8. Fire ordeal of Siyavush (76a)

While hunting in a forest, the Iranian warriors Tūs and Gīv come upon a beautiful maiden. She has run away from her father’s beating; she is of the kin of Garsvaz (brother of Afrasiyāb), and hence descended from Farīrūn. Tūs and Gīv begin to quarrel over possession of her, but decide to refer the matter to the king. Kay Ka’ūs is immediately enthralled by her beauty and chooses to take her for himself. The lady bears the king a son, Siyavush, whose upbringing is entrusted to Rustam in Zabolistan. At length Siyavush returns to court as a handsome and talented young man, and shortly after his mother dies. Sūdābah, another wife of Kay Ka’ūs, becomes infatuated with Siyavush. She schemes to draw him into the women’s quarters. When Siyavush rejects her advances, she tears her clothes, scratches her face, and accuses the prince to the king of trying to violate her. Kay Ka’ūs is not convinced. Sūdābah then claims that Siyavush has caused her to miscarry twins. Kay Ka’ūs is still in doubt and his adviser suggest that Siyavush should undergo ordeal by fire. The prince accepts this. Two enormous fires are built with a passage between them, and smoke and flames begin to rise. Siyavush is dressed in a white garment and a golden helmet, and seated upon a black horse; he sprinkles himself with camphor as preparation for a possible death; he does obeisance to his father, and prays to God for a safe passage through the fire. As the crowd wails and Sūdābah goes to the roof to watch, Siyavush sends his horse forwards, and disappears into the flames. The waiting people are engulfed in anguish:

‘As though a landscape all in blood were bathed,
Questioning: “Can he pass the fire unscathed?”

To a great roar, Siyavush emerges untouched. Sūdābah tears her hair, while Kay Ka’ūs embraces his son. Later, Kay Ka’ūs tells Sūdābah that he will have her hanged, while she accuses Siyavush of surviving the ordeal by sorcery. Siyavush pleads for her life; she is spared and continues to scheme against him.

As is usual, the amorphous crowd of the narrative is not shown, and attention is confined to Kay Ka’ūs and Sūdābah watching from the palace, and Siyavush below passing through the fire—the latter as ever shown as single. The blaze is rendered with flames in the Chinese tradition, and with more naturalistic smoke that seems to rise into sunny air. The figure of Siyavush, in white and on a black horse, though not wearing a helmet, is arresting. Opposites seem united in him: there is in the posture a balance between movement and stasis, and in the face both anxiety and confidence.