



HAFT PEYKAR

HAFT PEYKAR, a famous romantic epic by Nezami of Ganja (Nezāmi Ganjavi) from the last decade of the 6th/12th century. The title can be translated literally as “seven portraits,” but also with the figurative meaning of “seven beauties.” Both translations are meaningful and the poet doubtless exploited intentionally the ambiguity of the words.

Editions and translations. The *Haft peykar* has come down to us as part of the *Āmsa*, the posthumous collection of Nezami’s narrative poems. A critical edition of the *Haft peykar* was produced by Helmut Ritter and Jan Rypka (Prague, printed Istanbul, 1934) on the basis of fifteen *Āmsa* manuscripts and the Bombay lithograph of 1265. This is one of the very few editions of a classical Persian text that uses a strict text-critical methodology: the editors divided the principal manuscripts into two families (called ‘a’ and ‘b’). Only those verses shared by both families are regarded as authentic. The ‘b’ family is taken as the main basis for the edition, with those verses missing in the ‘a’ family printed in square brackets. The verses specific to the ‘a’ family are printed in the critical apparatus. More recently, the *Haft peykar* was re-edited by the Azerbaijani scholar T. A. Magerramov (Maharramov) (Moscow, 1987). This edition quotes variants from fourteen manuscripts, the Ritter/Rypka edition and the uncritical edition by Waḥīd Dastgerdī (Tehran, 1315 Š./1936 and reprints), but Magerramov made no attempt to divide the manuscripts into families and in this regard his version is a step backwards from the Prague edition. There is also an edition by Barāt Zanjāni (Tehran, 1373 Š./1994), but the present writer has not been able to consult it. In the following,



all references are to chapter and line of the Prague edition.

There are three complete translations in western European languages. First, the one in very rough English “blank verse” by C. E. Wilson (*The Haft paikar*, 2 vols., London, 1924, with extensive notes), wherein the post-Victorian translator felt compelled to render a fairly large number of verses in Latin. Second, an Italian prose version by A. Bausani (*Le sette principesse*, Bari, 1967), based on the critical edition by Ritter/Rypka, with omission of the bracketed verses. And finally an English version by J. S. Meisami (*The Haft Paykar, a medieval Persian Romance*, Oxford and New York, 1995), in “free verse” (partially rhymed, partially in near-rhymes, partially unrhymed) based on the Ritter/Rypka edition (but retaining the bracketed verses). There are also versions in Russian prose (R. Aliyev, Baku, 1983) and verse (V. Derzhavin, Moscow, 1959 and reprints). Of the various partial translations it might suffice to mention the one by R. Gelpke in very elegant German prose (*Die sieben Geschichten der sieben Prinzessinnen*, Zurich, 1959), also in English metatranslation by E. Mattin and G. Hill (*The Story of the Seven Princesses*, Oxford, 1976).

Date and dedication. The *Haft peykar* is probably Nezami’s last work (see the discussion in [ESKANDAR- NĀMA](#)). The manuscripts of the superior ‘b’ recension contain a dedication to the ruler of Marāḡa, ‘Alā’-al-Dīn Kōrpe-Arslān b. Aq-Sonqor (he is named in V. 12), who is known to have died in 604/1208 (see Storey/de Blois V, p. 441, n. 2), and the date of completion is indicated in LIII, 63-64 with the words: “three conjunctions after five hundred and ninety I recited this book like the famous (poets of the past), on the fourteenth day of the month of fasting, when four hours of the day were complete,” evidently meaning on 14 Ramadan 593 (early August 1197). This is probably correct. But the manuscripts of the ‘a’ recension have altered (or miscopied?) the name of the dedicatee to Qizil Arslān, retained the verse giving the day, month and hour of completion, but altered the year to “after *tā* (variant: *tā*) and *ṣād* and *ḥē*” i.e., either “after 498” (which is much too early) or “after 598/1202.”

Synopsis of the frame-story. The *Haft peykar* is a romanticized biography of the Sasanian ruler Bahrām-e Gūr. His adventurous life had already been treated in Persian verse by Ferdowsi in the *Šāh-nāma*, to which fact Nezami alludes a number of times. In general, his method is to omit those episodes that the earlier poet had treated, or to touch on them only very briefly, and to concentrate in new material.



After the customary long introductory sections, the poet gives an account of the birth of Bahrām, the often-told story of his upbringing at the court of the Arab king No‘mān (here, as often, mislocated in the Yemen instead of al-Ḥira) and the construction of No‘mān’s fabled palace, K̲varnaq. Reared in the desert, Bahrām becomes a formidable huntsman. Wandering through the palace, Bahrām discovers a locked room containing the portraits of seven princesses, one from each of the seven climes, with whom he immediately falls in love. Bahrām’s father Yazdgerd (i.e. Yazdegerd I) dies, and Bahrām returns to Persia to claim his throne from a pretender. After much palaver he is recognized as king. He rescues his people from a famine. Next Nezami picks up the story of Bah-rām’s hunting expedition with the loose-tongued slave-girl Feṭna, but alters the version known from the *Šāh-nāma* considerably; here the girl is not put to death, but eventually pardoned, and the king learns a lesson in clemency. The king sets out in search of the seven princesses and wins them as his brides. He orders his architect to construct seven domes to house his new wives. The craftsman tells him that each of the climes is ruled by one of the seven planets and advises him to assure his good fortune by adorning each dome with the color associated with the clime and planet of its occupant. The king is at first skeptical but eventually lets the architect have his way. The princesses take up residence in the splendid pavilions. The king visits each princess on successive days of the week: on Saturday the Indian princess, who is governed by Saturn, in the black dome, on Sunday the Greek princess, who is governed by the sun, in the yellow dome, and so on. Each princess regales the king with a story matching the mood of her respective color. These seven beautifully constructed, highly sensuous stories occupy about half of the whole poem.

Years pass. While the king is busy with his wives an evil minister seizes power in the realm. Eventually Bahrām discovers that the affairs of the kingdom are in disarray, the treasury is empty and the neighboring rulers poised for invasion. To clear his mind, he goes hunting in the steppe. Returning from the hunt he comes across a herdsman who has suspended his dog from a tree. He asks him why. The shepherd tells the story of how the once faithful watchdog had betrayed his flock to a she-wolf in return for sexual favors. The king realizes that his own watchdog (the evil minister) is the cause of his misfortune. He investigates the minister. From the multitude of complainants he selects seven, who tell him of the injustices that they have suffered (the stories of the seven victims are the somber counterweight to the stories of the seven princesses). The minister is put to death. The king restores justice, and



orders the seven pleasure-domes to be converted into fire temples for the worship of God. Bahrām goes hunting one last time and disappears mysteriously into a cavern. He seeks the wild ass (*gūr*) but finds his tomb (*gūr*).

General characteristics. In his introduction to the critical edition, Ritter described the *Haft peykar* as “the best and most beautiful epic in New Persian poetry and at the same time . . . one of the most important poetical creations of the whole of oriental Indo-European literature,” a judgment with which it is difficult to disagree. The poet made artful use of various older sources, among them the *Šāh-nāma* and other versions of ancient Iranian history and legend, also the *Siāsat-nāma* of Neẓām-al-Molk, from which he took the crucial story of the shepherd and his unfaithful dog. It is possible that the seven stories told by the princesses derive from earlier works, but it has not actually been possible to trace any of them to known literary sources. Nezami’s telling of the stories has in any event had great influence on the later development of Persian literature and world literature; for example the story told by the fourth (Russian) beauty is the oldest known, and arguably best, version of the tale of the cruel princess who is unnamed in Nezami’s version, but known in Pétis de la Croix’s translation of a later retelling as Turāndoḳt (Turandot; see, e.g., Meier).

Nezami’s *Haft peykar* is a masterpiece of erotic literature, but it is also a profoundly moralistic work. In some modern studies it has been regarded more or less as a versified treatise on astrology, but this is a misapprehension. The point of the story is clearly that Bahrām’s attempt to find happiness by living in accordance with the stars is a failure. The seven domes are built in perfect accord with the properties of the stars, but they are very nearly the cause of his downfall. In the end it is only justice that matters. Only by abandoning the pleasures represented by the seven domes and heeding the complaints of the seven victims of tyranny does Bahrām acquire the status of a true hero. And the essentially anti-fatalistic message is underlined by the story of the second (Greek) princess, which tells of a king who, because of an unhappy horoscope, had foresworn marriage, but then is led by the selfless love of a slave-girl to defy the astrologers and take his fate in his own hands.

Although there are mystic (Sufic) traits in the narrative (notably in the story of the seventh victim) it is also misguided to regard it, with some, as a Sufic allegory. It is a work of art that is very firmly rooted in this world, and its ethical content is of essentially worldly, not religious, nature.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Editions and translations are assessed in this article. For further studies see Storey/de Blois, pp. 485-87.

See also *Iranšenāsi* 3/4, Winter 1992 (special issue on Nezāmi, primarily devoted to *Haft Pey-kar*ZDMG 95, 1941, pp. 1-27.