THE EPIC OF THE KINGS

Shah-Nama
the national epic of Persia

Ferdowsi

Translated by
Reuben Levy

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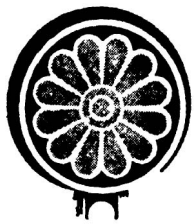

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Prologue

Before the land of Iran was converted to its present religion of Islam, or Mohammadanism, it had for many centuries followed the doctrines of Zoroaster. His religion, known in the West as Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism, had a literature of its own, which concerned itself largely, as might be expected, with doctrinal and ritual matters. But in its later stages there had also grown up a small body of secular works, of which some at least dealt with the history of the land, its monarchs and heroes.

The conquest of Persia by the Mohammadan Arabs, an event which took place in the years after 636 of the Christian era, wrought a profound change not only in the religion of the people but in its language and literature. The older Pahlavi script was displaced by the Arabic alphabet, and the older language, while remaining basically Indo-European, was blended with a great number of Arabic words relating not only to the new religion and the new worship, of which the sacred language was Arabic, but also to everyday life. In a measure it was a precursor of what happened to the Saxon vocabulary after the conquest of England by the Normans.

The Shāh-nāma and its author*

Of the writers in the new Persian, the Iranians themselves look upon seven as outstanding, and of these the earliest and most linked with national sentiment is the poet known as Ferdowsi, author of the Shāh-nāma (literally 'King-book', i.e. 'The Book of Kings'). This work provides a more or less connected story, told in metrical and rhymed verse, of the Iranian Empire, from the creation of the world down to the Mohammadan conquest, and it purports to deal with the reigns of fifty kings and queens, the section devoted by the poet to each bearing little relationship to the length of his or her reign.

The author himself is normally spoken of by his poetical name of 'Ferdowsi (or Ferdausi)', i.e. the 'Paradisal', whose honorific

* Vowels are pronounced as in Italian: **ā, i** and **u** are long, representing the long vowels which occur in the English words 'father', 'chief', and 'rule', while **a, e,** and o are short, as in 'cat', 'egg', and **'lot'.**

title was Abo'l-Qāsem. His personal name is unknown and the dates of his birth and death are both conjectural, though the latter probably took place at some time between the years 1020 and 1025 of the Christian era. He came from the neighbourhood of Tus in the province of Khorāsān and appears to have been a member of a family not wealthy but which owned a certain amount of land that they cultivated themselves. They belonged in fact to the 'Dehqān' class, which seems to have been the depository of national and local tradition and which educated some, at any rate, of its sons.

The origins of the *Shāh-nāma*

Ferdowsi had in his possession a prose book on the history of the Persian kings, and possibly also one in verse, but it was not until middle life that he began his own poem which, from beginning to end, took him about thirty-five years. He was not continuously employed at it and this is known from the fact that here and there he tells us what his age was at the time when he was composing some particular episode. This enables us to deduce that the various portions of the work were not done in the order in which they appear in the final form of the Shāh-nāma. His method was to select episodes as the fancy took him and he, or a redactor, later put them together in the chronological order of the reigns.

The contents of the *Shāh-nāma*

As a whole the work is a collection of episodes, providing a fairly continuous story of the Iranian Empire from before the creation of the world down to Iran's submergence under the Muslim Arabs,. The material was of ancient origin and much of it had been stored up in the minds of *Dehqāns*, who were able to refresh their memories from records written in Pahlavi [Middle Persian] or in Arabic prose translations. Ferdowsi indeed did not invent the legends he put into verse form; in other words, he was not a fiction-writer drawing on his imagination for the central characters or the actual plots of his stories. They were established parts of the national tradition. But he elaborated what he found already in existence and he himself composed the innumerable speeches he put into the mouths of his heroes, as well as the many long letters written at the dictation of the kings and other principal characters.

The narrative begins with the creation of the world 'out of nothing' and continues by narrating how the primordial kings invented the crudely conceived basic requirements of civilization. During the reign of Jamshid, who was king for seven hundred years, there appeared, born of a family with Arab blood in its veins, the monster Ẓaḥḥāk, who was finally overcome by Kāva the Blacksmith, whose famous banner was for long the palladium of the Iranians. Another great character who appears in the primeval era is Faridun, whose division of the earth between his three sons, Iraj, Tur, and Salm, leads to the murder of Iraj by the other two, and, hence, to the long feud between Tur (Turin) and Iran.

Manuchehr it was who avenged the blood of his father Iraj; then later in his reign appears the warrior Sām. His son Zāl fell in love with Rudiiba, by whom he became the father of the prince Rostam, mightiest of all the heroic figures who enter upon the scene in the Shah-niima. He makes his appearance intermittently during a number of reigns which between them cover a space of over three centuries. Born in the reign of Manuchehr he does not die until Goshtāsp is on the throne of Iran, when he is killed, treacherously, in vengeance for having caused the death, howbeit involuntarily, of the Shah Esfandiyār. Even in his last moments the hero had strength enough to slay the miserable wretch who had betrayed him.

It was during the reign of the inept Shah Kāvus that most of Rostam's heroic feats occurred, and also his combat with his son Sohrāb, who died tragically by his hand. During that reign also the war between Iran and Turān flared up with renewed strength. 'This was in part due to a quarrel between Kāvus and his son Siyāvush, who fled to the court of the Turanian king Afrāsiyāb. For a time all had gone well with the fugitive prince, to whom Afrāsiyāb had given his daughter in marriage, but then the Turanian king became offended with him and had him murdered. The need to avenge his death therefore became imperative. Key Khosrow, the son of Siyāvush, had grown to manhood in Turān and been with difficulty rescued from it. It was he who brought the war to a successful conclusion, Afrāsiyāb being killed after a long pursuit.

It is here that the romance of Bizhan and Manizha is inserted into the narrative.

After Key Khosrow there ascended the throne the Shāh

Lohrāsp, member of a parallel branch of the Kaiānid dynasty. In his reign occur most of the adventures of his son Goshtāsp, who became the lover and husband of the daughter of the Caesar of Rum, i.e. Eastern Rome. It was in Goshtāsp's reign that Zoroaster introduced his new religion, being supported by the Shāh's son, Esfandiyār. He was kept from the throne long after his succession was due and was slain in the end by Rostam, who had to employ magic to achieve his aim.

The reigns of Dārā and Dārāb, both of which names represent Darius, are followed by that of Sekandar [Alexander] with the accounts of his more or less mythical adventures. Then comes Ardashir, with whom the narrative enters the historical period of the Sasanian Shahs, though it is interspersed with much that is romantic and legendary. Interest is chiefly concentrated on Bahrām Gur, one of the favourite heroes of Persian romantic poetry, and on Kasrā (Khosrow) regarded as the paragon of kingly wisdom. To another Bahrām, known as Chubin, who revolts against Kasrā, is devoted a lengthy portion of the Shāh-nāma and much attention is given also to the fall of the second Khosrow and the rise of his son Shiruy (Qobād).

With sympathetic detail the poet describes the fall of the Iranian Empire under its last Shah, Yazdegerd, after his army, led by a second Rostam, had been defeated by the Arab invaders at the battle of Qādesiya. Then the long story is brought to its close in a brief section containing some dates which purport to give the author's age at the time of his putting the finishing touches to the work.

The character of the Shāh-nāma

The various episodes which compose the narrative are strung together very loosely, for, as we have seen, they were not composed in the chronological sequence proper to a work of history. The whole can be likened to a vast canvas on which the great heroes of Iran's past are depicted against the background of the poet's beloved country. From the nature of the work it cannot be an exact portrayal, for it begins from before the creation of the world and describes the careers of the Shahs who reigned during the era of myth and legend. Nevertheless it took the place of history with the audiences who listened to the stories recited to them; they were not concerned with the fact that no one could

have been an eyewitness to the scenes described to them or could have been close to them in time.

There is in the Shāh-nāma an amalgamation of the Persian equivalents of chapters in the book of Genesis, the Odyssey, Paradise Lost, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Shakespeare. It is indeedastonishing how often the vocabulary of Shakespeare suits the incidents described in the Persian epic. Drama, comedy, tragedy — all are here. Nature has a conspicuous and felicitous place in the Shāh-nāma. Tree lore has a prominent part. The vast scene of operations is bathed in a wondrous light.

In two types of passages Ferdowsi's art is often at its highest: the laments for the fallen kings and heroes, and the descriptions of sunrise. Perhaps Ferdowsi has intended an organic artistic link between these two themes that like a great antiphony run through the whole of the Shāh-nāma. The endless procession of death is punctuated by the recurrent birth of the source and symbol of all life itself. For the technical solution to the difficult task of treating repetitive material Ferdowsi borrows a prevalent and highly-regarded art form, namely theme and variations, and proves himself a consummate master. The full range of poetic arts are brought into play so that no two sunrises are described in the same terms and the same manner and no two laments are identical. There is an unsentimental pathos and a measured humanity in these laments. They often contain some of the profoundest lines in the whole poem.

But the poet's main object is to tell the story of his fatherland. We are stirred by the constant clash of arms, more particularly caused by the attacks and counter-attacks that throughout the passage of time recurred between Iran and its enemies, the most formidable of whom was Turān, the great national antagonist. The air is nearly always filled with the dust of battle, the roll of drums of war or the clash of heavy mace on steel helmet when a warrior meets his adversary in single combat.

Yet there areintervals for peaceful pursuits, when the monarchs, their coronets firmly attached to their heads, play polo or go hunting the onager — their favourite game — or the gentle gazelle. Following on triumphs in the field of battle or the hunting ground they seat themselves before huge trays laden with viands of every kind, being waited on by moon-cheeked maids who are constantly at hand with Aagons of red wine. From time to time they engage in amorous dalliance.

The events and characters described suffer no terrestrial limitations as they range over land and sky, though it is only rarely that anything is said of adventure by sea. In this connection it may be said that Ferdowsi was as little trammelled by the facts of geography as was Shakespeare. Territories separated by vast stretches of road are traversed in an instant or else brought for convenience into close proximity. Monarchs dictate their behests to the whole world from the height of their thrones and proclaim themselves the direct instruments of God's will. The prehistoric kings, and heroes such as Kostam, live and wage war for hundreds of years. Throughout the whole poem the struggle with the national foes is associated with the struggle between good and evil, where the good must in the long run gain the upper hand.

Cambridge, 1966 *R. L.*

EDITORIAL NOTE

Ferdowsi and the art of tragic epic

Ferdowsi's main object is to preserve the 'history' of his fatherland, but the sum of the Shāh-nāma's artistic worth outweighs the inherent shortcomings of the poet's conscious scheme. Broadly conceived, it belongs to the epic genre. But it is not a formal epic as the *Aeneid* or the *Lusiad*. Rather, it has the spontaneity of the *Iliad* and its episodic character reveals its kinship with the *chançons de geste*. More than any of its kindred poems, however, the Shāh-nāma is beset with paradoxes and conflicts. Paradoxes that are the protein of its art and the source of tragic nobility. If there is a unifying theme in the Shāh-nāma it is no simple 'wrath of Achilles', but the malevolence of the universe. Yet Ferdowsi is no passive fatalist. He has an abiding faith in a just Creator, he believes in the will of man, the need for his efforts, and the worth of his good deeds.

The pervading paradox of human existence is refracted and made particular in episodes and lives of mortals who, prism-like, reflect the light and shadow of character, the changes of moods and motives, and the many psychic levels of personality. In the strength, variety, and sometimes profundity of its characterization —often achieved with such economy of means—the Shāh-nāma is remarkable in rhe annals of classical literature. Very few of its many protagonists are archetypes. Alas, all too many of its noblest heroes are prey to the basest of human motives. And even the

vilest among them have moments of humanity. Although outwardly many a character defies all natural bounds, none is exempt from the inner reality of human nature. The goodness of the best is possible and the evil of the most wretched is not incredible.

Nowhere is this depth of characterization more evident than in the person of Rostam, the foremost of Iranian heroes. He is essentially a man of the arena. Chivalrous, intensely loyal, pious, fearless, steel-willed and obdurate, he is nevertheless subject to occasional moods of disenchantment and indifference accompanied by gargantuan gluttony. He has a mystic reverence for the crown of Iran that inspires him to all his heroic feats. But he is quick to take offence and, at the slightest bruise to his ego or threat to his independent domain, wealth or power, he reacts with the full fury and resentment of a local dynast. For all his 'active' temperament he can be very wordy and didactic. When the occasion demands he is wise, temperate and resourceful. Of the more than three hundred years of his life, so lovingly recounted by Ferdowsi, only one night is spent in the amorous company of a woman. It serves the purpose of siring the ill-fated Sohrāb. For the rest, he is infinitely more devoted to his horse. Sometimes he is unable to rein his pride, which results in the two monstrous deeds of his life—and shapes the final tragedy of his life.

It is partly this depth of characterization that enhances and ennobles the tragic episodes of the Shāh-nāma. Jamshid the priest-king, world-orderer, and the giver of knowledge and skills, is the victim of his own hybris. The tragedy of Sohrab is not merely in the horror of filicide but in the fear and vanity of Rostam and the repulsed tender premonitions of Sohrāb. The tragedies of Iraj and Siyāvush evoke the cosmic anguish and the inconsolable pity of the guileless and the pure, ravaged by the wicked. Forud and Bahrām are the promise of sweet and valorous youth cut down by the senselessness of war. Esfandiyār is rent by the conflict of his formal loyalties and his piety and good sense. But it is his vanity and ambition that send him to his doom. Nor is this moving sense of the tragic reserved for the Iranians alone. Pirān, the hoary Turānian noble, shows compassion to captive Iranians and risks his own life to protect them only, in the end, to lose it for remaining loyal to his sovereign. Even the villainous Afrāsiyāb—a prisoner of his evil nature—is pitiable and tragic in the helpless moments of self-awareness.

Ferdowsi has no set formulae for tragedy, yet in the early and

mythical part of the Shāh-nāma an inexorable divine justice seems to balance most of the scales. Iraj and Siyāvush are restored and triumphant in Manuchehr and Key-Khosrow, Rostam is reconciled to his fate as the price for the slaying of Sohrāb and Esfandiyār, and Afrāsiyāb cannot escape his share. The tragic impact of the Shāh-nāma, however, is not simply the sum of its tragic episodes. It pervades the encompassing conception of the work, and the sources of it are to be found in the conscious and unconscious paradoxes that form the personality, the emotional and the intellectual outlook of Ferdowsi.

The overriding tragic fact of the poet's life is that the glory of which he sings is no more. But this is not to say that the Shāh-nāma is a defiant nostalgic lament. The intellectual horizon of Ferdowsi is that of a rational and devout Muslim. Mohammad and Zoroaster are venerated as if they were of the same root, but Ferdowsi's pride in Iran is his constant muse. His concept of history is thoroughly Islamic, but there is no Augustinian righteous indignation in him. The cumulative emotional tensions of his 'history' are unresolved. Even in his stark treatment of the final reigns of the Sāsānian empire, when the succession of evil, tyranny, rapacity, treachery and chaos is unrelieved by any sign of grace, he cannot quite bring himself to a condemnation of the Iranian empire. The only possible catharsis is in the contemplation of the ideal of justice, essential in Islam—yet already far detached from the realities of his time. Nor is the holocaust so distant as the fall of the Sāsānians. Ferdowsi was undoubtedly inspired by the renascent Iranism of the Sāmānid epoch and may have even conceived of his masterwork as an offering to that illustrious house, only to witness its demise at the hand of the Turkic Ghaznavids. The bitterness of the mythical Iranian–Turānian epic struggle that permeates the Shāh-nāma and gives it its dramatic tension is largely the pressing phenomenon of the poet's own time. Thus he has experienced a re-enactment of the final tragedy of his poem. The necessity of dedicating the Shāh-nāma to the very Turkic destroyer of the Iranian Sāmānids must have been a bitter and demeaning fact. Much of the traditional denunciatory epilogue addressed to Mahmud of Ghazna may be accretions of later times, but the tone is true.

The tensions and contradictions in the experience of the poet that are reflected in the tragic paradoxes of the Shāh-nāma and are a source of validity, profundity, and universality of its art, are not

all conscious or external. The interactions of his innate character, his inculcated traits, his social position, his changing environment, and the nature of his creative genius, all fail to achieve a synthesis. Instead, they fashion a personality marred by unresolved intellectual conflicts and spiritual anguish.

He belongs to the class of *dehqāns*, or landed gentry, and has an inherited sense of expectation of privilege, which is embittered by gradual impoverishment. He is not yet free of the impulses of generosity and noble detachment that sometimes flourish in the serene and self-assured middle plateaux of wealth and power of a social class; but he is already afflicted with the material obsessions, if not greed and avarice, that characterize the periods of rise and fall of those classes. Thus he seeks, and needs, the patronage and the emoluments of the Ghaznavid court, yet he is too proud, too detached and too dedicated to his 'uncommercial' art to secure that patronage in the accepted mode of the day. He is contemptuous of the servility and the parasitic existence of the court poets, of the artificiality of their panegyric verse, of the ignobleness of their self-seeking and mutual enmity, yet he is not without the artist's vanity, envy and acrimony and, occasionally, he succumbs to the temptation of proving himself in their terms.

Ferdowsi's genuine compassion for the poor and the wronged, his remarkable and persistent sense of social justice, his courageous and vocal condemnation of irresponsibility of rulers, his altruism and idealism—in short, his profound humanity—account for some of the most moving and ennobling passages in the Shāh-nāma and endow it with a consistent integrity. At the same time he had the conservative impulses of the *dehqān*. His yearning for legitimacy, his outrage at disregard of position, his abhorrence of anarchy, his fear of heresy, and his dread of unruly mobs provide the narrative with moments of eerie drama and Jeremiah-like visions and nightmares of the apocalypse.

However much may be said of the formal and philosophical diffuseness of the Shāh-nāma, it is transcendentally successful as a true epic. In that sense only a comparison with the Iliad can be meaningful and instructive. In their origin, nature and functions as well as in form and content, there are arresting similarities between the two poems. This is not to say that the likenesses outnumber the differences. The Shāh-nāma is, of course, the product of a much later and more self-conscious age, and it draws from a vast fund of literary conventions and clichés of 'Near Eastern'

cultures. But the Shāh-nāma and the Iliad partake of the fundamental mysreries of epic as art. They both represent the instantly and eternally triumphant attempts of conscious art to immortalize the glory and the identity of a people. It does not matter that neither Homer nor Ferdowsi were the very first to attempt such a task in their cultures. It is the supreme elixir of their art which accomplished the miracle. They ennobled the natural epic without losing its spontaneity. Furthermore, they did so at a time when the cement of past associations was crumbling and the common identity of their peoples was in danger of effacement. Thus by their creations Homer and Ferdowsi succeeded at once in immortalizing the past and bequeathing the future to the language and life of their nation.

The western reader of the Shāh-nāma will learn much—and may gain in enjoyment—by some comparison of its similarities and differences with the Iliad. Although Ferdowsi works with a number of written and even 'literate' sources, at least in the first half of the Shāh-nāma, as in the Iliad the roots of oral tradition are close to the surface. Both poems employ a simple, facile metre and their rhyme schemes are suited to the long narrative and aid in memorizing. The heroes in both epics are affixed with appropriate epithets and are easily recognizable even without mention of their names. Both poems make use of a certain amount of repetition to assist recapitulation. Episodes of battle and heroism are modulated by sequences of chase, ostentatious banquets and idyllic revels, and ceremonious councils and parleys. Semi-independent sub-episodes are interspersed to vary the mood and relieve the tedium of the narrative. Of these, several romances in the Shāh-nāma, particularly those of Zāl and Rudāba and of Bizhan and Manizha in their exquisite lyricism, poignant intimacy and self-contained perfection, have no peers in the Iliad. Both poets lavish masterful attention upon the details of the martial life—the description of armours and weapons, the personal and near magical love of the heroes for their mounts and their armour, etc.—that breed and sustain a sense of epic involvement. Both poems abound in little warm human touches that evoke pathos and enhance the evolving drama.

Transcending these more or less formal similarities are the fundamental parallels of human behaviour under similar relationships and social conditions and the recognizable range of human types in the Iliad and the Shāh-nāma. The affinities of the indis-

pensable hero Rostam with Achilles; of the capricious, covetous, apprehensive and envious monarch Key Kāvus with Agamemnon; of the stolid and martial Giv with Ajax; of the wily and wise Pirān with Odysseus; of the dutiful and sacrificial Gudarz with Hector; of the impetuous and handsome Bizhan with Paris; of the youthful, loyal and pathetic Bahrām with Patroklos; of the impulsive, sensuous and beautiful Sudāba with Helen; of the adoring, meek and resigned Farangis with Hecuba; are only a few of the evocative suggestions of artistic kinship between the two epics. In the fragile social order depicted in the Iliad and in the first half of the Shāh-nāma tension and strife are never far from the surface. But Ferdowsi has endowed his cosmos with a higher morality and thus the lapses of his heroes are more grave and aweful.

In addition to mortal humans both epics are peopled by several supernatural orders of goodly spirits, demons and magical creatures who intervene in the affairs of men and profoundly affect their fate. But the God of Shāh-nāma is the unknowable God of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims. Unlike the deities of the Iliad He is not implicated in the struggle of the mortals though he is constantly evoked and beseeched. Only twice does an angel intervene to alter the course of battle. At other times there is only indirect confirmation of the righteous and chastisement of the wayward. On the other hand prophetic dreams count for more in the Shāh-nāma. Fate is the unconquerable tyrant of both poems, but in the Shāh-nāma it is sometimes unravelled by the stars, robbing the drama of its mystery.

The Shāh-nāma is inordinately longer than the Iliad. Essentially it is made in two segments: the mythical first half and the 'historical' second half. The psychological and artistic seam cannot be concealed. The fundamental affinities with the Iliad are primarily true of the first half. But even there the unity of theme, the limitation of action and time, the rapid devolution of the 'plot', the resolution of the conflict and the uncanny proportions of the Iliad are missing. Ferdowsi's 'historical' mission undoubtedly scatters the artistic impact of the Shāh-nāma and diffuses the focus of its aesthetic concept. But the 'wrath of Achilles', after all, is not the sole catalyst of Homer's art. The validity and viability of the Iliad rests in its general relevance to the human situation. In this sense the artistic 'flaw' of the Shāh-nāma is more than made up by, and perhaps makes for, its greater universality. Thus in the Shāh-nāma we come across characters who have no counterparts in the

Iliad, and one must cull the whole of Greek mythology, mystery and drama for parallels. Jamshid, the primal priest-king, the divinely inspired creator of civilization, the bringer of world order, whose hybris causes his fall and plunges mankind into evil and darkness. Ẕaḥḥāk, the grotesque tyrant, the personification of irrational and demonic forces who grips the world in a thousand-year reign of terror. Kāva, the rebellious *vox populi* triumphant in a just cause. Faridun, the ideal and wise king, compassionate pastor of his people. Siyāvush, the tragic guileless youth, maligned, helpless and martyred. Key-Khosrow, the messiah-king, avenger and restorer. Every one of them is a focal realization of a master figure in the history of man's existence and aspirations.

It is this universality together with its faithful and unresolved reflection of the human paradox that is the essence of Shāh-nāma's art and the cause of its timelessness; for it permits every generation to seek its own resolution.

Translator's Note

In accordance with the scheme laid down by the editors of the Persian Heritage Series, which is meant for 'the general reader', I have stressed before all else the narrative and literary value of the Shāh-nāma. The general reader in view here is presumably one who is not necessarily a specialist in the field of Persian language or literature, though such a one would not be excluded. He or she would appreciate a good story and would be willing to concede that such a thing can exist in surroundings other than Western and that its setting need neither be modern nor confined to what we know of the classical world. Such a reader would further be willing to accept the rendering of the stories into conventional English prose, tinged by archaisms introduced in the endeavour to create the right atmosphere. The original Persian text is in metrical verse, rhyminginhemistichs, in which as a rule a sentence is contained within the compass of a single line and does not often overrun into a second. Given the scanty stock of rhyming words existing in English it would have been impossible to imitate the form and style of the original.

The Persian text used was that of Vullers and Landauer for the early part and that published by Beroukhim (Tehran, 1934–) for the remainder. Notes on points of difficulty have been confined to the minimum necessary for the understanding of the narrative.

Some repetitive sections of the original have been omitted and some of the poet's moralizings also. Where it has been necessary to summarize or abbreviate passages I have put them in my own words enclosed within square brackets [ ]. The numbers of the chapters and sub-sections are arbitrary. They have been allotted to the anecdotes concerned with the chief characters in the work, not necessarily at their first appearance on the scene but when they ascend the throne or are otherwise shown as getting into their stride.

On the question of the transliteration of proper names and Persian words certain rules have been laid down by the editor of the Series and have normally been obeyed by me in accordance with the footnote on page xv. Very occasionally I have been in a dilemma when both a Persian and an English form of name exists, but I have as a rule come down on the side of the Persian.

For example, instead of speaking of Darius I have called him Dārā or Dārāb, as Ferdowsi did, and I have written Sekander instead of Alexander, for whereas the Macedonian was an actual historical figure, the Persian counterpart was in some degree a legendary character about whom many myths have gathered.

I have not sought to improve on the poet, but I have not been a slave, as he sometimes was, to metre and rhyme. I have used the English equivalent best suited to the Persian without seeking to subordinate sense to sound. Apart from that, I have tried to represent the poem 'warts and all'. The choice of what parts of the poem to omit has been my own. It would have added little to the interest or value of the work to have translated everything in it.

The Poet's Introduction

The opening of the book

In the name of the Lord of the soul and of wisdom, than Whom thought can conceive nothing higher; the Lord of all things nameable and of all space; the Lord who grants sustenance and is our Guide; the Lord of the universe and the revolving sky, who kindles the Moon, Venus and the Sun. He is beyond all naming, indication or fancy and He is the essence of anything a limner may design.

[The poet repeats his asseveration that the mind of man has no means of attaining to a knowledge of God by any power of reason.]

In praise of wisdom

Wisdom is better than aught else which God has granted to you. Wisdom is the guide and is the heart's enlivener; wisdom is your helper in both worlds. From it comes happiness and all human welfare; from it you gain increase and without it you experience loss. Thou, Wisdom, art the creation of the Creator of the world and knowest all things patent or hidden. Do thou, O man, ever keep wisdom as your counsellor, whereby you may preserve your soul from all unworthiness. When you have acquired an insight into any branch of a matter, you will understand that science does not reach down to the root.

On the creation of the world

As a beginning you must know precisely what the material of the elements was in origin. God created matter out of nothingness in order that his power might be manifested; out of it was produced the substance of the four elements, without effort and without expenditure of time. Of these elements one was fire, which arose shining; then the wind and the water came, above the dark earth. First the fire was stirred into motion and so dryness appeared because of the heat of fire. When it was still again, cold manifested itself, and then, out of cold grew moisture.

When these four elements were once in existence they came together to form this fleeting abode of the world. Thus they were compounded each with the other to make up every genus of the proudest order of phenomena, such as this swift-moving dome [the sky], displaying ever-new marvels. It is master of the twelve [Signs] and the seven [Planets], each of which takes up its due position. Through God generosity and justice came into being and He has granted fitting reward to all who recognize Him.

The heavenly spheres were constructed one within the other and set in motion once the structure had been completed. With sea, mountain, desert and meadow the earth became bright as a shining lamp. With the mountain towering high, waters coalesced and the heads of growing plants reared upwards. But to the earth itself no place on high was allotted; it was a central point, dark and black. Overhead the stars displayed their wonders, casting their brightness on to the earth. Fire ascended, water poured down and the sun revolved about the earth.

Grass sprouted, together with trees of several kinds, whose tops happily grew upwards. These things grow and have no other power; they cannot move in any direction in the way that animals can. These moving creatures brought the growing things into subjection. They ever seek food, sleep and repose and find all their satisfaction in being alive; with neither tongue for utterance nor wisdom to make investigation they nurture their bodies on thorn and stubble. They do not know if the outcome of what they do is good or ill; the Lord demands no service of them.

The creation of man

Going beyond these creatures Man appeared, to become the key to all these close-linked things. His head was raised up like the cypress, he was endowed with good speech and applied wisdom to use. He received sense, reason and wisdom, and all animals whether wild or tame are obedient to his command. By the path of wisdom you may perceive in some small measure what the significance of man may be. Perhaps you know mankind as a distracted thing and can find no indication of its being ought else. You were produced out of two worlds and nurtured in some respects to be a go-between; although first in nature you must regard yourself as the latest in time. Thus you are; therefore do not devote yourself to triviality.

The creation of the sun

The blue vault of heaven is made of red coral, being composed neither of wind and water, nor of dust and smoke. With its brilliance and light it is bright as a garden in the Spring. There is in it a heart-warming element which moves and from which day receives its illumination. Each dawn like a golden shield it raises its glowing head out of the East, clothing the earth in a garment of light in such fashion that the universe stands revealed. When it travels onwards from the East towards the West, dark night raises its head out of the East; neither seeks to overtake the other and nothing can be more orderly than this succession.

The creation of the moon

The moon is a lamp provided for the dark night (never turn to evil if it is within your power). For two days and two nights it does not show its face, the circle of it fades away; then it reappears thin and yellow, its back bent like the back of a person who has suffered the torment of love. Even as the beholder gazes on it from afar it vanishes from sight. The next night it reappears larger and provides you with more light. In two weeks it becomes full and whole again and then returns to what it was at first, becoming more slender each night and moving nearer to the sun. Thus did God establish a just path for it and as long as it exists it will pursue this same course.

In praise of the prophet and his companions

[Here follows a section belauding the Prophet Mohammad and his four Companions, the 'Upright' Caliphs, of whom the poet regards the prophet's cousin Ali as the most to be revered.]

How the SHĀH-NĀMA *came to be composed*

From early times there existed a work in which were contained an abundance of legends, and it was shared out between a number of [Magian] priests, each of whom held a portion. It happened once that a personage of high rank, belonging to Dehqān [landed gentry] stock, a man of noble character, liberal disposition and high intelligence, came to be interested in primeval days and

sought for histories of times gone by. Accordingly, he assembled from their various provinces the aged priests who had learnt that work by heart and he put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world and about other famous and illustrious men.

'How did they,' he inquired, 'hold the world in the beginning, and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?'

Little by little these revered men unfolded to him the histories of the kings and told how the world's vicissitudes had come about; and when this great knight had heard all that they had to tell him, he laid the foundations of a noble book that achieved fame throughout the world and received universal adulation from all people, high and low.

'Who was it first,' that gifted Dehqān had inquired, 'who invented the crown of royalty and placed a diadem on his head?'

They answered, 'The time of that goes far back in the memory of human beings. A son learnt of it from his father, and told about it, in every detail, as he had received it from his begetter.'

And now that inquirer into ancient legend, who recounts the story of the Heroes, has this to say:

The Reign of Keyumars

The ceremonial of throne and crown was introduced by Keyumars, who was king and ruler over the whole world. He placed his residence at first in the mountains, where his fortunes and throne were raised on high. Like his people he clothed himself in leopard-skin; nevertheless it was through him that civilization came, because clothing was something new, as also was food. He ruled the world for thirty years, benevolent as the sun everywhere and as resplendent on his throne as the two weeks old moon shining above a slender cypress. All living creatures, wild or tame, on seeing him, assembled from every part of the world and took refuge with him, bowing low before his throne. And so it was that he grew in majesty and power. All came to him in the attitude of reverence, and hence religion took its rise.

The Reign of Hūshang

[Keyumars had a son, Siyāmak, who was killed while giving battle to the Black Demon, son of Ahrimiin, the Maker of Evil. The demon was in his turn attacked by Siyiimak's son Hūshang and by Keyumars himself.][1]

Once Keyumars had made his resolve to exact vengeance and give battle [to the demon] he summoned Hushang, whom he loved dearly, and informed him of the stratagems he must employ, and imparted all his secrets to him, saying,

'I will mobilize an army and set alarming rumours on foot. You will have charge of all, for I must die and you shall be the new commander of the army.'

He then mustered the peris [fairies], the leopards and the lions, together with all the other ravening beasts, such as the wolves and the fierce tigers, so that it became an army composed of animals wild and tame, birds and peris, commanded by a chieftain endowed with pride and courage. Keyumars himself was in charge of the army's rearguard, while his grandson led the van.

In fear and trembling the Black Demon advanced, making the dust rise to heaven; and, when the two forces engaged, the demons were thrown into rout by the ferocious beasts. Hushang, stretching out a hand like a lion's foreleg, shut the world down tightly upon the raging demon, whose hide he split from top to toe. The monstrous head he severed, cast it down and trampled it under foot in contempt. Thus having achieved the vengeance he desired, Keyurnars reached the end of his life.

Hushang the all-powerful, endowed with the spirit of wisdom and justice, now set the crown on his head in his grandfather's place, and being seated on the throne of splendour he made this proclamation,

'I am lord of the seven climes, supreme over all and obeyed universally. By command of Almighty God I am ready to dispense justice and deal generously with all men.'

[1] Passages within square brackets provide links bridging gaps, sometimes lengthy, left by omissions in the translation. These are required in places where the poet has introduced material that interrupts the course of the main narrative or which is repetitious. [Translator's note.]

With that he set about the task of bringing prosperity into the world and providing equitable conditions in every part. As a beginning he procured a wondrous touchstone and by science separated the rock from the iron. That wonderful metal, the substance which he had extracted from the hard ore, he made his prime material, and, once he had become familiar with its qualities, he invented the craft of the smith, whereby he was enabled to fashion axes, saws and mattocks.

With that achievement completed he began to devise schemes for water, which he drew from the river in order to cultivate the plain, making a way for it along channels and ducts. By his royal *Farr*[1] he reduced drudgery. To the pasture-lands of people he added sowing of seeds, cultivation of soil, and reaping of harvests. And so each one was able to better his own livelihood, and to recognize and develop his own homestead. Before these tasks had been carried out no foods had existed but fruits, and no part of man's labours had gone to the storage of provisions, and his clothing was nothing but leaves.

The discovery of fire

Man's ancestors had possessed a number of ceremonial rites and a religion and the worship of God was practised. In those early days fire with its gorgeous colouring was the cynosure towards which men faced, as the Arabs do towards the niche that shows the direction of Mecca. And fire first appeared out of stone and became the source from which light was diffused about the world. It happened one day, while the king of the world was making a journey towards the mountains with some of his retinue, that there came into view, moving at speed, an elongated creature black in colour. In its head were two eyes like pools of blood and from its mouth there poured black smoke covering the world with gloom. Hushang observed it keenly and steadily, then took up a stone, which he gripped firmly and, with the strength granted to heroes, let fly against this world-devouring monster, which leapt aside from the world-conquering Shah.

[1] A certain refulgence or 'nimbus', symbolizing Divine favour, and reserved for kings and other royal personages. It had almost a physical character, being as it were a palladium, talisman or mascot, which was recognizable by beholders and implied infallible greatness and good fortune as long as its possessor held the favour of the Divine Powers.

The small stone dashed against a greater one, both were shattered by the impact, and from between the two there flashed out a spark whose brightness set the heart of the stone aglow. The monster was not slain, but, out of the realm of the hidden, fire was discovered from that stone. So that whenever iron is struck against stone a spark appears. On that first occurrence the world-possessor went to the Creator of the world and worshipped him, calling down blessings on him for having granted him the gift of the spark. And he appointed the fire to be the objective to which men turn in worship.

'This spark,' he proclaimed, 'is God-given; if you are wise you will worship it.'

Night came, and with it the fire blazed mountain-high, the king and his retinue being gathered about it. That night he feasted and drank wine and gave the name Sada to this happy occasion.

By virtue of his divine Farr and his royal powers he was enabled to set apart the beasts which are hunted, such as the onager and the wild antelope, from domestic animals like donkeys, cows and sheep. And he fostered all things that would serve man. He bred the swift animals whose fur is good and he skinned off their pelts. They were such animals as fox, marten and smooth ermine, as well as the sable, whose fur is warm. With the skins of such fast-running beasts he clothed the bodies of human beings.

The Reign of Jamshid

[After Hushzng came his son Tahmuras, who subjugated the demons and earned the title of 'Demon-binder' and reigned for thirty years. He was followed by his son Jamshid.]

For a time Jamshid had respite from war, since all the demons, birds and peris were subject to his command. 'I am,' he declared, 'endowed with the divine *Farr* and at the same time both king and priest. I shall stay the hand of the evil-doers from evil, and I shall guide the soul towards light.' He first devoted himself to the making of weapons of war, which he gave to valiant heroes eager for renown. By virtue of his kingly Farr he was able to mould iron into such equipment as helmets, chain-mail, and laminated armour as well as missile-proof vests, to swords and horse-armour, all of which he invented by his perspicuous intellect. He spent fifty years at this task, part of the time being devoted to the accumulation of stores.

For the next fifty years he gave his mind to the subject of apparel and such matters as the dress appropriate to feasting or to battle. Hence he contrived materials of linen, silk, wool and floss as well as rich brocades and satins. He taught men how to spin and weave and how to interlace the warp with the weft; then, when the weaving was completed, they learnt from him how to wash the materials and how to sew.

When that task was completed he turned to another employ, which was the bringing together of all the men engaged in each craft. Over that he spent fifty years. The class of men known as 'Kātuzi', regarded as being specially charged with the rites of worship, was set apart from the common herd of mankind. As for the priests, the mountains were allotted to them as temples, where they were to devote themselves to worship and to supplication of their divine Master.

In contrast to them he established the caste whom men call 'Neysāri'. They are lion-hearted warriors who shed lustre over the army and the whole land and because of whom the king sits securely on the throne. Through them the term 'manliness' was established.

The third group claiming recognition was that of the 'Nasudi'

caste. They give homage to no man; tilling, sowing and themselves reaping. They heed no person's censure when the time comes for eating. Their heads refuse to bow to command; they are men of independence although clad in rags, and their ears are deaf to abuse. By them the earth is kept under cultivation and clear of strife and discord.

The fourth class is named 'Ahnukhwashi', who industriously spend themselves in all crafts. Their work is consummately skilled and their minds teem with ideas.

Over that task Jamshid consumed another fifty years, distributing benefits generously in every region. Thus he assigned to every living creature the right rank or station [proper to it] and directed [it on] its path, so that each might be aware of its place and understand the measure of it. Upon the demons he laid the duty of mingling earth with water, and when they understood what could be produced with clay they quickly fashioned moulds for bricks. With stone and mortar they built walls, upon which they were the first to erect works of masonry such as baths and lofty arches and castles which could provide refuge against attack.

For a length of time the king sought for gems amongst the rocks and by experiment discovered their lustre. Precious minerals of various kinds came into his hands. They included jacinth, yellow amber, silver and gold, which he extracted from the rock by magic art, the key to unloosening any bond of conglomeration. He also distilled sweet perfumes in whose fragrance men delight; essences like balsam, camphor, pure musk, aloes, ambergris and limpid rose-water. These are drugs and restoratives for those who suffer disease, and they are of use in health as well as during illness. All these hidden things he brought to light, there being no equal to him as a discoverer in the whole universe.

After that he went over the water in a ship, voyaging swiftly from one clime to another. In that way he spent another fifty years. And then he set foot even beyond greatness. With the aid of the royal *Farr*, he fashioned a marvellous throne, which at his bidding was lifted by demons into the air. He sat upon that throne like the sun in the firmament. To celebrate, that day was called a new day—the festival of Now-Ruz—the first day of the new year.

Thus another three hundred years went by and men never saw death, remaining unacquainted even with toil and hardship, for the demons waited ever ready to serve. All men were obedient to the king's command and the world was pervaded by the pleasant

sounds of music. And so years went by until the royal *Farr* was wrested from him. The reason for it was that the king, who had always paid homage to God, now became filled with vanity and turned away from Him in forgetfulness of the gratitude he owed Him. He summoned those of his followers who were held in highest esteem and in these words addressed his nobles of long experience,

'I recognize no lord but myself. It was through me that skills appeared on earth, and no throne however famed has ever beheld a monarch like me. It was I who adorned the world with beauty and it is by my will that the earth has become what it now is. Sunshine, sleep and repose all come through me, and even your clothing and what enters your mouths originate from me. Power, crown and kingship are my prerogative. Who can claim that anyone but I am king? By means of drugs and other medicaments the world has been brought to such a level of health that sickness and death befall no one. Who but I have banished death from amongst mankind, although many kings have been upon the earth? It is because of me that you have minds and souls in your bodies. And now that you are aware that all this was accomplished by me, it is your duty to entitle me Creator of the World.'

The priests to a man remained with heads bowed low, none daring to ask 'Why?' or 'HOW?'. But as soon as he had made his speech the *Farr* departed from him and the world became full of discord. Men deserted his court and no one desiring repute would remain in his service, for when pride combines with power of action it brings ruin in its train and converts good fortune into bad. Jamshid's destiny was overcast with gloom and his world-illumining splendour disappeared.

(i) The *story* of *Zaḥḥāk*

In those days there lived a man who came from the deserts where men rode horses and brandished spears. He was a person much honoured for his generosity and one who in his fear of the Lord trembled as though shaken by a gale. The name of this noble man was Merdās. This true believer and prince had a son, whom he loved with a love beyond measure and who was called Ẓaḥḥāk, a youth of high courage, swift in action and bold. Of each day and night he spent two parts our of three in the saddle on noble enterprises, never for any unlawful purpose.

Now one day Eblis [the Devil] arrived on pretence of being a visitor who wished to pay him homage. The visitor's speeches fell agreeably on his ear, for he had no inkling of his character, and he surrendered to him with his whole mind, heart and pure soul, and humbled himself before him. Eblis, feeling that the prince had been completely won over by him, rejoiced beyond measure at his own cunning and said,

'I have many things to impart to you which no one knows but me.'

'Tell me then,' replied the youth, 'and hold nothing back. You are the man to give good advice. Instruct me.'

'First,' said he, 'I require an oath of you, and then I shall reveal such matters as I have to impart.'

The youth was innocent of heart. He gave his word, swearing an oath in which Eblis demanded that he would never disclose any part of his secret to anyone and would obey his every word. Eblis then said,

'Within this palace, my noble lord, what need for a being other than yourself? Why is a father necessary when a son like you exists? Listen to counsel. Over this aged nobleman long years have passed; he lingers on while you endure in wretchedness. Seize upon these riches and this palace; the high rank which he enjoys in the world is well suited to you. If you will have trust in what I say, you will be the only ruler in the world.'

As he heard this Ẕaḥḥāk became pensive, but his heart filled with pain at the thought of taking his father's life. 'It would conflict with all justice,' said he to Eblis. 'Suggest some other plan, for that is something which I cannot do.'

'If you fail in carrying out my advice,' replied Eblis, 'you will dishonour your pledge and the oath which you swore to me; that oath and your bond will lie heavily upon you. Moreover you will linger on as a person disregarded by all, while your father continues to command reverence.'

The head of the Arab [Ẕaḥḥāk] fell into the net and he was cowed into submission to the other's will. He asked what scheme he advised and declared he would not reject the slightest detail.

Now within the palace bounds the king had a garden which rejoiced his heart, and into it every night he went to prepare himself in privacy for the rites of worship by washing his head and body. The servants who accompanied him carried no lanterns, and on the path leading into the garden the vile demon, in pursuance

of his evil plan, dug a deep pit, and covered it with straw. Night fell and the Arab chief [the king], that noble lord ever zealous for his good repute, arose to enter the garden. As he approached the abysmal pit, the royal fortunes sank heavily; down into it he fell and lay there broken. So departed that benevolent and God-fearing man.

Ẓaḥḥāk, despicable malefactor, seizing his opportunity, usurped his father's place and set on his head the crown of the Arabs, amongst whom he became the giver of good and evil.

Once Eblis understood that he had brought this matter to an end with success, he began to elaborate a further scheme. He said to Ẓaḥḥāk,

'When you turned to me for aid, you won all that you desired. If you will make another such compact with me, leaving nothing undone that I suggest and obeying my commands, the sovereignty of the whole world will be yours. Every living animal wild or tame, together with the birds and the fishes, shall be in submission to you.'

So saying he departed to further this scheme and to devise another strange artifice.

(ii) *Eblis turns cook*

Having tricked himself out as a young man, glib-tongued, active and clean-limbed, Eblis found his way into the presence of Ẓaḥḥāk, whom he addressed in the language of flattery and said,

'If I am agreeable to your Majesty, I am myself a renowned and perfectly-trained cook.'

Ẓaḥḥāk accepted this with approval. He had a place got ready for him where he could prepare his viands, entrusted him with the key of the royal kitchens and gave him full oversight of all. In those days flocks were not plentiful, and living creatures were rarely killed for eating. Except for herbs men had nought to eat and it was the ground that produced all, until Ahriman, the Evil-doer, conceived and lodged in the minds of men the thought of killing animals. Out of every genus both of birds and quadrupeds he contrived eatables, making use of all. With their blood he fed Ẓaḥḥāk, as though it were milk, in order to make him stout of heart. And Ẓaḥḥāk obeyed every word that Eblis uttered, giving his mind in pledge to his command.

First Eblis gave Ẓaḥḥāk the yolk of an egg to eat and for a time

kept his body in good health with it. Ẓaḥḥāk ate and, finding it agreeable to his palate, gave praise to Eblis. One day Eblis said to him,

'Proud monarch, may you live for ever! Tomorrow I will prepare a dish that will give you the perfection of sustenance.' Then he went to rest and all night long his mind was occupied with the thought of the wondrous dishes his cook would concoct on the morrow. Next day, when the azure vault [of heaven] raised aloft and displayed the yellow jacinth [of the sun], Eblis cooked a dish of partridge and white pheasant and brought it in with his mind full of expectation, and as the Arab king stretched out his hand to the tray of food, his foolish head betrayed him into a partiality for Eblis.

On the following day the tray was decked by Eblis with chicken and lamb as well as with other viands. On the next day again when he set his tray before the king, he had prepared a saddle of veal enriched with saffron and rose-water as well as with old wine and clarified musk. When Ẓaḥḥāk partook of this delicacy and savoured it, he was filled with admiration at the man's skill and said to him,

'Consider what you would most desire and then ask me for it.'

The cook replied,

'May your Majesty live happily for ever, endowed with all-powerful command! My heart is wholly devoted to love for you and from your countenance comes all that sustains my spirit. I have one petition to make of your Majesty, although I am not of the degree to aspire to it. It is, if your Majesty command, that I may be permitted to kiss your shoulders and rub them with my eyes and face.'

Ẓaḥḥāk heard the words and, little suspecting what lay behind all the doings of Eblis, replied,

'I grant your desire. Mayhap your fame will get advancement from it.'

And so he let him have his wish, as though he were his dearest friend, to kiss him on his shoulders. This Eblis did, and immediately vanished into the ground—a marvel such as no man in the world has ever seen.

From Ẓaḥḥāk's shoulders now two black serpents thrust their heads out, filling him with terror. On every hand he sought for a remedy and at last had recourse to cutting them off. But, just as branches sprout anew from trees, so those two black serpents grew

again from the royal shoulders. Learned physicians crowded about him, each in turn advising what should be done; and every kind of wizardry was tried. Yet no remedy was found for the affliction.

And then Eblis appeared again, this time in the guise of a physician. Presenting himself gravely before Ẓaḥḥāk, he said,

'This is an occurrence predestined by fate. Leave all alone. Since they are there, you must not cut them off; rather let food be prepared and given them to eat so that they can be propitiated. That is the only proper expedient. For food let them have nothing but human brains, and it may be that given that kind of nurture they will die.' [And in this his secret intent was to empty the world of people.]

(iii) *Jamshid's fortunes decline*

Days passed, and then, [God having withdrawn His favour from Jamshid] a mighty discontent arose throughout Iran. On every hand strife and turmoil erupted and glorious bright day was turned to darkness. Jamshid's allies broke away from him, his divine *Farr* became tarnished and he took to crooked paths and folly. On every hand new kings sprang up, on every frontier men sought a way to power. They gathered armies and made war, their hearts having been emptied of all affection for Jamshid. By ones and twos a host of men forsook Iran and went along the roads towards the Arabs, in whose land, they had heard, was an awe-inspiring king with a dragon's body.

Iranian knights, in search of a new king, turned their glances in unison towards Ẓaḥḥāk and, saluting him as sovereign, they proclaimed him liing of Iran.

Swift as the wind the dragon-king journeyed to Iran, where he assumed the crown. In Iran and from amongst the Arabs he chose an army composed of the champions of every region. Then when fortune had withdrawn its face from Jamshid, the new king hemmed him in closely until he came and surrendered throne and crown, his high rank vanishing with his diadem, treasure and retinue. The world grew black in his sight, so that he hid himself away and no one saw him again for a hundred years. At last he, prince of besmirched faith, appeared in the sea of China. There Ẓaḥḥāk had him seized and, without granting him a moment's respite, had his body sawn in two, thus cleansing the world and ridding it of all fear of him.