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ŠĀH-NĀMA TRANSLATIONS III. INTO ENGLISH

The numerous and varied English versions of the *Šāh-nāma* can be divided into two groups: direct translations from the Persian and adaptations of earlier translations.

Direct translation from the Persian

Ferdowsi's name, along with those of Hafez and Saʿdi, has been known in the West since the mid-17th century through travelers' accounts, but his epic the *Šāh-nāma* was first introduced to English readers by Sir William Jones (1746-94), who, in his many essays on Oriental poetry, compared Ferdowsi to Homer. Jones was drawn to the *Šāh-nāma* and claimed that it was through reading the great Persian epic (see EPICS) that he thought of the family of Indo-European languages (Davis, 2000b, p. 446). Apart from some excerpts, which he translated into English, French, and Latin in his essays, Jones drew up a plan for a play based on the story of Rostam and Sohrāb, intending to write a tragedy on the Greek model but with Persian characteristics. This project did not, however, come to fruition, though a short "Epode" consisting of nineteen lines of a "Chorus" by Persian sages or magi (Zoroastrian priests) has survived. It was first published in 1804 in the Appendix to *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of Sir William Jones* by Lord Teignmouth (John Shore, 1751-1834). The Epode, like Jones' other free versions of Persian poetry, is metrical and rhymed but rather sentimental: "What power, beyond

all pow'rs elate, / Sustains this universal frame" (Teignmouth, 1804, p. 530). It is therefore not surprising that the early translations of the *Šāh-nāma* emulate Jones' assertion of Homeric epic, though sadly they are mostly poor imitations of the Homer translation by Alexander Pope (1688-1744).

The first substantial translation of Ferdowsi's epic was prepared by Joseph Champion (ca. 1750-1813?). But only the first volume of a planned translation of the complete *Šāh-nāma* appeared in Calcutta in 1785 (Figure 1), and because of a mental breakdown Champion did not succeed in publishing further translations from the *Šāh-nāma*. The book is dedicated to Jones and shows Champion's loyalty to Jones' ideas of the Homeric epic. To render the original Persian—in which one line (*bayt*) comprises two distinct halves (sing. *meṣrāʿ*)—in heroic couplets, which were a popular form of narrative verse in the 18th century, seemed a suitable choice. His translation is thus very much in the vogue of, though inferior to, Pope's Homer. The verse in iambic pentameter is heavy and laden with archaic diction. Reasonably accurate, it lacks the quick pace, vivacity or pathos, as well as the simplicity, of the original Persian. Champion starts his version with the story of the first mythical Iranian king, Kayumarṯ (see GAYŌMART), thereby omitting the all-important beginning of the *Šāh-nāma*; he nevertheless shows a deep understanding of the Persian literary and historical tradition.

Another translation in heroic couplets was that of James Atkinson (1780-1852). His version of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb is the first fully independent English version of this moving episode of the *Šāh-nāma*. Atkinson concentrates on the sentimental and on the description of nature—perhaps an indication of the Romantic influence despite his use of the by now outdated heroic couplet. As Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak (p. 200) has observed, Atkinson's translation starts with "a panoramic view of the Scythian woods and brings it into focus on Rustam's solitary hunt." His language is closer to Pope's diction than to Champion's; it reads well and is often eloquent. The simplicity of its diction brings it closer to the diction of the original. The success of his *Soohrab* prompted Atkinson to produce an abridged version of the whole work, and his *Sháh Námeh* was one of the first books to be published by the Oriental Translation Fund in London, established in 1829 (Yohannan, 1977, p. 57; see GORE OUSELEY). Like Champion, Atkinson's starts with the story of Kayumarṯ, and he concludes with the death of Sikandar (Eskandar for Alexander). A short afterword illuminates Atkinson's view of the work: "The remainder of the Sháh Námeh contains nothing striking either in a poetical or historical point of

view, and indeed presents little more than an enumeration of the kings who reigned in Persia from the time of Sikander to that of Yesdjird, embracing among others, the names of Ardshír, Shahpúr, Bahram Gór, Núsherván, and Khosrú Parvíz" (Atkinson, n.d. [1898], p. 338). Having thus omitted or drastically abridged and summarized some significant passages of the *Šāh-nāma*, Atkinson adds, as an appendix, his translation of the beginning of Ferdowsi's work, including the invocation (pp. 339-40) and the satire on Sultan Maḥmud (pp. 341-43), in readable heroic couplets, as well as a slightly revised version of his annotated translation of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb (n.d. [1898], pp. 344-412). Atkinson's epitome of the *Šāh-nāma* occasionally intersperses prose with verse. His prose is eloquent and vivid, but his verses come in a variety of meters—including, among others, blank verse, unrhymed octosyllabics, and quatrains—and so the whole work appears somewhat disjointed. While his notes and annotations are informative and include comparisons with Homer, Atkinson's translation, like the earlier one by Champion, lacks the epic thrust of the original.

In 1815, a year after the publication of Atkinson's *Soohrab*, Stephen Weston (1747-1830) issued privately in London a small volume with excerpts from the *Šāh-nāma*. Weston was a classicist and orientalist, and this volume became, as intended by him, a successful textbook. It opens with a "Chronology of the Persian Dynasties" (pp. 3-4), and this is followed by the "Introductory Matter" (pp. 5-10 and 14-29), which includes "Ferdoosee's Epigram on Mahmood" in three stanzas (p. 11) and his satire (pp. 12-13); it concludes with "The Dirge and Funereal Procession to Fereedoon" (pp. 30-32). Weston chose to retell the romantic love story of Rudāba and Zāl and the tragic father-son story of Rostam and Sohrāb. As he believed that prose would give a more accurate account of the *Šāh-nāma*, he relied on prose for summaries and on heroic couplets for the stories' interesting sections. His prose is simple, but his verse is not as skillful as that of Atkinson. Weston, however, demonstrates a deep understanding of the conventions of the Persian epic genre in his characterization and particularly in his romantic sentiments and the pathos of his sense of the tragic. The book's second part provides "A Verbal Index, Persian and English" (pp. 62-121) and a few informative notes (pp. 122-25).

An unjustly ignored translation of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb was published in Calcutta by William Tulloh Robertson in 1829; this is a revised and illustrated edition of an earlier version published in the Calcutta *Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Science and the Arts* (Calcutta, 1826-). In

his “Advertisement” Robertson reiterates already established views on the Persian epic but emphasizes Jones’ notion of the tragic drama by quoting in full his “Epode.” Robertson presents his *Šāh-nāma* translation in seven cantos, a term which alludes to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The title of each identifies a place for enactment, such as “The Palace” and “The Gathering,” and each canto starts with a quotations from works by Shakespeare, Pope, and Byron, as well as by such relatively minor figures as the Scottish dramatist David Mallet (ca. 1701-1765). The illustrations are imitations of Persian miniature paintings. Although Robertson promises to present “a strict translation,” he expands the story, thereby giving more dramatic dimensions to his version, but turning it, unlike the Persian original, into a slow-paced account. His heroic couplets read more fluently than those of earlier translators. His copious references to epic poems such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, and Byron’s *Don Juan*, indicate Robertson’s Romantic approach to the epic as literary genre.

Another 19th-century *Šāh-nāma* translator was the amateur orientalist Samuel Robinson (1794-1884). On 24 December 1819, he read a paper on Ferdowsi to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester, which in turn published Robinson’s paper in its *Memoirs* of the year 1819. Robinson privately republished the paper twice, in 1823 and 1876. Shortly before his death, he compiled an anthology of Persian poetry, for which he revised and enlarged his earlier work on Ferdowsi (Robinson, 1883, pp. 1-102; in the “Advertisement,” p. 4, the publication details for the Ferdowsi paper are misstated). His translations from the *Šāh-nāma* are written in rhythmic prose, though presented on the page as verses; they read well and are modeled on the language of the King James Bible. Robinson’s *Šāh-nāma* excerpts also include the story of Zāl and Rudāba (pp. 29-30).

The twentieth and twenty-first century have seen many publications, scholarly and otherwise, of Ferdowsi’s work. In 1907 the barrister William Stigand (1825-1915) and the professional translator Alexander Rogers (1825-1911) published their versions of the *Šāh-nāma*. Stigand begins with an introduction to Ferdowsi and his epic, and his rendition of Rostam and Sohrāb combines an uncouth and dense prose, which is just about readable, with passages in verse, which are very clumsy, in an archaic vocabulary, and overlong (that is, 14 syllables to the line). In contrast, Rogers’ version presents the whole of the *Šāh-nāma*. The first 200 pages are written in verse, but as the work progresses, prose takes over, and the last 60 pages are written in prose. While the prose

sections are largely abridged, his heroic couplets are very archaic and not as good or easy to read as Atkinson's.

The first truly complete translation of the *Šāh-nāma* was prepared by the brothers Arthur George and Edmond Warner. The curate Arthur George Warner, who had studied Oriental languages at Oxford in the early 1860s, suddenly passed away in April 1903 (Warner and Warner, I, p. vii) and it was left to his younger brother Edmond Warner (b. 1852) to arrange for the publication of their translation and to write the introduction and explanatory notes. In the "Introduction" to the first volume, Edmond Warner explains their approach:

> Our version is metrical, partly rhymed and partly unrhymed. The rhymed portion consists of preludes, apologues, sayings of wise men, songs, terminal couplets, passages in which the poet speaks in his own person, and some others that seemed to lend themselves to such treatments. These form a very small part of the whole, and are generally line for line with the original, though couplets or hemistichs may be sometimes inverted for convenience in rendering. We have changed the metre occasionally partly for the sake of variety, partly to suit the character of different passages, and partly for our own refreshment and amusement. ... The unrhymed portion, which forms the bulk of the translation, and does not aspire to the dignity of blank verse, is more condensed than the rhymed, though the proportion of English to Persian is constantly varying; (Warner and Warner, I, p. 78).

But despite this modesty their blank verse flows well; even if the heavy use of Edwardian diction can, at times appear intrusive to the modern reader. The rhymed sections are in a quick pace close to the original. The brothers worked from the original Persian, while making good use of both *Le livre des rois* (French tr. by Jules Mohl, 7 vols., Paris, 1838-78) and *Il libro dei rei* (Italian tr. by Italo Pizzi, 8 vols., Turin, 1886-88). These scholarly versions provided them with wide understanding of the original and thereby helped them to avoid some of the embarrassing errors committed by some later translators. Introduction and notes are informative and erudite, and unlike some earlier translators, the brothers acknowledged all material they had consulted.

The poet Basil Bunting (1900-1985) was an important translator of Persian literature. His Ferdowsi translations are free and in different poetic forms, but always eloquent. In the long poem "Faridun's Sons" (Bunting, 2000, pp. 207-8), first published by T. S. Eliot in *Criterion* (15/3, April 1936), Bunting succeeds particularly well in conveying the sense of tragic epic. His 1935 version of one of Ferdowsi's autobiographical ruminations (ed. Khaleghi, IV, pp. 169-76) was

included into the section “Overdrafts” of his *Collected Poems* (Bunting, 1968, pp. 139-40; cf. Bunting, 2000, pp. 151-52).

A readily available translation of the *Šāh-nāma* was prepared by Reuben Levy (1891-1966). The simple prose translation, largely straightforward with sporadic poeticisms, is always readable, though at times lacking in vivacity. Levy summarizes much of the work and omits some important episodes altogether. There are, however, some serious mistranslations. This translation has been in print since its first posthumous publication in 1967.

Since the 1980s, English-reading audiences have had access to scholarly translations based on modern critical editions of the Persian text, in particular those of E. E. Berthels (9 vols., Moscow, 1960-71) and Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (11 vols., New York, 1987-2009). In 1987 Jerome Clinton (1937-2003) published a version in blank verse of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb, with the facing Persian text. Clinton’s second and revised edition of 1996 removes most of the inaccuracies in translation found in the first edition. His version contains useful explicatory notes. Despite its modern idiom, the verse is rather flat as it starts, though it picks up pace as the story progresses, and the tragic events find adequate expression towards the end. His 1999 translation of the story of Rostam and Esfandiār is again in blank verse but of better quality, as the description of nature is vivid and elegant and the narrative flows well and is effective in its sense of epic.

Dick Davis, a scholar of the *Šāh-nāma* and a gifted poet himself, published in 1992 a lucid and eloquent version in blank verse of the story of Siāvoš, which is the best poetic translation of an episode from the *Šāh-nāma*. His choice of blank verse, for all its distance from the original Persian in which one line comprises two rhymed distichs, is explained in the introduction: “attempts at the spaciousness and sublimity of epic have traditionally been made in blank verse, and it is perhaps worth remembering that blank verse was expressly invented by—Surrey—for the translation of epic into English” (Davis, 1992, p. xxvi). In his translation an awkward sentence or phrase is exceedingly rare (Loloi, 1992, p. 90), and his introduction and notes are scholarly and illuminating.

Davis’s translation of the complete *Šāh-nāma*—mainly in prose, with careful selections of verse—has been published to great acclaim, in two different editions. The first edition in three separate volumes is illustrated with reproductions of Persian miniature paintings from different manuscripts;

each volume has its own introduction. The first volume (1998) covers the epic's beginning, comprising about a fourth of the complete *Šāh-nāma*. The second volume (2000a) concentrates on the theme of father-son relationships, which dominate the middle of the epic, from the story of Siāvoš until the death of Rostam. The third volume (2004) is devoted to the history of Iran from Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) until the end of the Sasanian dynasty (224-650 CE). The second edition (2006) provides the complete text of his translation, but the illustrations from manuscripts were replaced by lithographed illustrations. It was chosen by the *Washington Post* as one of the best books of the year 2006. In the introduction to the 2006 edition, Davis explains that his translation follows the tradition of the professional storyteller (*naqqāli*; see DĀSTĀN-SARĀ'I) who recites, at appropriate intervals, sections of Ferdowsi's work to mark internal divisions in his prose narrative or to add dramatic emphasis. Davis emphasizes that his "aim in translating the *Shahnameh* was not to produce a text for scholars, but to make it available to a wide non-specialist audience" (Davis, 2006, p. xxxiv). Some sections of Ferdowsi's work have been summarized and some omitted completely to keep the translation within a manageable length. His rhythmic prose is eloquent, and his diction modern. He has chosen rhyming couplets with variable meters for his verse, and this flexibility allows for a poetic translation with a quick pace like that of the *Šāh-nāma*:

These battles that I fought, I fought, alone,
No man has shown the valour I have shown.
But we have talked enough: if you agree,
Take up your wine, and slake your thirst with me.
(Davis, 2006, p. 392)

Inevitably, as with every prose translation, some of the epic force is lost, but as a *naqqāli* version his translation is very successful.

A noteworthy group of translators, who are often ignored, are academic scholars of Persian. From Jones onwards, when orientalists were writing about Ferdowsi, they often included verse or prose translations of *Šāh-nāma* excerpts in order to provide some impression of his work. William Ouseley (1767-1842), E. B. Cowell (1826-1903), Edward Henry Palmer (1840-82), and E. G. Browne (1862-1926) translated significant sections of the *Šāh-nāma* with some degree of success. Scholars such as James Ross (1759-1831) and Indian teachers of Persian such as Vali-Bhāi Badr-al-Din Bohrā can also be considered in this category.

As illustrated by this survey, the English translations of the *Šāh-nāma* are varied, and even the translations in verse hardly give a sense of the greatness of Ferdowsi's work. Most of the early translators worked from deficient and unscholarly originals and therefore include some unfortunate errors. Jones' comparison of Ferdowsi and Homer, albeit a valid approach to the study of world literature, was also restrictive to those who followed his notion of the Homeric epic. Despite the recent translation by Dick Davis, the version of the Warner brothers still remains the only complete English translation of the *Šāh-nāma.*

Adaptation of earlier translation

The poem "Sohrab and Rustum" by Matthew Arnold (1822-88) is the best known adaptation of the *Šāh-nāma*. Originally published in 1853 as an English poem without any acknowledgement of its sources, Arnold was accused of plagiarism. Subsequently he admitted to having used the *History of Persia* (1815) by John Malcolm (1767-1833) and Mohl's *Šāh-nāma* translation, which had come to his attention through the review in *Le Constitutionnel* (Paris, 11 February 1850) by Charles Auguste Sainte-Beuve (1804-69; cf. Super, p. 206). But some critics have argued that Arnold was also familiar with Atkinson's version of the story (Yohannan, pp. 81-82, 276). In the posthumous editions of Arnold's poems that include "Sohrab and Rustum" (e.g., 1890, pp. 65-92, 502), only Malcolm's *History* is mentioned as a source in the note. Arnold considered this poem an imitation of an episode of the great Persian epic, which inevitably imitated Homer's epics. It is a much-anthologized poem with significant literary merits of its own and with major differences with Ferdowsi's version.

Helen Zimmern (1846-1934) relied on Mohl's translation when she wrote her prose paraphrase of some of the major *Šāh-nāma* stories. After its first publication as a limited collector's edition in 1882 (Figure 2), the book was reprinted many times on both sides of the Atlantic. Her version is readable, though not free of archaisms. Zimmern's preface and introduction are followed by a "Prefatory Poem: Firdusi in Exile" (1882, pp. xxvii- xlvii) by Edmund Gosse (1849-1928). He wrote the rather sentimental poem of 54 eight-line stanzas about Ferdowsi's predicament for Zimmern's *Šāh-nāma* adaptation. Afterwards Gosse used it as the opening poem of his 1885 poetry collection, and the poem gave the book its title (pp. 1-30; 221, n. 1; Gosse gives 1883 as the year of publication for Zimmern's *Šāh-nāma*).

In 1930, Bapsy Dastur Cursteji Pavry (1902-1995), who belonged to a distinguished Parsi family and studied with A. V. Williams Jackson (1862-1937) at Columbia University, published a book about the *Šāh-nāma* to illustrate the lives of women in ancient Iran. Her prose is eloquent, and she inserts sections from the translation of the Warner brothers and 14 reproductions of Persian miniatures. In 2002, the art historian B. W. Robinson (1912-2005) published a *Šāh-nāma* epitome based on the translation of the Warner brothers. His text is accompanied by 55 miniatures from three late 15th-century *Šāh-nāma* manuscripts. It is intended for the general audience (Robinson, 2002, p. xvii) and includes an introduction, notes, a genealogical table, a bibliography, and an index.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), the noted scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature and the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, was inspired by Ferdowsi's autobiographical ruminations. His rather staid poem on "The Prodigality of Firdausi" fails to match the polemical vigor of his academic prose or the vitality of his own fiction. The poem's first version appeared in *Punch* (no. 215, 1 December 1948, p. 510), and Lewis later revised the poem.

The stories from the *Šāh-nāma* have been fertile ground for educators and amateur writers who employed earlier translations to produce their own versions. The material is always drawn from the epic's mythical part. The prose is kept simple, and the text is often accompanied by illustrations. Alfred John Church (1829-1912), a professor of Latin at University College London (1880-1888), adapted not only the classics of Latin literature for young readers, but also published in 1887 a collection of *Šāh-nāma* stories. Ella Sykes (1863-1939) who had lived in Persia from 1895 to 1897, prepared afterwards a children's book version of Ferdowsi's epic. Ethel (Etheldreda) Mary Wilmot-Buxton, a prolific author of books for young audiences, engaged also with the *Šāh-nāma*. Wallace Gandy's prose version appeared in 1912 in a series of English Literature for Secondary Schools. Barbara Leonie Picard (1917-2011), an acclaimed author of historical fiction and retellings of ancient myths, published in 1972 her take on Ferdowsi's epic.

Until Jerome Clinton there was no American translator of the *Šāh-nāma*, but readers in the United States were of course familiar with the British and French translations and adaptations. For example, the Colonial Press issued *The Literature of Persia* (2 vols., New York, 1900), which included Atkinson's *Šāh-nāma* translation, as it did not pose any copyright concerns for U.S. publishers. In 1909, the librarian Elizabeth D. Renninger published a

children's book version of the epic. The teacher Dorothy Coit used the translation of the Warner brothers for her 1929 selection of *Šāh-nāma* stories, and a few years later she adapted some of these into plays intended for school theater productions. In 1930, the educator Alan Lake Chidsey (1904-81) published his version of the stories of Rostam.

In anthologies of epic literature, *Šāh-nāma* adaptations were interspersed with excerpts from translations. Kate Milner Rabb (1866-1937) referred the readers of her 1896 textbook to the translation by Atkinson and the adaptation by Zimmern (p. 215), but then went on to cite from the translation by Samuel Robinson: "The Raja of India Sends a Chessboard to Nushirvan" (pp. 225-28) and the story of "Zal and Rudabeh" (pp. 229-35). Hélène Adeline Guerber (1859-1929) provided in her 1913 anthology a very brief prose account of Ferdowsi's work (pp. 398-414) from the beginning of the *Šāh-nāma* to the death of Rostam, which is enlivened with citations from the translation by Champion and the adaptation by Arnold.

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