

*Character as Destiny: The Portrait of the Shah as a young man*

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He was born a soldier's son, grew into a reluctant king, and died a woeful pariah. He seemed forever ready to leave Iran, yet he ruled the country for thirty-seven years. In 1953 his absconding propensities nearly foiled the coup masterminded by British Intelligence and the CIA on his behalf.

In the West, he was known as "the Shah": A handsome *debonair*, a *bon vivant*, an enlightened despot, a would-be-modernist, and a minor polyglot, competent in both French and English. He was also at least partially responsible for the sharp rise in the price of oil in the 1970s. To his critics, which included many of his countrymen, he was a frivolous man, a pseudo-modernist, a repressive despot, all too tolerant of financial corruption in his family and friends, and a ward of the West. In contrast to his mastery of foreign languages, his Persian was infamous for its stranded articles, its dissonant verbs, and its incongruent syntax.

As Iran's oil revenue grew, so did his cult of personality. He insisted on being called the "King of Kings, the Light of the Aryans;" he grew more and more intolerant of "saucy minions." With the Western media, he became increasingly belligerent, often railing against what he called the failed "democracy of the blue-eyed world." In a now famous interview with Oriana Fallaci, he went so far as to claim that he was in direct communion with God. He also pontificated on his views about women. Though they made great strides during his reign, he subscribed to the theory of women's natural inferiority. They cannot even cook, said the modern monarch, and as proof, he observed

that the greatest chefs in the world were invariably men. (That was, of course, in the days before Alice Waters and her Chez Panisse).

His childhood was marred by the strictures of his father's unbending military discipline, and further cramped by the starchy solemnities of an upstart Court. He turned out to be, not surprisingly, a shy and timid man, one who rarely looked anyone in the eye. In his youth, as in much of his life, he was gaunt in countenance, vulnerable in physique, haunted by the specter of his imposing father. As he recounts in his ghostwritten memoir, *Mission for My Country*, he was emotionally bruised when he came to realize that his father had no trust in his ability to safely steer the ship of state. And in the classical pattern prophetically described by Philip Larkin—"They fuck you up, your mom and dad . . . But they were fucked up in their turn . . . Man hands on misery to man"—he in turn directed onto his son the same debilitating distrust his father had shown in him: On more than one occasion, he opined that the Crown Prince would not be able to manage the affairs of state.

Having received little love from his father, he craved the affection and adoration of others, and thus begot a spirit of sycophancy in those around him. During the height of his power, like Shakespeare's Richard II, "a thousand flatterers sit in his throne." At the same time, his early liberal training in a Swiss boarding school inculcated in him values ill at odds with the daily demeanor of his Court. As an authoritarian ruler, he was full of political braggadocio, regularly threatening his enemies and critics. Yet he abhorred violence, and was ever averse to using the requisite force necessary to maintain his despotic rule. He had the hesitant soul of a Hamlet, yet he put on the face of a Herod. His

strength as a human being was his weakness as a despot; a soft heart is poison to the constitution of a tyrant.

The Shah fancied himself a prophet or messiah, but spent the last months of his life a deposed despot and embittered man, fighting cancer and extradition and the man he had trusted with his money. He was also tormented by the suspicion that even his closest friend, his childhood companion, Hossein Fardoust, had betrayed him, playing Iago to his insecure Othello.

Even before this sobering endgame, he had been a man of few friends. In choosing them, he was hardly a discerning judge of character. In fact, he had a peculiar propensity for picking unsavory figures as “friends.”

At La Rosey, the young Mohammed Reza, for once free from the claustrophobic domination of his father, had a chance to choose a friend on his own. He chose a poor young boy, a Swiss national, and in an uncanny coincidence, he was, like Fardust, also the son of a gardener—one who worked on the grounds of La Rosey. His name was Ernest Perron and he was, even as a child, openly gay. Over the next fifteen years, he would remain the King’s constant companion. Every day, for about two hours, the two would be closeted together, behind closed doors. But when, in 1954, the intimate friend became a political liability, the Shah showed no compunction in suddenly cutting off all contact with him. He did not meet with or speak to Perron for the rest of the latter’s lonely and tormented life.

Mohammed Reza Shah’s strange choice of friends was not limited to these callow and youthful indiscretions. Even in the last two decades of his rule, at the zenith of his

power, when he considered himself a statesman of world stature, his choice of friends was no less unusual, and no less dizzyingly destructive.

The Shah rigorously pursued the modernization of the country's economy and of its infrastructure, and tolerated even the most experimental forms of post-modern art, he did not adhere to modern ideas about democracy. Giddy minds, he believed, could best be kept busy not just by wars, but also by economic affluence. He had particular affinity for Iranian farmers; his daily mood was often hostage to the weather report. Rain, as a blessing for the country's farms, brought a smile to his face, and sunshine, as a possible portent of an arid season, was a source of anxiety. In his unrelenting advocacy of his own peculiar notion of modernity, he provoked a revolution whose patriarch was a man bent on demodernizing Iran and establishing a theocratic autarky in the country. In short, the Shah was at once an enigmatic failure and a man who loved "not wisely, but too well."