

7. Parable of the Ship of Shi'ism

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 18 verso
Attributable to Mirza-'Ali

Ca. 1530

300 x 209 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., 1970
(1970.301.1)

Firdawsi's Shahnama opens with praise of God in both philosophical and theological terms. In the theological section Firdawsi relates a parable about the passengers on seventy ships wrecked in a stormy sea from which no one emerged alive. Each of the ships held believers in one of the seventy religions of man. The finest and largest of all the ships carried Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan, and Husayn; and this was the ship on which Firdawsi chose to travel. Although the ship and its passengers were doomed to destruction, Firdawsi rode content in the knowledge that he would perish near the helping hands of his saviours. S. R. C.



Although the work of illustrating the *Shahnama* ordinarily proceeded chronologically, from the beginning of the epic to the end, particularly admired pictures were inserted later, at the patron's discretion. This miniature, the third in the volume, can be attributed on grounds of style to Mirza-'Ali, a brilliant painter of the second Safavid generation, who was over-shadowed by his great father, Sultan-Muhammad. Contemporary sources tend to remark upon his parentage, then dismiss him with modest praise. Nonetheless, his art was favored by the Shah and later by the Shah's nephew, the great patron Sultan Ibrahim Mirza. Mirza-'Ali's earlier works for the *Shahnama* must have been painted when he was very young. This one may well mark his artistic coming-of-age, and is one of his more ambitious compositions for the manuscript.¹ Although influenced by his father's style, Mirza-'Ali here reveals the impact of Shaykh-Zadeh (see no. 42), a pupil of Bihzad whose version of that master's style was strongly felt by the second generation of Safavid artists.²

Inscribed

along the canopy on top deck of main ship, rhyming couplet from Sa'di's Preface to his *Rose Garden*

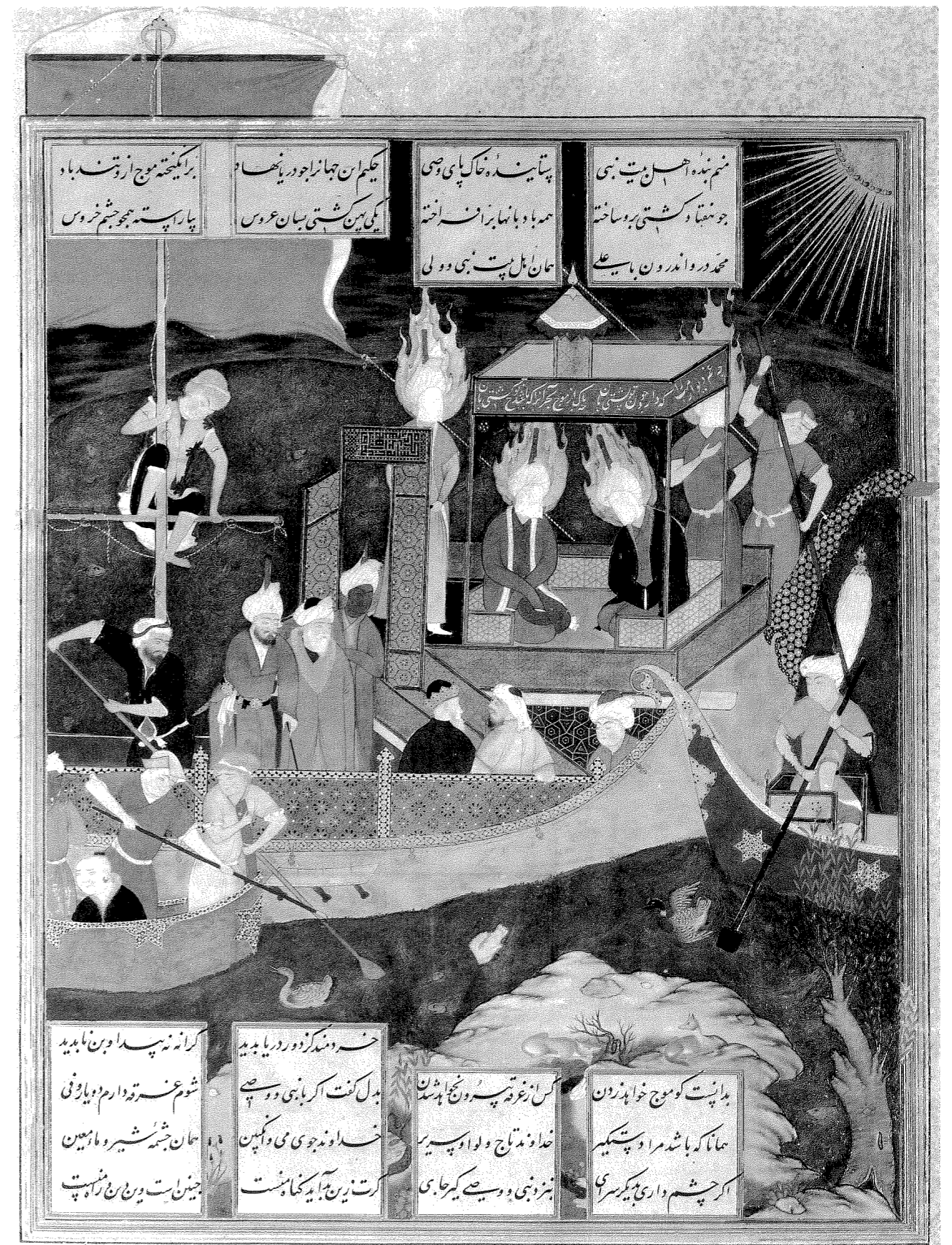
What need are walls?
Muhammad's here to fortify our inner state!
Why heed the waves when Noah's fore, piloting our Ship of State?

on lintel of gateway leading to upper deck

May the portals of this court ever open to good fortune!

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 85, 86.

2. For an apt comparison to this picture, see *Iskandar Shooting a Bird from a Boat*, a picture attributable to Shaykh-Zadeh in the *Paris Collected Works of Nava'i* (Bibliothèque Nationale, supp. turc, 316, 317); also, see Stuart Cary Welch, *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Braziller, 1976) fig. B.



8. *The Court of Gayumars*

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 20 verso
By Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1522–25

342 x 231 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

Gayumars, the first Shah of Iran, ruled the world from a mountain top for thirty years. During his benevolent reign, men wore leopard skin garments and discovered how to prepare food. Gayumars' subjects revered him and in his presence wild animals grew meek as lambs. In time, however, a plot by the evil demon Ahriman shattered the idyllic peace. Although the angel Surush tried to warn the Shah of Ahriman's schemes, the ferocious Black Div, son of Ahriman, killed Siyamak, Gayumars' beloved son. S. R. C.



In this astonishing picture, Sultan-Muhammad brought together the visionary power of Turkman painting, so admired by Shah Isma'il, and the psychological nuances and fineness associated with Bihzad, whose style was favored by Prince Tahmasp. In it, the Western and Eastern traditions of Iranian painting merged; and Safavid painting reached its greatest height. In his Preface to the Bahram Mirza Album, Dust-Muhammad's appreciation of Sultan-Muhammad could hardly be more laudatory. With him "painting rises to the heights, where skies, for all their thousand-starred eyes, have yet to see the like. . . . Among his creative works are those he painted and sketched in a *Shahnama* done for his Alexandrous Majesty in whose person is Jamshid's right reserved, the True Creed conserved, and the True Rite preserved." One of these (*Gayumars*), described as "a scene with figures clad in leopard skins," is singled out for special praise: "Lions fierce in the field of painting, as awesome tigers drawn to the arts, stung at heart by the smart of his brush, cower in hurt, overpowered by this work."

To see the picture is to agree with Dust-Muhammad. Each rocky outcropping, flame-like tree, figure, and blossom proclaims the artist's wizardry, and rewards our sustained contemplation. All ages and sorts of men peep out at us, as do hundreds of chthonic spirits concealed in rocks, in what must be the most profound and yet delightful game of hide and seek ever devised.¹

OPPOSITE PAGE: Detail of no. 8. Illustration of the complete miniature, p. 17.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 89, 91.



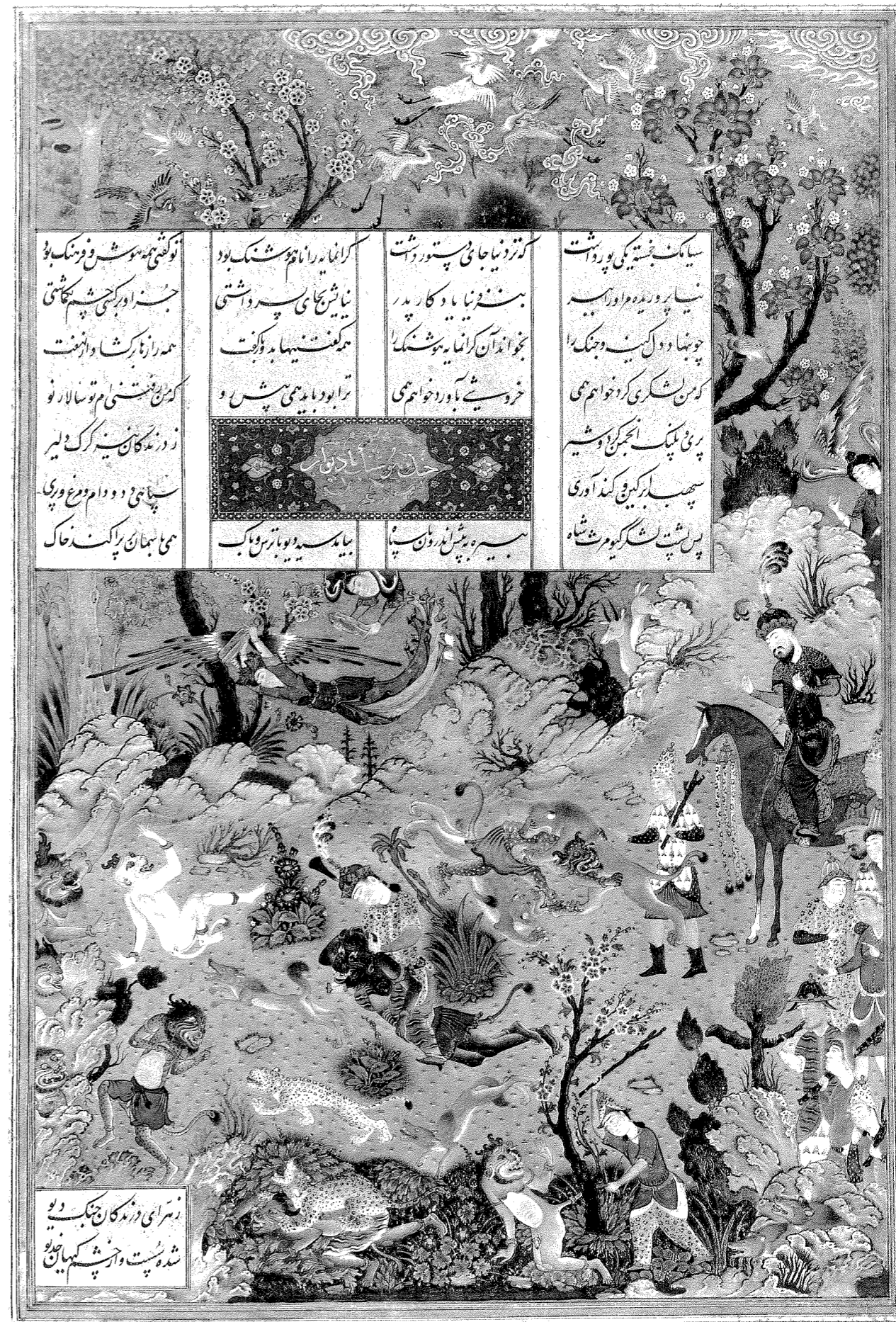
9. *Hushang Slays the Black Div*

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 21 verso
 Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1522 or earlier
 321 x 215 mm. (miniature only)
 Private Collection

Snarls, quacks, yelps, growls, thuds, and trumpeting sound the death of the Black Div, wolf-like son of Ahriman, who is shown being decapitated by Hushang, in partial vengeance against the Div's master, Ahriman (see no. 8). To the right, Gayumars, still lamenting his son's death, proudly observes his grandson's valor. Lions, leopards, bears, wolves, and angels assist; and the sky vibrates with the flapping of cranes, ducks, and other excited birds (see color detail, p. 6). Even the grotesques in the rocks chorus their approval.¹

Dashingly sketched and spontaneously conceived, this miniature is the liveliest of a series painted by Sultan-Muhammad for the *Shahnama*, paradigms of energy, intended either to charm the boy-patron Tahmasp, or to excite his visionary father, Shah Isma'il. In style, these exhilarating pictures recall *Rustam Sleeping While Rakhsh Fights the Lion* (no. 2), which probably was begun for the same project. Although the doll-like simplifications of figures recall the *Khavarannama* (see fig. 7) and *Jamal u Jalal* (no. 1, fig. 6), Sultan-Muhammad's sharp-eyed observation of nature is apparent in the gestures of the cranes and in the musculature of a white demon's back.



1. For color reproduction, see Stuart Cary Welch *Persian Painting: Five Royal Safavid Manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Braziller, 1976) pl. 4.

10. *The Death of King Mardas*

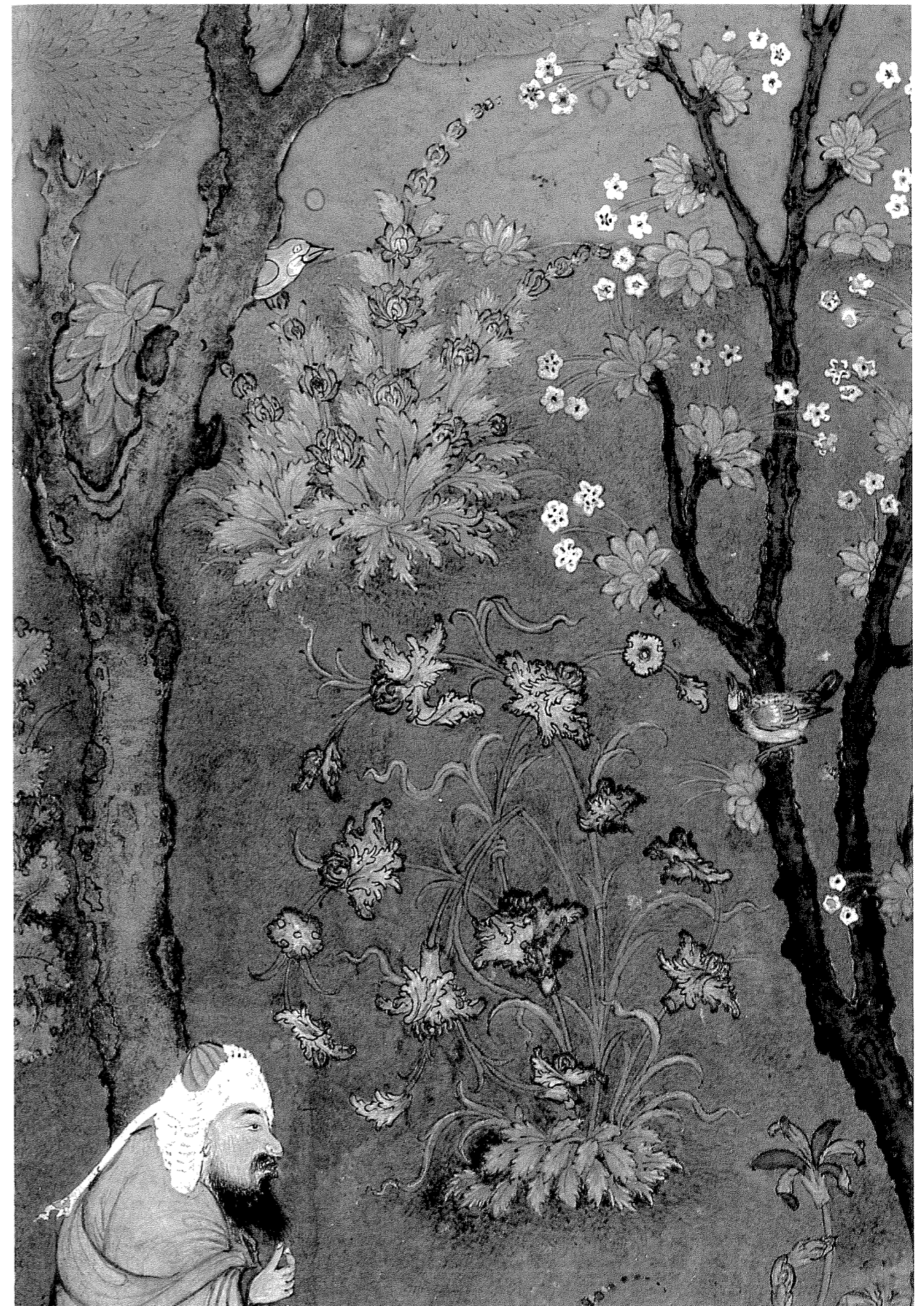
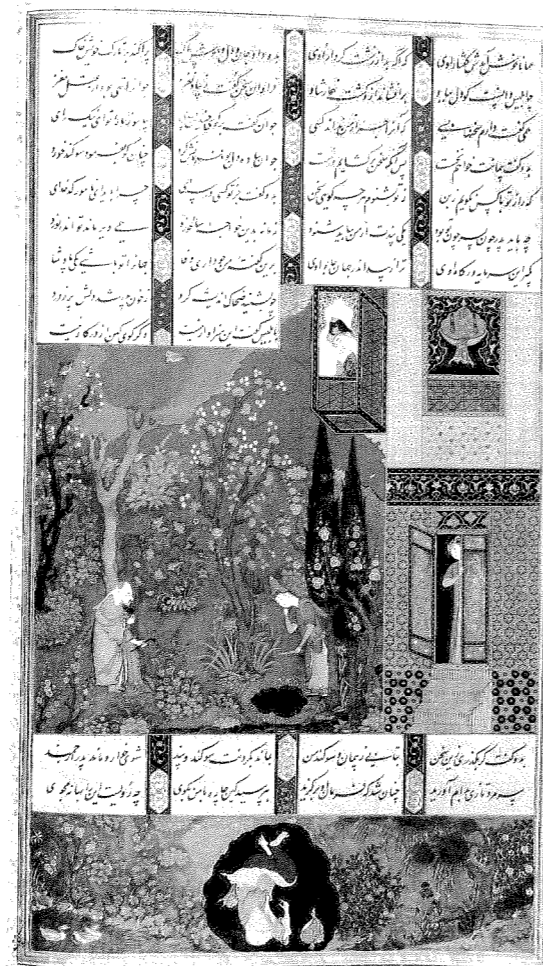
From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 25 verso
 Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1522 or earlier
 232 x 175 mm. (miniature only)
 Lent by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

The moods of the *Shahnama* range from heroism, joy, and wisdom to lust, cruelty, and wickedness. *The Death of King Mardas* is of the last sort—here interpreted with humor and bitter-sweetness by Sultan-Muhammad. Iblis (Satan), disguised as the old gentleman to the left, persuaded Prince Zuhhak, gazing down from the balcony, to join in a plot against his father, Mardas, a king of Arabia Deserta, in order to inherit the throne. A deep pit was dug, carefully screened with boughs, in the pathway used every day at dawn by the old king en route to his bath. The plot succeeded; Mardas fell to his death, to the consternation of his pageboy, who peers somewhat rapidly into the pit, candle in hand.

This is another of Sultan-Muhammad's spritely early miniatures for the *Shahnama*. In it he has sketched a witch-dance of foliage setting the mood for a dastardly act. A gloriously seething cluster of flowers and leaves, to the right of Iblis's head, is one of the artist's liveliest recollections of a favorite Turkman motif (see color detail). His sure, calligraphic sweep of line appears to advantage in the festooning robes of the ill-fated Mardas.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Detail of no. 10.
 Complete miniature at right.



11. *The Nightmare of Zuhhak*

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 28 verso
Attributable to Mir Musavvir

Ca. 1525–35
342 x 276 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

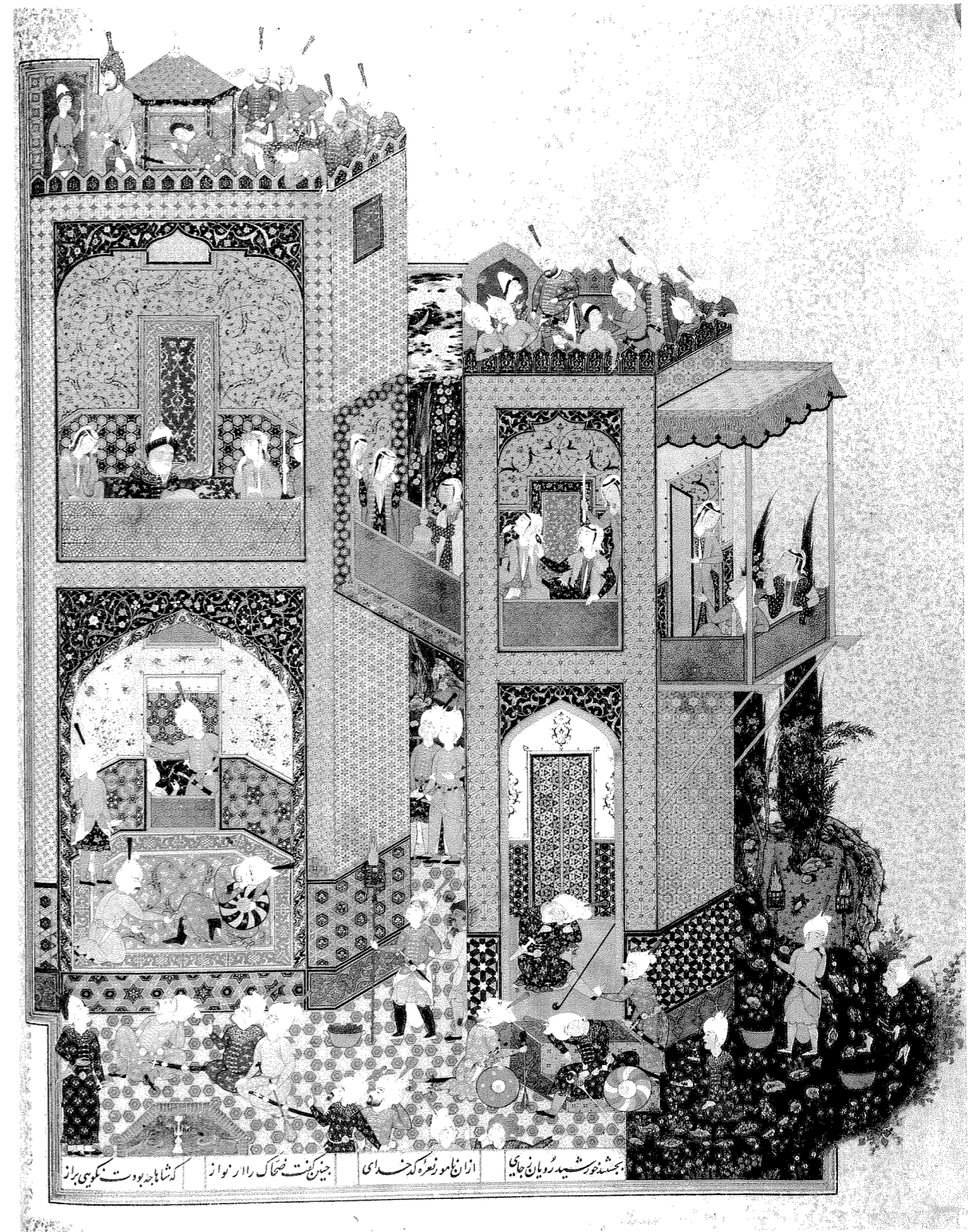
Gullible Zuhhak gained his father's throne — at a price. Iblis, having plotted the murder, later turned up as a chef and prepared succulent dishes for the royal gastronome. So pleased was Zuhhak that he offered the cook any boon he desired. The chef wished merely to kiss his patron's shoulders, but when he did, two snakes, who required daily feedings of the brains of human youths, grew where the devil's lips had touched.

One night, gray with age and torment, Zuhhak awoke in terror from a nightmare. In his dream, he had been beaten with an ox-head mace, yoked, and dragged through the dust past jeering crowds to Mount Damavand. S. R. C.



Dust-Muhammad in his *Preface* to the Bahram Mirza Album describes Mir Musavvir as a “master jeweler . . . a star of lapis lazuli . . . a Sayyid [descendant of the Prophet] whose brushwork is flawless . . .,” clearly the artistic personality represented here. Mir Musavvir's *Nightmare* is a tour de force, a painted challenge to Sultan-Muhammad's *The Court of the Gayumars* (no. 8). Despite the subject, it is the high point of Mir Musavvir's romanticism; he has concentrated on the king's pleasure dome, which may be an idealized view of Shah Tahmasp's court and is perhaps the most ambitious treatment of architecture in Safavid painting. The artist has rendered night by the crescent moon and by a deeply saturated, nocturnal palette. Signs of doom are minimal, but if we follow Zuhhak's gaze to the patch of garden, lower right, each stone reveals a microcosm of ghouls.¹

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 101, 103.



12. *Faridun Crosses the River Dijla*

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 33 verso
 Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad

Ca. 1525-30
 271 x 207 mm.
 Private Collection

Zuhhak's nightmare was interpreted by his leading magus as a prophecy that a champion named Faridun would seize the throne. Despite Zuhhak's efforts to locate and slay the still youthful rebel, Faridun grew up unscathed; and at sixteen he undertook the revolt against Zuhhak. While his great army gathered, Faridun procured an ox-headed mace, and soon led his troops toward Arabia. At the bank of the River Dijla (Tigris) the Arab boatmen who controlled the ferries refused passage to Faridun and his army for Zuhhak's orders specified that only those authorized by him might cross. Undaunted, Faridun and his horse pressed onward into the river, followed by his reluctant supporters.

S. R. C.



Sultan-Muhammad's easy adjustment to the Herat style of Bihzad, admired by Shah Tahmasp, is apparent in this complex, strikingly designed miniature. The expressively distorted, lumpy figures of his earlier mode (see nos. 2, 8, 9, 41, 43, 44) have now become slenderly naturalistic. Three-dimensional space has taken on a modicum of Bihzad's coherence and logic; and the finish is jewel-like rather than boldly dashing. Nevertheless, close scrutiny shows that the changes were superficial. The free-flowing line of the boatman's clothing is but a finer version of Mardas's (no. 10); and Sultan-Muhammad's sense of the comical, which had been toned down in his transitional pictures,¹ has re-emerged in scarcely subtler form. An amusing young horseman, center right, gestures insolently towards a corpulent veteran who is terrified of entering the water.

In the foreground, a pair of lions—stylistic ancestors of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century beasts from the Indian school of Kotah—stalk through ornamental grasses, silhouetted against the now tarnished silver river. Close inspection brings out many water-birds and leaping fish, the latter made to appear glisteningly wet with crushed mother-of-pearl or mica. An almost invisible, ghostly monkey bobs playfully on a flowering branch to the right of the central standard, and the concealed grotesques in the stony horizon recall those of *The Court of Gayumars*.

1. Compare: Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 104-111.



13. *The Death of Zuhhak*

From Shah Tahmasp's *BOOK OF KINGS*, folio 37 verso
 Attributable to Sultan-Muhammad, assisted by Mir Sayyid-'Ali

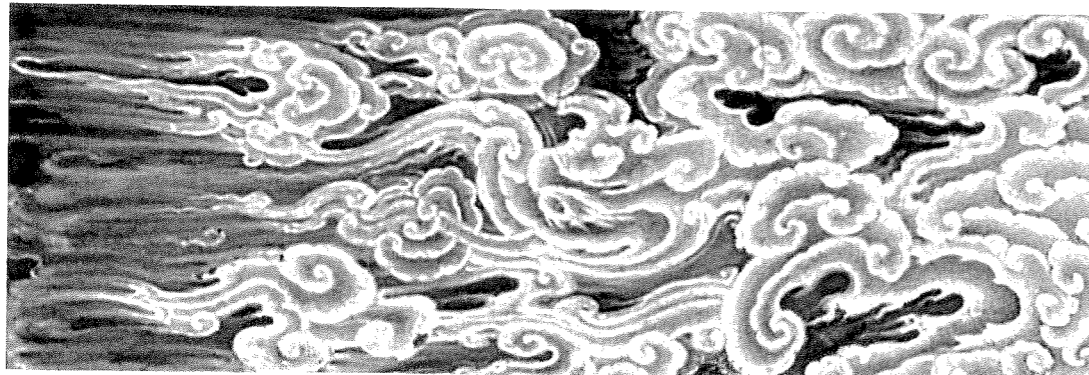
Ca. 1535
 311 x 232 mm. (miniature only)
 Private Collection

When Faridun's army took Zuhhak's palace, Zuhhak had fled, but Faridun still followed the victory with feasts and entertained Zuhhak's favorite ladies, the daughters of Jamshid. Tortured by jealousy, Zuhhak disguised himself and stole into the palace to murder the daughters. On advice from archangel Surush, Faridun spared Zuhhak, bound him in chains, and carried him to Mount Damavand. Zuhhak was fastened, arms outstretched, in a remote cave, "so that his brain might chafe and his agony endure" forever. S. R. C.



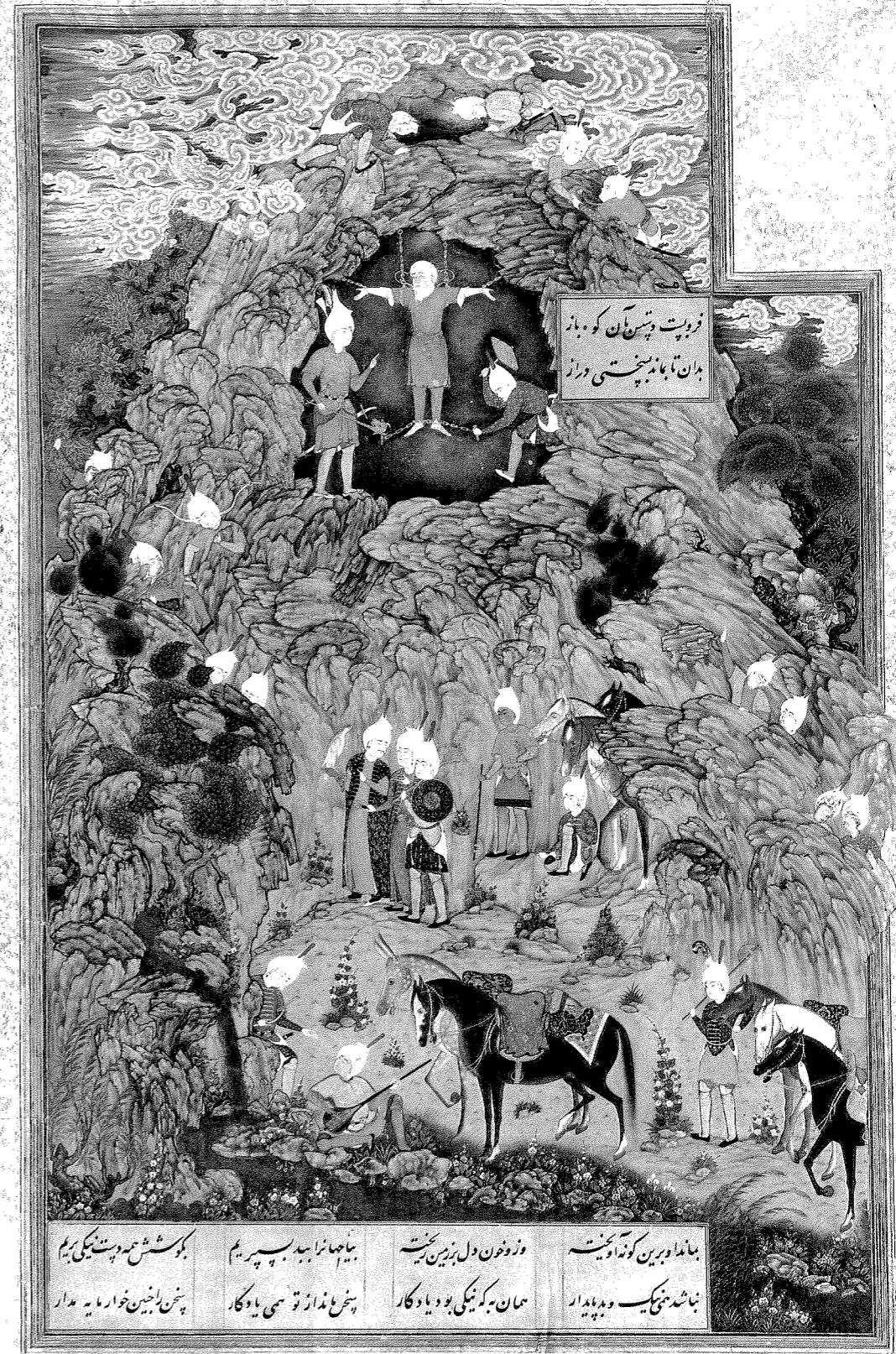
Like Shakespeare, Sultan-Muhammad populated his dramas with a large and varied cast. Although on the whole very life-like, some of his characters veer from conventional interpretations. Here Zuhhak the Dragon-king seems to accept his agony unflinchingly, while Faridun raises an admonishing finger. As in Mir Musavvir's *Nightmare* (no. 11), ambience belies action. Despite the dragonish clouds, the weather is bright and cheery and the elegant hawking party seems better suited to a picnic than to a death scene. But there is horror too in the stealthy, cruel-mouthed executioners and, as in *Gayumars* (no. 8), the mountain crags surprise us with their earth-spirits.

This haunting miniature is probably the latest major contribution to the manuscript by Sultan-Muhammad. In style, it could as well belong to the British Library *Quintet* of 1539 to 1543 (nos. 48, 65). Mir Sayyid-'Ali, an aspiring young painter recognized for his painstaking workmanship, evidently help finish the work. Many of the faces, trees, and ornamental passages are his.¹



Detail of no. 13.

1. For color reproductions, see Welch, *A King's Book of Kings*, pp. 117, 119; and Welch, *Persian Painting*, pl. 6.



زودیت و تن آن کو باز
 بران تا باید چینی و راز

بماند او برین کوه تا او نیست
 و ز خون دل بزرگ نیست
 بیا چنانرا بید پریم
 و سخن ماندار تو همی یادگار
 بکشش همه دست یکی بریم
 پهن را چنین خوار ما به مدار
 بنشاند نه یک و بد مدار
 همان به که نیکی بود یادگار