In the Old Avesta: Social Position and Textual Composition

Martin Schwartz

In memoriam Mary Boyce and Mary Douglas

This paper originated in a presentation for a conference on women in ancient Iran. My goal here is to examine the four Old Avestan passages bearing on the position of women in Archaic Iran. Of the six passages analyzed, two come from Gathic poems, Yasna A 46 and 53, and the others from Yasna Hapta 77bäti (YH) 35, 37, 39, and 41. I mean to illuminate the contents of these passages by detailing their compositional history and thereby their interrelationship.

We begin with Y46.10–11:

Y46.10  YV WA mOI nA  gynA WA mazdA ahurA
dAiiAT aMhVuS  YA tU WOistA WahiStA
aClm aCAl  WohU xSaQrvm manaMHa
YLscA haxSAi  xSmAuuatLm WahmAiA
frO tAiS WispAis  cinuuatO frafrA pvrvtUm

Y46.11  xSaqrAis YUjVn  karapanO kAuuatiascA
akAis KiiaqanAis  ahUm mvrvNgvidiiAis maClm
YVNg XV uruuA  XaEcA xraodaT daEnA
hiiaT aibI.gvmvn  YaQrA cinuuatO pvrvtuS
YauuOi Wispers  drUjO dvmAnAis astaiiO

Y46.10 ‘Whoever, [be it] man or woman, O Mazda Ahura, would give me
those things of existence which Thou knowest are best—Reward for
Rightness, power through Good Mind—and those whom I shall join
together for the eulogy of Those like You—with them all shall I cross
the Assigner’s Bridge.

Y46.11 ‘With their powers, the Karpans and Kavis yoke the mortal to bad
actions in order to destroy existence—those whom their own soul and
envisionment will vex when they come where the Assigner’s Bridge is,
as guests forever in the House of Wrong!’

Y46.10 is a return to the issue of lack of patronage, which is voiced in
the earlier part of the poem. What puts into clearer focus the hope for
patronage from either male or female is the fact that Y46.10 was originally
the last stanza of the original form of the poem corresponding to the present
Y46.2–10. This fact follows from the demonstration that [like other “proto-
poems” situated within the final poem.² Y46.2–10 form a complete complex ring composition within whose concentricism of concatenated stanzas the central and antipodal stanzas also concatenate.³ I now adduce a further proof for Y46.2–10 as a poem in its own right. As one of the earliest poems which Zarathushtra composed, Y46.2–10 was “seeded” by a bidirectional stanza-by-stanza recasting of lexical elements from the first-composed Gāthic poem, Y29 (see Appendix, Charts I and II) as part of a serial generation resulting in the entire corpus.⁴

That Y46.10 concluded Proto-Y46, which was subsequently expanded by the addition of stanzas 11–19 (and stanza 1), explains why the first part of the final poem [i.e. up to Y46.10] expresses a hope for patronage yet to be given by someone unknown, whereas stanzas 12–19 list a series of patrons, and conclude [18–19] with Zarathushtra’s confident promise of enmities as well as benefactions in reciprocity for treatment not only to Zarathushtra, but also to his community. Y46.18–19 restate and expand the contents of Y46.10, however without the phrase ‘man or woman’, all of the patrons acquired by Zarathushtra having been male. These are listed in stanzas 11–17, i.e. the inner stanzas of Y46.10–19, which is a complete poem (obligatorily constituted by the first stanza of the proto-poem plus the series of additional stanzas) in which 10 and 19 form the outer stanzas of the concatenating concentricism; at the precise center of the this composition, whose chief theme throughout is patronage, is set the name of the principal patron, Kauui Vištāspa.

It emerges from these compositional considerations that Y46.10, the proto-poem’s conclusion, was composed when Zarathushtra did not know who would be his patron and looked to either a man or a woman as potential supporter. It follows that in Zarathushtra’s society women as well as men could possess the wealth and prestige that characterize a patron.

[TYPESETTER: SUBHEAD LEVEL 1.]

II

The context of our next passage, Y53.5–7, is a hymn composed upon the occasion of the wedding of ‘Pourucistā, youngest of Zarathushtra’s daughters’ (Y53.4a–b). Some preliminary commentary on the text is in order.

For Y53.4a’ I read *tʰ76m zi vʰ79 ... nīuuarānī ‘For I entrust her to you’, with *tʰ76m ‘her’ instead of tʰ79m ‘him’ [a misreading based on tʰ79m ‘him [the bridegroom]’ in the parallel position at Y53.3a’]. I take nīuuarānī- ‘I entrust’, with nīuura- */ni vara- from ṣvar ‘to opt for belief’ (cf. Chart III, Y53.4a’ nīuuarānī: Y30.6b’ varənātā ‘they opted’). Y53.4a’ vʰ79 ‘to you’ probably refers to Kauui Vištāspa, Zarathushtra’s son Spitāma, and Frašaoštra [whose brother Djāmāspa is traditionally regarded as the bridegroom], who are addressed at Y53.2c. For mss. hapax sāxʰ79nī, I read *saxʰ79nī plural. of saxʰ-an- ‘proclamation’ [reflected throughout Middle Iranian] alongside Y29.4a’ saxʰær⁷⁹ [*collective], from ṣanh ‘to proclaim’, not ṣāh ‘to teach’; cf. Chart III, Y53.6a” * sāxʰ⁷⁹nī : Y30.8c” sastē.
[TYPESETTER: TYPESET THE NON-ENGLISH SECTIONS HERE.]

53.4 *tLm zI WV spvrvdA niuuarAnI YAYAfvDrOi WIdAT
paqiyaEca WAstriaEibiiO aTcAXaEttauE
aCAunI aCauuabiiO manaMHO WaMHVuS XVnuuaT haMHuS
mVm.bVvduS
mazdl dadAT ahurO daEnaiAi WaMHuiAi YauuOi WIsPaI.A

Y53.5 sAXVnI WaziiammAbiiO kainibiiO mraomi
xSmaibiiAcA WadvnnnO mVNCaI mLzdadUm
WaEdO.dUm daEnAbIS abiiascA ahUm YV WaMHVuS
manaMHO
aCA WV aniiO ainIm WIuuVNgvatU taT zI hOi huSVvnvm aMhaT

Y53.6 iQA I haiqiiA narO aqA iVnaiiO
drUjO hacA rAqymO YVMV spaSuqA frAidIm
drUjO6 AiesE hOIS6 piqA tanuuO parA
WaiiT bvrvdbiiO duS XavqVvm nLSaTXAqvvm
drvguuuO.dvbiIO DVjIT.arvtaEibiiO anAiS A manahIm ahUm
mrvrNgvduiiE

Y53.4 ‘For I entrust (dedicate) her to you (for her to be) with that zeal with which she would provide for father, husband, pasturers, and family, (as) a woman righteous to righteous people. By virtue of Good Mind, Mazdā Ahura will give a sunny harvest ... for the good envisionment, forever.

Y53.5 ‘I speak (in) proclamations, addressing you maidens who are to be married. Give mind to these things, possess them with your envisionments, and (thus possess) the existence [realm] of Good Mind. May you win one another with Rightness, for that will be for it good gain.

Y53.6 ‘Thus are these things true, O men, so, O women. As for the adherent of Wrong whom you see profiteering[?], I shall remove the protections from his body. For such persons as they raise howls[?], bad food shall overtake their comfort, those worsome ones, the ruiners of Rightness. Through such people will you destroy your spiritual existence.’

The moral message is directed to both men and women.

[TYPESETTER: SUBHEAD LEVEL 1.]

III
The four passages in the Yasna Hapta^77hāiti which bear on women juxtapose nar- ‘man’ and its derivative nāirī- ‘woman’ in the phrases nar^76mcā nāirin^76mcā at YH37.3 and YH39.2, and nā vā nāirī vā ‘man or woman’ at YH35.6 and YH41.2. The juxtaposition of cognate forms,
coordinative and contrastive, is typical of the YH. Thereby nā vā nāĩrī vā differs from Y46.10a y^79 vā ... nā gnā vā (where gnā may perhaps have the nuance ‘noble woman, lady’). The phrase nā gnā is a collocation favored by its rhyme; cf. Y53.6a narō ... j^79naiiō, where j^79naiiō, plural of /jani-/ (where gnā was probably selected for prosodic reasons. As we shall now see, the phraseological parallelism between YH35.6 and Y46.10 ‘man or woman’ is not accidental.

YH 35.6 Yaɓā a^123 utā nā vā nāĩrī vā vaëdā haiīm aɓā ha^123 vohū ta^123 ɣ9aعالم vәɾәziiiptables i^123 ahmāi fracā vәɾәziiiptables i^123 әibiiyō yōi i^123 aɓā vәɾәzii^76n yaɓā i^123 astī

‘Now when a man or woman knows something [as being] true, this being so, then let him/her cultivate it for himself/herself as a good cereal-grain, and let him/her bring about awareness of it, so that others will cultivate it, just as it is.’

In accordance with the YH style of multiplying variant forms of the same root or stem, we find, in addition to nā ... nāĩrī, yaɓā ... aɓā, and vәɾәziiiptables ... vәɾәzii^76n, the framing etymological figure haiīm ‘true’ ... yaɓā i^123 astī ‘just as it is’. As for a relationship between YH35.6 and Y46.10, suggested by the shared phrase meaning ‘man or woman’, I would now bring into considerations of this question my recent independent observation that the phraseology of YH35.3–4 and YH36.8–YH36.2 draws sequentially upon the phraseology of Y49.3–8 [Schwartz 2006b, 283–84, schematically summarized below in Chart VI].

It is precisely the gap between YH35.4 and YH35.8 which is filled by verses reflecting the phraseology of Y46.10 and its close environs. Thus, in addition to YH35.6 and Y46.10 ‘man and woman’, YH35.6 vaëdā ‘knows’ compares with Y46.10b” vәĩstә ‘knowest’, the repetition of xәәра- ‘power, dominion, rule’ in YH35.5 huxәәro.tәmәi ... xәәrem ‘dominion ... to Him who most has good dominion’ compares with Y46.10c” xәәrem countered by Y46.11a’ xәәrәiʃ; YH35.7 am^79hmaidә furnishes a unique correspondence for Y46.13e” m^79hmaidә ‘we have considered’; while YH35.7 vahmәm ‘eulogy’, the object of the former word, corresponds to Y46.10d” vahmәį.ә.

In YH35.5–7, the entrance of lexical material from Y46.10–13 and particularly the closely linked pair Y46.10–11, in a kind of substitutive diversion from the material from Y49, is to be explained as a conflation between the relevant portions of Y49 and its source-text, Y46. The close bidirectional relationships between the two texts culminate in recastings which are both notably precise in their detail and are in proximity to two recastings, in each direction, of forms of xәәra- and manah- (mana^77h-). Forwards, Y46.10c” xәәrem > Y49.11a’ -xәәr^79^138g; Y46.10c” mana^77hә
> Y49.11b" mana\^77stailō [see Appendix, Chart IV]. Backwards, Y46.11a’ x\asha\^traiś > Y49.8c" x\asha\^trōi; Y46.11a’ yūį\^79n > Y49.9c" yūį\^79n; Y46.10c” x\asha\^rom > Y49.10d’ -x\asha\^trā; and Y46. 10c” mana\^77hā > Y49.11a’ mana\^77hō [see Appendix, Chart V].

The interrelationships between the two Gothic poems of Zarathushtra brought about for the anonymous author of the Yasna Hāpta\^77hāiti a cluster of mnemonic associations which resulted in the above-noted “diversion” from Y49 to Y46 in the incorporation of Gothic lexical materials in YH35.5–7.

In addition to its dependence on Y46.10 seq., YH35.6 seq. evidences a similar relationship to Y53.3–6, again involving mnemonic associations of similar items. In both YH35.6 yaθā ... nā vā nāirī vā haitōm aθā and Y53.6 Ḣ\^ā Ḣ haitōi nārō aθā j\^79naiiō we have co-occurrence of the phrase ‘man/men and/or woman/women’ with haitōiia- ‘true’ and with correlation of the particles in -tā.

Furthermore, YH35.7 mazd\^ā yasn\^ēmcā vahn\^ēmcā ‘worship and eulogy of Mazdā’ seems to echo Y53.2b’ mazd\^ā vahnāi. ā ... yasn\^76scā. The mediating associative item is identifiable as Y46.10d” vahnāi. ā. Note also Y35.9 paitiiastārōm ‘attender[?]’ cognate of the Gothic hapax Y53.3c’ paitiiastīm ‘attendance[?]’. In addition, the striking image of the cereal-grain (a\^79ādā-) in YH35 excellently suits derivation from Y53.4 ‘the sunny harvest of Good Mind’ [although this does not necessitate taking the problematic m\^79m.b\^79āduś as *[-]79ādā-]. The association between the relevant section of Y53 and Y46 is attributable to the similarity of the phrases Y53.6e” ahūm mərō\^138gōdīīiē and Y46.11b” ahūm mərō\^138gōdīīiē, both ‘destroy existence’.

YH37.3 (t\^79m) a\^137aun\^76m frauua\^137īs nar\^76mcā nāirīn\^76mcā yazamāidē ‘(Him) we worship the frauua\^137īs of righteous men and women’ [where tsm is repeated from the stanza’s preceding incipits], in a text which otherwise is devoted to Mazdā and his aspects, must be a Young Avestan interpolation [based on the stanza’s foregoing mention of ‘names’]. The elimination of the frauua\^137īs from the Yasna Hāpta\^77hāiti allows comparison with the Gathas, which mention only souls, but not frauua\^137īs; cf. the next item to be discussed.

Y39.2 a\^137āun\^76m āa\^123 urunō yazamāidē kudō.zātan\^76mcī\^123 nar\^76mcā nāirīn\^76mcā yaēś\^76m vahehiś daēnā vānaī\^138ti vā v\^79\^138/ghan vā vaonar\^79 vā

‘We worship the souls of men and women wherever they are born, whose better envisionsments win, will win, and have won’. 
The worship here of souls of both men and women contrasts with the Vedic cult of the Pitara ‘Fathers’ and the Greek cult of heroes, but finds its Young Avestan continuation in the Farvardin Yašt’s [Yt13] long name-lists of righteous women whose fraua[^137]is are worshipped. Y39.2 daēnā vanai[^138]tī etc. may now be derived from the earlier collocation of daēnā-pl. ‘envisionments’ and ṣvan ‘to win’ at Y53.5c–d.

Finally we come to YH41.2:

ḥuxšaθrastū n[^79] nā vā nāiṅī vā xšaētā ubōiō a[^77]hūū hāt[^76]m hudāstōmā

‘May a good ruler, man or woman, rule over us in both existences, O Thou most beneficent[^12] of beings!’

Compositionally, this passage in the last poem of the Yasna Hapta[^77]hāiti hearkens back, in the manner of a loose ring-composition[^13], to the section of the first poem, YH35, which includes the phrase ‘man or woman’ in stanza 6. For this ring-compositional relationship, note that YH41.2 huxšaθra- ‘good ruler’, more precisely ‘one having good rule’, corresponds to its superlative in YH35.5 huxšaθrō.tōmāi xšaθrōm ‘[we give and allot...] rule to Him Who most has good rule’, whose additional reference to Mazdā Ahura’s rule (xšaθra-) has its analog in the incipit of YH41.2, vohū xšaθrōm tōi mazdā ahurā apaēmā vīspāi yauuē ‘may we obtain Thy good rule, O Mazdā Ahura, for all time’. The phrase YH41.1 dadāmahicā cišmahicā ‘we give and allot’ is repeated from YH35.5. In the final stanza, YH41.6, sarōm a[^137]ahīīā (vīspāi yauuē) ‘Rightness’ union [for all time’], which matches Y49.8 a[^137]ahīīā ... sarōm (... yauuī vīspāī), correlates with Y35.8 a[^137]ahīīā ... saṅī ‘in Rightness’ union’. YH41.2 ubōiīō a[^77]hūū matches YH35.3 ubōiīā ahūbīīā and indicates that the rule by man or woman extends to both realms of existence in this world.[^14]

Combining the evidence of YH41.2 with the related material from Y46, Y53, YH35.6, and YH39.2, we arrive at the clear conclusion that in the early Iranian society which is reflected in the Old Avesta, women, as much as men, were regarded as qualified for being not only patrons but even rulers, and were regarded in general as participants in both secular and spiritual life, and were ritually memorialized for their achievements. In bringing forth this evidence from arcane and obscure texts, it is hoped that these realia of egalitarianism in most ancient Iran will enter the light of social history and, as much as possible, have a role in human progress.

[TYPESETTER: TYPESET CHARTS. SEE PDF FILE.]

Appendix
Chart I

Y29 (forwards) > Proto-Y46

Y29.1a' gvrzD  
Y29.1c' sLtA  
Y29.2a' gVuS  
Y29.3a' paitI.mraua  
Y29.4c' WicirO  
Y29.5a' frInvm  
Y29.5c' drvg  
Y29.6a' WaocaT  
Y29.6b' nOiT  
Y29.7a' taSa ... gau  
Y29.7c' YV ... dAi  

Chart II

Y29 (forwards) > Proto-Y46 (backwards)

Y29.1c' xSmaT  
Y29.2a' taSA gVuS  
Y29.3a' paitI.mraua  
Y29.4b' pairI ciqI,  
Y29.5c' fra-jiiAit  
Y29.6a' WaocaT  
Y29.7c' dAi  
Y29.8b' huuO  
Y29.9c' auuO  
Y29.10a' xSaqr  

*Y29.11b' aM  

Chart III

Y30 > Y53

Y30.1a' iSvNtO  
Y53.1a' ISt  

\[\sqrt{i}S \text{ 'be in motion, on a mission, seek'}\]
Y30.2a' srAotA Y53.1a' srAuuI √sr(a)u ‘to hear’
Y30.2a' WahiStA Y53.1a' WahiStA ‘best things’
Y30.3b manahi-ca Wacahi-ca Y53.2a'-a” manaMhO uxDAiS ‘mind, word (uk/Wac),
KiaqanOi and action’
Y30.3c hu-dlMhO ... Y53.2d’ dlMhO ‘doer[s]’
Y30.4c” WahiStvm manO Y53.3c’ WaMhViS ... manaMhO
‘Good/Best Mind’
Y30.5a WaraT ... WrvziiO Y53.3d” WarSuuA17 √War ‘opt’, √Warz ‘to effect’
Y30.5b’ spVniStO Y53.3d” spVniStA ‘holiest’
Y30.6b’ WrvnAtA Y53.4a’ ni-uuarAnI √War ‘opt’
for, believe in’
Y30.7c’ aMhAT Y53.5d” aMhA ‘will be’
Y30.8c’ sastE Y53.6a’ sAXVnI = *sAXVnI √sanh ‘proclaim’
Y30.9c” ahUm Y53.6d” ahUm ‘existence [acc.]’
Y30.9c” aMhAT Y53.7a’ aMhA ‘will be’
Y30.10b” hu-SitOiS Y53.8c” SiieitiibiiO *Siti-
‘dwelling’
Y30.11b’ X-itI (Vnv)itI Y53.9c” WasV.-itOiS iti- ‘a going’
Y30.11c’ aCauuabiiO Y53.9c’ aCauuA ‘righteous’

Chart IV

Y46 > Y49 (forwards)

Y46.1c’ xSnAuS, Y49.1b’ cixSnuSA xSn(a)u-S- ‘to satisfy in reciprocity’
e” xSnOaSAi Y49.1c A ... rapA √rap ‘to support’
Y46.2d’ rafvDrVm Y49.1c A ... rapA √rap ‘to
Y46.3b’ darvqrAi Y49.2c’ dOrvSt √dar ‘to hold’
Y46.3e” WrvnE Y49.3a” WarvnAi W(a)r-n- ‘to opt’
Y46.4a’ drvguul Y49.3d” drvguuuatO ‘wrongsome’
Y46.4c’ duZazObl Y49.4b’ hizubiS √zU/zU’a ‘to invoke’18
Y46.4d’ xSaqrAT Y49.5d’ xSaqrOi ‘Dominion’
Y46.5b” huzvNtuS Y49.5c” huzvNtuS ‘(good)
kinsman’
Y46.5d’ mruiiAT Y49.6a” mrUitE √mrU ‘to speak’
Y46.6e’ daEnl Y49.6d’ daEnlm ‘envisionment’
Y46.6e” dl Y49.7d” dAT √dA ‘establish’
Y46.7a” dadl Y49.8a” dl
Y46.8c" paitiaogvT Y49.9c" YUjVn, √Y(a)ug/j ‘to yoke’
Y46.9c" aCauuanvm Y49.10b" aCAunLm ‘righteous’
Y46.10c" xSaqrvm Y49.11a’ -xSaqrvNg ‘dominion’
Y46.10d" manaMhA Y49.11b" -manaMhVNg ‘mind’
Y46.11e" drUjO dvmAnAi

for/in the House

astaiiO

Y46.12b" friiAnahiiA Y49.12c" frInAi √frI ‘be near and dear’

Chart V

Y46 (backwards) > Y49

Y46.19d’ -WistAiS Y49.1d” WidA √Wid ‘to obtain’
Y46.19a’ aCAT Y49.2a’ aCAT ‘from Rightness’
Y46.18d" WArvm Y49.3a’ WarvnAi √War ‘to wish/opt’
Y46.17d” dAqvm Y49.3a” nl-dAtvm √dA ‘to lay down’
Y46.16e” Warvdmlm Y49.4a” Warvdvn √Ward ‘to increase’
Y46.16e’ mazdI Y49.5a’ mazdA ‘Mazda’
Y46.16d WaMhVuS ... Y49.5b’ WohU ... manaMhA ‘Good Mind’

manaMhO

Y46.16d” xSaQrvm Y49.5d” xSaQrOi ‘Dominion’
Y46.16c” ArmatiSi Y49.5c’ ArmatOiS ‘Concordant Mind’
Y46.16e’ aCA Y49.5d” aCA ‘with Rightness’
Y46.15b’ WicaiiaqA Y49.6c’ Wlciidiai ‘WI + √c(a)indo

‘discriminate’
Y46.14b” (fra)sruuidiiAi Y49.7a” sraotU √sr(a)u ‘to hear’
Y46.13b” (fra)sruuidiiAi Y49.7b” sraotU sr(a)u ‘to hear’
Y46.12e” sastE Y49.7d’ fra-sastIm (-)sast(a)i-
‘proclaiming’
Y46.11a xSaQrAiS Y49.8c’ xSaQrOi ‘Dominion’
Y46.11a YUjVn Y49.9c” YUjVn ‘they yoke’
Y46.10e xSaQrvm Y49.10d” -xSaQrA ‘Dominion’
Y46.10e manaMhA Y49.11a manaMhO ‘mind’
Y46.9e iSvNtI Y49.12d iStA iS ‘be in motion, on a mission, seek’
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