales from other literary sources in addition to the ones that he found in the prose Shāhnāmeh.⁷

Ferdowsi specifies how he adheres to the text of his prose archetype quite frequently throughout the epic. For instance at the end of Kāmūs’s story, he expresses his joy in finishing that long episode (iii: 285: 2879–80):

This tale of Kāmūs too, have I ended
It is long and not a jot of it was left out
Had a word been omitted of it
My soul would have mourned [the loss].

Again, after the long episode of philosophical discourses between the sage Būzarjumīhr and the emperor, Khosrow I, he writes (vii: 303: 2661–62):