Persian Mirrors for Princes: Pre-Islamic and Islamic Mirrors Compared

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Mirrors for princes are treatises on governance distinguished from political philosophy and political jurisprudence (*fiqh-i siyāsī*) in the Iranian and Islamic intellectual traditions. Chronologically speaking, they are categorized into two major groups: mirrors for princes from pre-Islamic Iran and the ones from the Islamic era. In spite of the discernible differences between the two, they have in common similar political ideas and a shared intellectual tradition. Fine specimen of the first group are *Nāma-yi Tansar* (The Letter of Tansar)[1] and ٠ *Ahd-i Ardashīr*[2] (Ardashīr's Testament), both originally written in Pahlavi, though no Pahlavi version is extant. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ١٣٩/٧٥٨) has translated the first one from Pahlavi into Arabic. The second is a collection of advice from the Sassanid dynast Ardashīr I (d. ٢٤٢ CE) to his governors and deputies throughout the Persian empire. These two mirrors from pre-Islamic Iran are important to this article, as it will focus on the works of the Islamic era, i.e. the works of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, the *Siyāsat-nāma*[3] by Niẓām al-Mulk (d. ٤٧١/١٠٩٢) and *Marzbān-nāma*[4] by Marzbān b. Rustam b. Sharwīn (١٢th century). The latter one was translated by Saʿduddīn Varāvīnī from the Ṭabari language to Farsi between ٦١٢/١٢١٥ and ٦١٧/١٢٢٠. Emphasis is also placed on the ways in which the Islamic treatises are influenced by the pre-Islamic ones while adapting their contents to their own historical context. A.K.S. Lambton and M.A. Emam Shushtari, the translator of the *Nāma-yi Tansar*, as we shall see, believe in the influence of pre-Islamic Iranian mirrors on the

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[1] Ed. Mīnuvī ١٩٧٥.
[2] Ed. ٠ Abbās ١٩٦٩.
[3] Ed. Darke ١٩٨٥.
[4] Ed. Rushan ١٩٧٦.

Islamic ones, while Javād Ṭabāṭabā'ī sees Islamic mirrors as a "continuation" of Iranian ones,[5] arguing for an ideology of "Iranshahri" or what might be called "Iranopolis", and Davud Feirahi observes them as independent treatises influenced by their own historical context.[6] What confirms the first idea is that the essence of pre-Islamic and Islamic mirrors seems alike, and what confirms the second hypothesis is that the concept of aura (Persian *farra*) of kings does not predominate in mirrors from the Islamic era. According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Niẓām al-Mulk's *Siyāsat-nāma* draws on pre-Islamic advice literature and develops a new theory of Persian kingship which, despite some references to Islam, the Qur'an, the hadith and the records of the caliphs, remains essentially alien to the caliphate.[7] In other words, historical context is not important, since mirrors from widely divergent contexts reveal similar contents. Analyzing these two opposing ideas, this study proposes that Islamic mirrors are influenced by both Iranian intellectual traditions and by their own historical context. This is also the position adopted by Omid Safi in his study on the relationship between the production of knowledge and social and political conditions in the Saljuq era. The focus in this study will be on the relationship between religion and state. In this regard, concepts such as *farra* or the aura of kings, governance or *khashasra*, expediency, justice and goodness (*asha*) will be discussed. Religion and political power are often described as twins in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, though the "Big Brother"[8] of political power always has been superior to religion.[9]

Students of Iranian mirrors are invariably constrained by the fact that these mirrors are only available in manuscripts dating from the Islamic period; which has made content analysis unavoidable. However, Foucauldian discourse analysis may provide a new and productive

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[5] Ṭabāṭabā'ī ٢٠٠٣, ٤٦.
[6] Feirahi ٢٠٠٣, ٧٤-٥.
[7] Ṭabāṭabā'ī ٢٠١٢.
[8] Borrowed from Orwell ١٩٥٠ passim.
[9] Safi ٢٠٠٦ passim.

method for comparing the two groups of mirrors for princes, thus shedding new light on the relationship between knowledge and political power. Although discourse analysis, in general, is a common term for a number of approaches to analyzing written and unwritten texts, the objective of this method, especially in this article, is to find coherent sequences of sentences and speech acts. The basic difference between discourse analysis and text linguistics is that discourse analysis seeks to reveal socio-psychological characteristics of the author rather than studying the structure of the text in question. As Chouliaraki explains:

> […] the Foucauldian concept of discourse sets up a constitutive relationship between meaning and power in social practice. Every move to meaning-making comes about from a position of power—power both structuring and structured by the social positions available within the practice. […] Foucault does not, however, postulate that meaning and power pre-exist in an inseparable state as causal conditions of existence for social practice—as ontological aprioris of the social world.[10]

Adopting discourse analysis as its primary methodological tool, this study hopes to demonstrate similarities between Iranian and Islamic mirrors, a "hypothetical" influence on the latter by the former, as well as specificities of Islamic mirrors that are determined primarily by their own historical contexts.

E. I. J. Rosenthal in his *Political Thought in Medieval Islam* has presented political philosophy, political *fiqh*, and mirrors for princes as a trinity.[11] While philosophers debated the scope of human reason, the ideal society and how to attain it and the nature of revelation, jurists argued about interpretations of the *sharī'a*, i.e. Islamic law, to govern private and public life. Mirrors for princes instructed kings, especially young ones, on certain aspects of rule and behavior to reinforce their power. Although Rosenthal identified three kinds of political texts in the medieval era, it seems that the essence of mirrors is different from political philosophy and

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[10] Chouliaraki ٢٠٠٨, ٦٧٤-٥.
[11] Rosenthal ١٩٦٢, ١١٥-٢١.

political *fiqh*.[12] Mirrors may rely on reason, *fiqh*, narrations, fables, history and so on, but their style and method is not as significant as their overarching objective, which is the preservation of power. There is no similarity between the *Nasīḥat al-mulūk* attributed to al-Ghazzālī (d. ٥٠٤/١١١١), the *Nasīḥat al-mulūk* of al-Māwardī (d. ٤٥٠/١٠٥٨), the *Siyāsat-nāma* of Niẓām al-Mulk and the *Irshād-nāma* of Mīrzā-yi Qummī (d. ١١٩٥/١٨١٦) except in their purpose. For this reason, we can differentiate between al-Ghazzālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* and his *Nasīḥat al-mulūk*, since the first is a religious book, while the second is a mirror for princes. In the latter al-Ghazzālī has argued: "God has chosen two kinds of people: prophets and kings. According to tradition, kings are the shadows of God on earth, so we should like and obey them. The Holy Qur'an says: 'Obey Allah, the messenger and those in authority' (Q ٤:٥٩)".[13] While Patricia Crone in her study on medieval Islamic political thought has accorded mirrors to the Sunni tradition,[14] several Shi'i mirrors exist as well.

Between Text and Context

According to contextualism, a text should be interpreted in its context, rather than as an independent entity. In this article a contextualist method is necessary as mirrors for princes, pre-Islamic and Islamic ones alike, are often written in the form of stories to reinforce the authority of kings, or what Jennifer London has dubbed as "speaking through the voice of another".[15] In her dissertation London used this term to refer to the rhetorical technique of translating or interpreting a story or saying to convey a political point and effect political action. For her, "political action" connotes how the translator or author uses an ancient source to challenge

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[12] Feirahi ٢٠٠٣, ٢٧-٣١.
[13] Al-Ghazzālī, *Nasīḥat al-mulūk*, ٣٢٢.
[14] Crone ٢٠٠٤, ٢٥٤-٨١.
[15] London ٢٠٠٩, ١.

political ideas in his own environment. Her suggestion, however, is that the particular genre (e.g. literary, philosophical, etc.) used by individual scholars allowed them to achieve a particular sort of political action.[16] Hence, it is impossible to understand the meaning of these texts without knowing the historical situation of the kingdoms in question. The authors of mirrors expressed their perspectives on political subjects, how rulers ought to think, act and organize society, by translating and interpreting stories and sayings, in widely different political and social contexts.

What follows in this paper is a brief contextual introduction of several specific mirrors, from pre-Islamic Iran as well as the Islamic period: The *Nāma-yi Tansar* claims to have been written in seventeen parts in about ٥٧٠ CE by a Zoroastrian priest who served as advisor to the first Sassanid monarch, Ardashīr I, and was translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffaʻ. Though Ibn al-Muqaffaʻʼs Arabic version is lost, Ibn-i Isfandiyārʼs Persian rendering of it, made in the early ١٣th century and embedded in his *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, reveals its content. The ٠Ahd-I *Ardashīr*, or Ardashīrʼs testament, is a collection of the dynastʼs teachings on good governance, addressed to his son and heir. The Pahlavi original is lost, but an Arabic rendition dating probably to the late Umayyad period is extant.[17] The *Siyāsat-nāma*, also known as *Siyar al-mulūk* or *The Ways of Kings*, was presented to Malikshāh, the Saljuq dynast by his vizier, Niẓām al-Mulk, right before the vizierʼs assassination in ٤٨٥/١٠٩٢. Niẓām al-Mulk was a pivotal figure who bridged the political gap between both the Abbasids and the Saljuqs against their various rivals such as the Fatimids and the Buyids. According to Yavari, "Niẓām al-Mulk was asked by Malikshāh to prepare a manual for good governance, shedding light on the ways and manners of past kings, just rule and stable polities. Repetitious and faculty in its factual contents, Niẓām al-

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[16] London ٢٠٠٩ passim.
[17] ٠ Abbās ١٩٦٩ (introduction), ٣٣-٣٤.

Mulk's string of anecdotes tie together pre-Islamic kings, Aristotelian tidbits, stories related to Prophet Muhammad and episodes from the lives of earlier caliphs."[18]

Omid Safi has written on the intricate relations between the Saljūqs and a number of well-known Sufi Muslims and jurists of the time, explaining how orthodoxy in the structure of *madrasa*s and Sufi *khānqāh*s legitimized Saljūq power.[19]

That intricate relationship between power and knowledge is evidence for the necessity of a contextual approach to the *Siyāsat-nāma*. To confirm Feirahi's idea, the *Siyāsat-nāma* is a text influenced by Iranian mirrors on the one hand, and by the relationship between religion, knowledge and Saljūq power on the other. It and other Islamic mirrors are not simply "continuations" of Iranian mirrors as Ṭabāṭabā'ī has argued.

In addition to the translation of *Nāma-yi Tansar*, which has been referred to, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was responsible for a couple of other important translations. His Arabic rendition of the *Kalīla wa Dimna* from Middle Persian is considered the first masterpiece of Arabic literary prose. A Middle Persian collection of animal fables mostly of Indian origin, and involving two jackals, Kalīla and Dimna, the text is prefaced by a putative autobiography of Burzūya and an account of his voyage to India. Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was able to articulate his genuine views on how princes ought to behave and order society through his translation of fables from Middle Persian (Pahlavi) into Arabic.[20] Two other important works in Arabic are ascribed to Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *al-Adab al-kabīr* and *al-Adab al-saghīr*[21], but only the first one can be accepted as his. The first of its four parts is a very brief rhetorical retrospect on the excellence of the ancients' legacy, clearly Sasanian, of spiritual and temporal knowledge. The second is a miniature mirror for princes. The

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[18] Yavari 2008a, 47-8.
[19] Safi 2006 passim.
[20] London 2009.
[21] Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ 2001.

addressee, seemingly the caliph's son, is apostrophized as one in pursuit of the rule of seemly conduct (*adab*).[22]

The *Marzbān-nāma,* ascribed to Marzbān b. Sharwīn, ruler of Ṭabaristān, which was written between ٦٠٧/١٢١٠ and ٦٢٢/١٢٢٥ AH,[23] to which we shall refer in further detail below, is another treatise on good governance disguised as an animal fable. In the *Marzbān-nāma*, there is a dialogue between Malikzāda, as the symbol of good governance, and Dastūr, as the symbol of bad governance. While Malikzāda stresses governance based on honesty, rationality, justice, equity, truth, kindness and good deeds, Dastūr's government is based on power, wealth, lie and trick. Without any doubt, the structure of this book is influenced by *Kalīla wa Dimna*, and both of them are influenced by Iranian mirrors for princes, though they should be interpreted in their own socio-political contexts.

Religion

Although it seems that Zoroastrianism and Islam have little in common, mirrors for princes have tried to use both religions to reinforce the authority of kings, commonly known as *farra*. Patricia Crone has argued that Muslims perceived Zoroastrianism as a dualist religion as it was blended with Manichaeism,[24] and one of the arguments for positing a close relationship between the two religions is the background and murder of Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ himself. Abū Muḥammad ٜ Abdallāh Rūzbih b. Dādūya (d. ca. ١٣٩/٧٥٧), known as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, was a Persian thinker and a Zoroastrian convert to Islam. He was murdered at the order of the second Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (٩٥-١٥٨/٧١٤-٧٥), reportedly for heresy or bad faith (*zindiqa*), in fact for a complex of political and religious reasons.

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[22] Latham ١٩٩٧.
[23] Varāvīnī, *Marzbān-nāma*, ٥٩-٦٨.
[24] Crone ٢٠٠٤, ٢٥٤.

The most important difference between pre-Islamic and Islamic mirrors in this regard is that there was a clash between Islamic *madhāhib* (denominations) such as Shias and Sunnis, or between Ḥanafīs and Shāfiʿis in Abbasid era. According to Niẓām al-Mulk, one of the conditions of viziers is to be Shāfiʿī or Ḥanafī, though that sectarianism was not what classifications and labels were all about in the medieval period.[25] It is the reason that we should analyze *Siyāsat-nāma* in the context of Ḥanafī religion and Turkic rule.[26] Although there are similarities between mirrors before and after Islam, each should be analyzed in its special context.

The Aura of Kings

In most ancient Iranian texts, kingship is equated with the possession of the right aura and considered as a gift from God. For example, Ardashīr Babakān's Naqsh-i Rustam inscription, which dates to ١٠٠٠ BCE, illustrates a bas-relief of Ardashīr riding a horse in front of the supreme deity Ahura Mazda, who is also riding a horse and delivering the symbol of kingship to Ardashīr. A stone inscription above Ardashīr's horse reads in three languages, "Ardashīr is king of kings of Iran who is blessed by God. (He is) the son of Bābak Shāh."[27]

The Farsi *farra* (aura) is derived from Middle-Persian *xvarenah* wherein *xvare* denotes the sun, and the verb *hvar* to lighten or to glorify. Accordingly, *farra* is the source of legitimacy and a sacred power bestowed on kings by God. As Fatḥullāh Mujtabāʾī explains: "*hvare* is an abstract example of light which can be observed in all classes including the rulers, guardians and the workers, in the story of Ardashīr (when he was going to the war and saw a sheep), and in the aura of kings, etc."[28] Ardashīr introduced himself to people as the representative of God on

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[25] Yavari ٢٠٠٨a, ٥٣-٤.
[26] Makdisi ١٩٧٣, passim.
[27] Moradi Ghiasabadi ٢٠١٢.
[28] Mujtabāʾī ١٩٧٣, ٩١-٢.

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earth,[29] having the authority to use force against his opponents.[30] As an abstract concept denoting denoting distinction and supernatural guidance, *farra* is akin to the light of prophecy, possessed by Zoroaster and Muhammad and the Imams—this latter at least insofar as the tenets of Shi'ism are concerned. Henri Corbin has equated *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* of as-Suhrawardī (٥٠٩-٥٨٧/١١٥٥-٩١) with *xvarenah* and the light of prophets.[31] The power in the arms of Rustam, the hero of *Shāh-nāma*, and the holiness of the hoopoe and the Sīmurgh in ˙ Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* are some examples of *farra* in texts from the Islamic era. Rustam is the epic hero of the story, "Rustam and Suhrab", a part of the Persian epic of *Shāh-nāma* of Firdausī (٣٢٩-٤١١/٩٤٠-١٠٢٠). According to ˙ Aṭṭār (٥١٣-٦٢٦/١١١٩-١٢٢٩), the birds of the world gather to decide who is to be their king, as they have none. The hoopoe, the wisest of them, suggests that they should find the legendary Sīmurgh, a mysterious bird in Iranian mythology which is a symbol often found in Sufi literature. When the group of thirty birds finally reaches the residence of the Sīmurgh, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection.

According to Niẓām a-Mulk the condition for the happiness of kings in this world and the other one is the aura given by God.[32] He states: "In every age and time God chooses one member of the human race and, having endowed him with godly and kingly virtues, entrusts him with the interests of the world and the well-being of the servants, He charges that person to close the doors of corruption, confusion and discord, and he imparts to him."[33]

In analyzing these quotes, four points become evident: First is the confluence of textualism and contextualism insofar as methodology is concerned. According to contextualists, such as the theorists of Marxism and sociology of knowledge, our understandings are reactions

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[29] ˙ Abbās ١٩٦٩, ٢٥.
[30] ˙ Abbās ١٩٦٩, ٨٠.
[31] Corbin ١٩٩٠, ١١٨.
[32] Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ٨١.
[33] Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ٩.

to the reality around us. Hence, there would be no essence to ideas such as the imamate. A theory of confluence, however, suggests that although a text should be interpreted in its context, religious concepts maintain their original essences. Secondly, in as-Suhrawardī's iteration, the *Shāh-nāma* and its hero, Rustam, are put in mystical terms, another example of content adapting to new historical circumstances. In fact, Suhrawardī has changed the position of Rustam from a hero to an example of mystical stories. Thirdly, most Iranian kings, including the most recent one, Muḥammad Riḍā Pahlavī (١٣٣٨-١٤٠٠/١٩١٩-١٩٨٠), have displayed a belief of sorts in the *farra* of kings. The main difference between pre-Islamic and Islamic notions of kingly *farra* is that the first was validated by Zoroastrianism, while the second was justified by Islam. Lastly, *farra* as a concept has itself changed over time. *Farra* was at least partially Islamized after the seventh century CE, and further on, lost some of its centrality following the fragmentation of the Islamic polity beginning in the tenth century CE. As mentioned before, Ṭabāṭabā'ī sees "continuation" in this regard, but the contention of this study has been that *farra* in the Islamic era should be interpreted in a more religious context. Over time, the *farra* of caliphs has been normalized and secularized, a development that is particularly noticeable in the Umayyad period.

Governance (*khashasra*)

    Khashasra (or *xsora*) is the nodal point of power in Iranian treatises on governance. In fact, Iranian kingship cannot be understood without this concept. As a concept, it has three components: firstly, as God's sovereignty or *khashasra vairiah*, secondly as beneficent power, or *hū khashasra,* and finally as evil power, or *dej khashasra.*

    Another good example for the influence of Iranian mirrors on the Islamic ones is the juxtaposition of Iranian viziers with Muslim kings (Arabs or Turks for the most part). Based on

the relationship between power and knowledge, Iranian viziers have advised Muslim kings in the framework of mirrors. Furthermore, Niẓām al-Mulk advocated for the division of power in the kingdom between the administrative and judicial branches, as well as a strictly hierarchical division of peoples into social classes, both reminiscent of pre-Islamic social organization. So, the form of hierarchical division of powers in the Islamic era is influenced by the pre-Islamic one.

For context, Ibn al-Muqaffaᶜ 's *Risāla fī al-ṣaḥāba*, which discusses specific problems confronting the newly-installed Abbasid regime may be instructive. While it may be true that this book should not be considered as a proper mirror for princes as Patricia Crone has argued,[34] its story of fallen princes and murdered viziers shows that "mirrors are kisses of death."[35]

Religion and Government

Religion and state are routinely considered as twins in Islamic as well as pre-Islamic eras. But, what is meant by this metaphor? Does it imply that governance should be in the hands of clerics? A close relationship between religion and government is not limited to Iran and Islam. As Yavari states in the case of *Siyāsat-nāma*:

> The veiled nature of advice that permeates this literature is reinforced by many ways in which politics and religion are mixed in medieval texts. The absence of political and religious spheres does not of course imply that the two are not separated. It only means that religion and politics are locked in a bitter struggle of power and authority, and that the political never succeeded on the religious unless it appropriated the form and content of religious arguments.[36]

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[34] Crone ٢٠٠٤, ٢٦٠.
[35] Yavari ٢٠٠٨a, ٦٨.
[36] Yavari ٢٠٠٨a, ٥٠.

This understanding is confirmed in *al-Adab al-saghīr*. There the prince is urged to promote men of religion to take advice, when necessary.[37]

The relationship between Niẓām al-Mulk and Malikshāh was like the one between a father and his son. Meanwhile Niẓām al-Mulk himself was the victim of plots in the court.[38] Obedience is due to kings, he argued, since God himself has so decreed: "Obey God, the Prophet and the rulers" (Q ٤:٥٩). The one who disobeys the rulers, opposes the Prophet, and the one who disobeys the Prophet, opposes God.[39] According to him, one of the king's duty is to be knowledgeable about the *sharī'a* and to honor men of religion.[40] The point is that he argued it by two quotations: the first is from Islamic narrations and the second is attributed to Ardashīr. According a hadith narrated from the Prophet: "٠ *ulamā'* [i.e. religious scholars] are trustees of me except when they obey the kings."[41] Ardashīr says: "The king who can't deal with the elite, can't improve other people's affairs."[42]

The relationship between religion and kingship in mirrors after the rise of Islam was colored by the *sharī'a*. Mirrors continued to be written after the rise of Islam for two reasons: the contradiction between *sharī'a* and political rationality on the one hand, and pursuing "power politics" on the other. Lambton has seen a continuation of the structure of Iranian governance in the Islamic period.[43] For this reason the historiographers al-Mas'ūdī and aṭ-Ṭabarī have used Iranian mirrors such as *Nāma-yi Tansar* in their chronicles.[44] As mentioned before, kingship was considered superior to religion in both pre-Islamic and Islamic treatises. Ardashīr himself had

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[37] Ibn al-Muqaffa' 2001, 293.
[38] Yavari ٢٠٠٨b, ٣٥٣.
[39] Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ٢٢.
[40] Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ٧٨.
[41] Majlisi ١٩٨٣, vol ٢, ١١٠.
[42] Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ٨٠.
[43] Lambton ١٩٨٨, ٧.
[44] Al-Mas'ūdī ١٩٩١, ٦٠.

specified the form of religious shrines and their social and political roles. The same pattern, i.e. the superiority of kingship to religion, persisted in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. Because of the centrality of government in the Abbasid period, al-Māwardī divided leadership into *istikfāʿ* and *istilāʿ*. He has distinguished two types of rule: one freely conferred by the caliph, *istikfāʿ*, and rule by conquest, *istilāʿ*. These types of governments should be understood in the context of Abbasid era. Imām Shushtarī, the modern Persian translator of the *Nāma-yi Tansar*, believes that all Islamic mirrors are influenced by Sassanid texts.⁴⁵ As we have seen, however, Islamic mirrors are not simple imitations of the Iranian ones. Although Islamic mirrors were influenced by latter, the confluence of text and context demands that they be interpreted in their proper social and political contexts, especially according to Foucault, in regard to the inter-relationship between power, knowledge, and religion.

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⁴⁵ Abbas ١٩٦٩, ١٣.

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