



CHAMPION, JOSEPH

CHAMPION, JOSEPH, ESQ. (b. London? ca. 1750, d. London? ca. 1813), English poet and translator of selections from the *Šāh-nāma* and other Persian poetry.

Champion was the son of Joseph Champion, of a Bristol Quaker family, by his second wife (Owen, pp. 38, 40, 41-42); he was thus a younger half-brother of Richard Champion (1743-91), merchant, porcelain manufacturer, and prominent supporter of Edmund Burke. Champion attended Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, for at least a year in 1769-70 and may have remained there until 1773, though there is no record of his having taken a degree (Venn, p. 6; Owen, p. 107); he apparently planned a literary career (letter from R. Champion, *Letterbooks*, 15 December 1769).

In 1773 financial necessity forced him to accept a posting to “the most unwholesome Settlement” of the East India Company, at “Bencoolen” (Bengkulu) on the west coast of Sumatra (letter from J. Champion, *Letterbooks*, 16 April 1774; cf. letter from R. Champion, *Letterbooks*, 17 December 1774). His early poetry included *The Progress of Freedom and Envy*, both published in London in 1776 (Allibone, p. 366; Halkett and Laing, p. 176; cf. *New Catalogue*, p. 329). In 1778 the Company posted him to Calcutta in a junior capacity (*Fort William VIII*, pp. 124, 161, 166); he eventually rose to the position of senior merchant (*Fort William XI*, p. 470). In 1780 he married Anne Forbes, “the handsomest woman that ever left Europe for India” (“Obituary,” p. 576) in Calcutta. It is not known when or how he became interested in Persian literature, but it was during these years that he published his most important works in this field (see below). He became a member of the Asiatic Society of



Bengal in 1784, the year it was founded by Sir William Jones and several colleagues (See [BENGAL ii. Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal](#)), but does not appear to have been active in its affairs.

After Champion's wife died, in October 1791 ("Obituary," p. 576) at the age of twenty-eight (Derozario, p. 46), he apparently suffered some kind of breakdown, sailing for England on the *Queen* on 25 November. In January 1792 the Calcutta directors of the company wrote to the Court of Directors in London asking for a subsistence allowance for him during the "suspension . . . of his mental faculties" and no loss of rank should he return to his duties (*Fort William XI*, p. 470; cf. p. 458, XII, p. 66). He appears not to have returned; although in 1799 and 1802 he was again listed among the members of the Asiatic Society (*Asiatic Researches* 6, 1801, p. 603; 7, 1803, p. 506), he was still in England at the end of 1800 (*East India Kalendar*, p. 20), and, according to pension books at the India Office Library in London, the firm continued to pay an allowance to his guardians until his death, probably in the first quarter of 1813.

Champion's three books devoted to Persian literature, *Poems Imitated from the Persian*, *The Poems of Ferdosi* (FIGURE 1), and *Essays Characteristic of Persian Poetry*, were all first published in India. The earliest contains a number of English odes in imitation of the poems of Ḥāfeẓ, mostly on the theme of wine and drinking. The second and most important of the three works is an abridged excerpt of the *Šāh-nāma*, apparently the first of a projected series of volumes, in rhymed couplets and iambic pentameter. The third work consists of a series of essays in verse after the manner of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism." It expresses the author's enthusiasm for Persian poets and the genres of Persian poetry, in contrast to the works of classical Greek and Roman poets and certain English poets of the Renaissance and subsequent generations.

The Poems of Ferdosi attracted considerable attention when it was published and continues to merit discussion. Both in his general view of Persian epic poetry and in his verse translations Champion emulated Pope's translations from Homer. In a dedicatory ode to Jones he expressed the predominant 18th-century view of Ferdowsī's position in Oriental literature as comparable to that of Homer in the Western tradition:

For *Homer* only did the epic muse,



Weave the bright wreath, impearl'd in Orient dews.
 For our *Ferdosi* did the fates design,
 The Poet's crown, and fancy's richest mine.
 Does *Hector* or *Achilles* rage in fight?
 A *Rustem* equals with undaunted might!
 Do envious gods the fierce contention raise?
Aherman rises, and the dæmons blaze!

Jones, however, never made any reference to Champion's work in his own later discourses on the poetry of Ferdowsī.

All three of Champion's books were reviewed extensively in English journals, though not very enthusiastically. The assessment of *The Poems of Ferdosi* in *The Monthly Review* of August 1790 is typical: The anonymous reviewer hailed the introduction of "the Persian Homer" to English readers as opening "the prospect of a new poetic world" and speculated that, once Eastern literatures were sufficiently known, they might well "diminish our fond admiration of the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans." About Champion's translation, on the other hand, he warned the reader "against raising his expectations to a high degree," concluding that "much of the spirit of Ferdosi is probably evaporated" (cf. *New Catalogue*, pp. 329-31).

Indeed, Champion's verse translations, uneven in quality and laden with cumbersome and repetitive rhymes and numerous lexical archaisms, appear out of step with the changing aesthetics of the late 18th century. Nonetheless, he displayed a keen awareness of the general historical development and characteristic features of classical Persian poetry.

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