

Workshop 8

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The Cerulli Collection of Persian Manuscripts and the Dramatic Representation of the Devil in *Taziyeh*

The Cerulli Persian Collection at the Vatican Library is the largest archive of Shi‘ite passion plays, or *ta‘ziyeh* manuscripts, comprising 1055 texts (some of which are fragments). These scripts were collected by Enrico Cerulli, the Italian orientalist, during his tenure as Italy’s ambassador to Iran between November 1950 and April 1954. The predominant subject of these dramas is the tragic events involving Shia saints, particularly the martyrdom of the third Shia Imam at Karbala. Cerulli’s stay in Iran coincided with a period of modernization under the Pahlavi dynasty, during which *ta‘ziyeh* reached its nadir, despised by both orthodox clergy and secularist intellectuals. As a result, this dramatic art, once celebrated in the courts of the Qajar kings, was relegated to margins.

The manuscripts in the Cerulli collection originate from urban areas across various cities in Iran. While they are primarily written in Persian, about thirty are in Azeri Turkish or a mixed Persian-Turkish language, and four plays contain passages in Arabic. In present-day Iran, where the discourse of Ashura and Husain’s uprising is extensively used in the Islamic regime’s propaganda, the core plays of this repertoire, particularly those depicting the martyrdom of Husain Ibn Ali, are still performed during the first ten days of Muharram. However, the repertoire also includes many other plays that are not directly related to the events of Ashura.

These less frequently performed plays, known as *majales-e gharib*, cover a diverse range of subjects. This paper focuses on one of the most enduring figures in these plays: Satan, or Iblis, a character present since the creation of Adam and the Garden of Eden. The paper examines various aspects of this figure, including the context in which Satan appears, the manner of its representation in *ta‘ziyeh*, the evolution of this portrayal over time, and the costume and masks used in its depiction. Additionally, it explores how this character relates to the main antagonists in the core plays of the repertoire and how the Persian Div influenced the formation of the Islamic Satan. To address these questions, the research draws not only on *ta‘ziyeh* texts but also on Persian epic poems, religious murals in mausoleums and *tekyehs*, and the painted screens of *naqals* and *pardehkhans*.
