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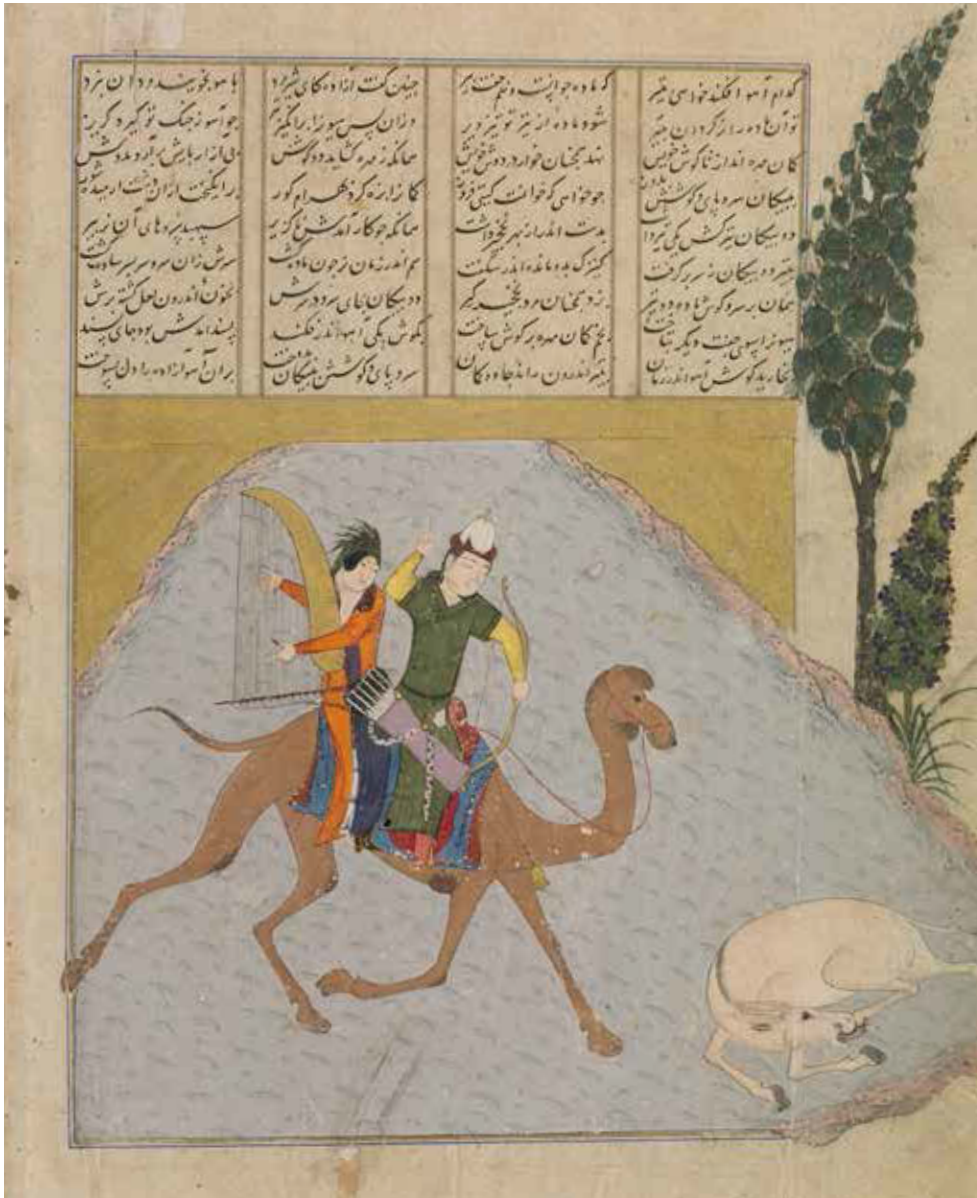
***‘The Conceits of Poetry’:
Firdausi’s Shahnama and the discovery of
Persian in early modern Europe***

The Muse of the Coming Age

In one of his few meta-literary stories, written in 1861, the famous Danish fairy tale writer, Hans Christian Andersen, posed a question to the reader about the future of literature in the century to come. ‘The Muse of the Coming Age, whom our great grandchildren, or possibly a later generation still, but not ourselves, shall make acquaintance with, – how does she manifest herself? What is her face and form? What is the burden of her song? Whose heart-strings shall she touch? To what summit shall she lift her century?’ Responding with the gaze of a Romantic writer, Anderson proposes a number of possible figures, at the crossroads of the poetic tradition and modern scientific prose. But what is certain to him is that the Muse ‘in the vast workshop of the present . . . is born, where steam exerts its sinews’; ‘The nurse has sung to her of *Eivind Skalde-spiller* and *Firdusi*, of the *Minnesingers* and what *Heine*, boyish-bold, sang from his very poet’s soul . . .’. Thus, to Andersen, the Persian poet Firdausi was among the required body of knowledge for anyone who aimed at creating literature in the coming age; an age whose Muse was launched towards the future as a locomotive pushed by the force of steam. Andersen added, with emphasis and visionary passion: ‘Europe’s railways hedge old Asia’s fast-sealed culture-archives – the opposing streams of human culture meet! . . .’.¹

In fact, by the middle of the 19th century, European knowledge of Abu’l Qasim Firdausi Tusi (d. 1020) and his poetic work, the *Shahnama*, (‘Book of Kings’), was still very sketchy, even though some pioneers had beaten a path towards acquiring knowledge and appreciation of the book, while some legendary details about Firdausi’s life had fascinated several European poets and scholars. This article contributes a brief overview of the long and sometimes tortuous process of European engagement with this masterpiece of human literature, which itself is a story only partially reconstructed, needing further research. On the other hand, as we will see, this story is closely tied to the complex history of European encounter with the Persian language.

The *Shahnama* is one of the most voluminous epics of world literature. It was completed in the year 1010 CE, and contains around 55,000 verses (each *bayt*, ‘verse’, consists of two rhyming hemistiches, *mesra*’, which is the prosodic structure of the Persian *masnavi*, or narrative poem).² The work recounts the history of the ancient kings of Iran from its mythical beginnings to the Arab conquest in 651 CE, and it is structured around four successive dynasties, with their 50 different kingdoms, each representing the various phases of human history, seen from the Iranian perspective.



Bahram Gur hunts with Azada.

Leaf from a disbound manuscript of Firdausi, *Shahnama*, copied for Ibrahim Sultan, c. 1430, Shiraz. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Ouseley Add. 176, fol. 337v.

The first dynasty presented in the poem, consisting of the early mythical *shahs* of the Pishdadiyan, is associated with the founding of civilisation, through the introduction of such technologies and social practices as fire, metallurgy, cooking, weaving, cattle breeding, agriculture, and law. This first section of the poem provides the framework within which the eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil are played out. The second dynasty, the Kayaniyan, partly includes figures connected with the historical dynasty of the Achaemenids. This dynasty is presented as having set the geographical identity of Iran – as opposed to its Central Asiatic counterpart, Turan – by way of a symphonic alternation between war and peace, fault and justice, crime and vengeance. This section incorporates the famous 'Sistan cycle' of legends about the hero Rustam and his family. After the shocking break in Iranian rule constituted by the conquest of Alexander the Great – referred to as King Iskandar in the Persian sources – the third very brief section of the book, with about twenty verses, concentrates on the Ashkaniyan dynasty, that is, the Parthians. The fourth and final part of the poem presents a very detailed account devoted to the Sasanians. This section is considered to be the most historical: it concerns both the great achievements and the increasing decadence of the last dynasty that ruled a unified Iran before the advent of Islam. It also reflects the crisis in Iranian identity that was still a palpable concern several centuries later in Firdausi's time.

Taken as a whole, the *Shahnama* of Firdausi (whose name means 'the Paradisiac') covers the full spectrum of human and political experience: from battles and romantic interludes, to realistic descriptions and supernatural events; from intense moral meditations to exploration of the depths of human doubt. Through these myriad themes, the *Shahnama* constitutes above all a vast reflection on authority and its relationship to wisdom. Within the literary tradition, the work belongs to the genre of the *Fürstenspiegel*, 'Mirror for princes': it functions both as an admonishment to the haughty king who abuses his power, and as a set of precepts that must be followed by the righteous king seeking to employ wisdom in his rule. As Charles-Henri de Fouchécour stated: 'Ferdowsi est un poète, épique et lyrique pour la forme, moraliste et politique pour le fond'.³ In dealing with the succession of Iran's legitimate kings, the *Shahnama* in fact is concerned with the ideal image of a king. It is probably useful to note, also, that a literal translation of the work's title would not be given in the plural, as *The Book of Kings*, as it is usually known, but rather *The Book of the King*, reflecting the aim to present kingship as an abstract ideal, as much as an historical account of Iran's rulers.

The *Shahnama* was dedicated to the Ghaznavid ruler Sultan Mahmud (ruled 999-1030 CE), who had built a strong presence in the eastern region of the Caliphate, and whose court was brimming with the cream of the poets and intellectuals of the time. Unfortunately, Mahmud's response to the poem was not as enthusiastic and generous as expected and promised. According to the legend, he gave Firdausi a much less valuable reward than the agreed one; in response, on leaving Ghazna the poet is said to have given all of the money to some workers outside the palace, thence retiring to his home town

of Tus, embittered enough to compose a harsh satire against Mahmud, which can be read in some of the manuscripts that contain the poem. The legend continues the story with an epilogue: Mahmud recognizes his mistake and unfair behaviour, and re-sends the reward promised to Firdausi's village. But just as the messengers were entering the town of Tus through one of its gates, Firdausi's funeral procession was leaving from the opposite gate. The legend is universally known in the Persian world, but it also came to appeal to the Romantic ideal of poetry in 19th-century Europe.

The King and the Maidservant

Produced in the heart of Asia, the *Shahnama* is based on a long tradition of Persian stories – transmitted both orally and textually. At the same time, as a work devoted to universal themes on the virtues and failings associated with kingship and sovereignty, much of the book indirectly draws on the literature circulating in Eurasia in that period. Of course, this is the case for the dense chapter on Alexander the Great, King Iskandar, the destroyer of the Achaemenid Empire, whose narrative is based mainly on the transmission of the Greek romance by the Pseudo-Callisthenes and its derivatives.⁴ The Persian legend made Alexander the illegitimate son of the Persian king Darab, thus a step-brother to Dara, the king he fought against and defeated. In this way, the Iranian authors of the Alexander legend attempted to recover the great collective mourning that was felt at the fall of the Achaemenid Empire, which marked a break in the chain of legitimate kingship. Still, other details and scenes of the legendary history of the Iranian kings reflect the very animated literary circulation that took place in Eurasia between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: as an enormous sapiential narrative, the *Shahnama* was part of this circulation, and from the very point of its compilation it interacted with European culture in the widest sense, even if tenuously.

One useful and multifaceted example of cross-pollination between the literary traditions can be found in the *Shahnama* section which deals with the long and illustrious reign of the Sasanian king Bahram Gur (historically Bahram V, ruled 420-438 CE): one particular episode has been made famous through a number of splendid miniatures depicting a hunting expedition undertaken by Bahram in the company of the beautiful maidservant Azada (whose Persian name literally means 'Free')(see p. 120). A skilled harp player, Azada provokes the young prince by setting him a very difficult archery trial. The prince accepts the challenge and, at the cost of showing himself to be ferocious and merciless, with great ability he transforms a male deer into a female one, by cutting off its horns with just one arrow shot. He then changes a female into a male deer, by driving two arrows into its head, as if they were horns. Finally, and aiming to comply fully with the servant's request, Bahram uses a stratagem to hit a third deer with one last arrow, nailing one of its hooves to its ear.

چنین گفت آزاده ای شیرمرد	به آهو نجویند مردان نبرد
تو آن ماده را نره گردان به تیر	شود ماده از تیر تو نره پیر
از آن پس هیون را برانگیز تیز	چو آهو ز چنگ تو بگیرد گریز
همان مهره انداز تا گوش خویش	نهد همچنان خوار بر دوش خویش
همانگه ز مهره بخاردش گوش	بی آزار پایش بر آرد به دوش
به پیکان سر و پای و گوشش بدوز	چو خواهی که خوانمت گیتی فروز

Azadeh replied: 'You are a lion of a man, and a warrior doesn't fight against deer! But turn that doe to a buck with an arrow, and with another arrow make the buck into a doe. Then urge your camel forward, and as they flee from you, use your slingshot, and strike one of the deer on the ear, so that she will rub it against her shoulder and lift up her foot to scratch the spot, and when she does that – if you want me to call you the light of the world – pin her foot, ear and head together with one shaft'.⁵

This famous and deeply symbolic episode has a clear antecedent in the descriptions of the Roman emperor Domitian's hunting customs, as reported by Suetonius (c. 120 CE) in his *Lives of the Caesars* (Domitianus XIX):

Armorum nullo, sagittarum vel praecipuo studio tenebatur. Centenas varii generis feras saepe in Albano secessu conficientem spectavere plerique atque etiam ex industria ita quarundam capita figentem, ut duobus ictibus quasi cornua efficeret. Nonnumquam in pueri procul stantis praebentisque pro scopulo dispansam dexteræ manus palmam sagittas tanta arte derexit, ut omnes per intervalla digitorum innocue evaderent.⁶

While it is not possible to reconstruct here the many twists and turns that the details of this scene took throughout the nine centuries and various regions and languages which separate Suetonius from Firdausi, it might not be by chance that the beautiful and daring slave Azada is identified in the *Shahnama* as 'Rumi', a term which is often translated as 'Greek', but may also be understood as 'Roman'. Through the centuries, furthermore, its general meaning came to refer to all civilisations that lie to the west of Iran, in Asia Minor and in Europe, commonly viewed by Firdausi and his contemporaries as one and continuous.

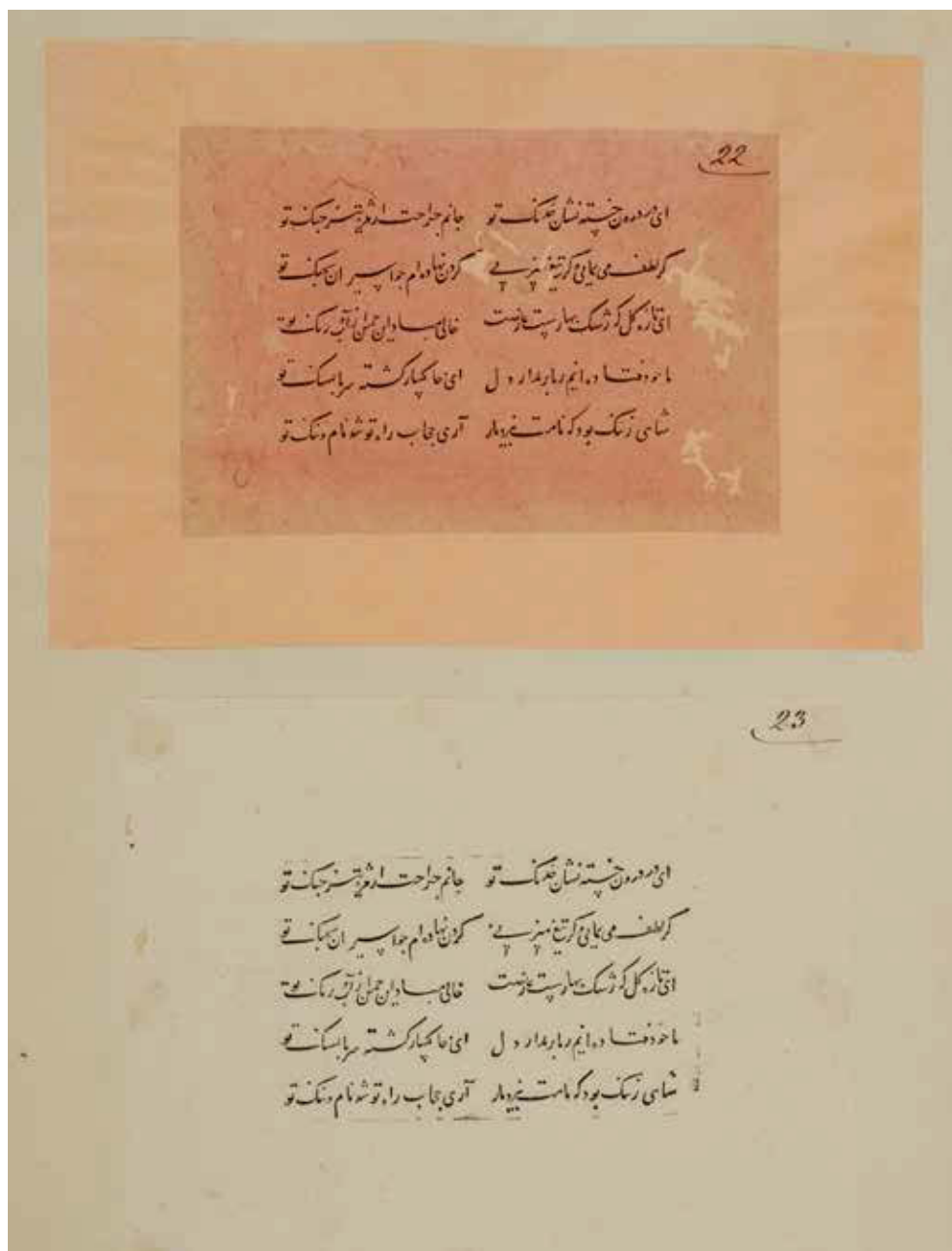
In Iran, Firdausi's account provided the basis for later variants of the 'Romance of Bahram', *Bahramnama*. These were produced by notable Persian poets, such as the *Haft Paykar*, 'Seven Figures', by Nizami-i Ganjavi (d. 1209), the *Hasht Bihisht*, 'Eight Paradises', by Amir Khusrau-i Dihlavi (d. 1325), and the *Haft Manzar*, 'Seven Sceneries', by Hatifi (d. 1521). In these accounts, the maidservant figure – who was given different, but always meaningful, names (*Fitna*, 'Temptation'; *Dilaram*, 'Consoler', *Ashub*, 'Tumult') – was pivotal in transforming the tale from that of a reflection on authority and hierarchy, into a story on the ability of subtlety and love to cure the abuses of power. Although explicit traces of the *Shahnama*'s most ancient stories remain elusive in the European narratives of the Middle Ages, the Bahram episode arrived once more on the shores of Europe, this time in Italy in the mid-16th century, and probably by way of these three *masnavis* (long narrative poems). Re-cast into Italian, the Bahram story represents the first translation

of Persian works into any European language. It was published as the *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del Re di Serendippo* by a certain Cristoforo Armeno in Venice in 1557.⁷ In this extremely successful book, the story of Bahram and the maidservant was reproduced as one of the novellas, while the narrative frame of the work concerned the story of three wise princes from the island of Sri Lanka (*Sarandib* in Persian), whose dexterity in solving clues is considered to have laid the foundation for the structure of the modern detective novel. It was on the basis of the English version of a French reworking of this Italian book, which appeared in 1722 with the title *Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*, that Horace Walpole, in 1754, coined the now famous term 'serendipity', meaning 'accidental sagacity'.⁸

The Conceits of Poetry

But in returning our discussion to the 16th century, we find that the appearance of the *Peregrinaggio* probably was not by chance. This was the period when European scholars began to recognize the existence of a second cultural language of the Islamic world, besides Arabic. As the result of the mostly polemical or missionary approach of the Europeans towards the region, up to the end of the 15th century the scholarly study of Persian had been mainly the prerogative of restricted religious milieus, especially the Dominicans. Only a few isolated erudites seem to have had a less superficial perception and knowledge of Persian.

In this context, we have to consider as a true milestone the establishment of the Medici Oriental Press in Rome at the end of the 16th century: the Press was promoted by Pope Gregory XIII and placed under the patronage of Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici. From the time of its foundation in 1584, the Press was entrusted to the directorship of the Neapolitan Giovanni Battista Raimondi, a teacher of mathematics at 'La Sapienza' University in Rome and an expert linguist, whose abilities apparently included, besides Latin and Greek, also Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew, Coptic, and Syriac. The first aim of the Press was to publish books, mainly Christian works, in Oriental scripts, in order to evangelise the Muslim lands and to move closer to Oriental Christians. Yet below the surface of the missionising project, the depth of the editorial work of the Press, which spanned the fields of linguistics, science and literature, seems to have placed the circle of scholars led by Raimondi, who came to Rome from various corners of the Mediterranean, at the heart of a closely woven network of intellectual interests and relations with the East in late-16th century Italy. Unfortunately, following a series of personal and financial misadventures, Raimondi's enterprise could not achieve all the goals that he had been working for, but the scope of his research, knowledge, and cultural milieu demand to be rediscovered and acknowledged as a fundamental step in the history of Oriental studies in Europe.⁹ Despite his setbacks, Raimondi managed to publish an *Alphabetum Arabicum*, three Arabic grammars, and the Arabic versions of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, Euclid's *Elements*, and an abridged version of Idrisi's *Geography*. Moreover, Raimondi insistently campaigned for the establishment of an Arabic chair in Rome, and



Shahi Sabzavari, *Ghazal*.
Printed edition, c. 1590.
Archivio di Stato, Florence.

we may attribute to his efforts the opening of Arabic courses at ‘La Sapienza’ University in 1605. Still, Raimondi had a special devotion to Persian that comes out clearly from the breadth and depth of the projects he embarked on in this field, but which unfortunately were never carried out: they included grammars, dictionaries and a number of editions and translations of texts from the Persian literary and scientific tradition.

It is precisely in the context of the Medici Press enterprise that we can find what seems to be the oldest mention of Firdausi in Italian, and possibly the first in any European language. Among Raimondi’s collaborators, an outstanding role was played by the two Vecchietti brothers, Giovan Battista and Gerolamo, who accomplished various diplomatic and scholarly missions to Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Persia, and India, on behalf of both the Papacy and the Medici family. On their return from these various trips, they provided the Press with numerous Oriental manuscripts in line with Raimondi’s editorial plans. In particular, Giovan Battista Vecchietti laid the foundation for the study of Judeo-Persian literature, and at the end of a Judeo-Persian Psalterium whose transcription in Hormuz he had personally supervised (today held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France), he explains in his own hand the difficulties he encountered with the interpretation of the text, which required continuous comparison with the works of the outstanding ancient poets of Iran, among them ‘Ferdausi’.

I maestri persiani mi hanno aiutato ad intendere molte antiche voci e disusate, sparte per questo libro intero, a pena hoggi intese da valentissimi huomini di questa lingua, però che essendo seguita questa traduzione come comprender si puo in tempi molto antichi, molte voci che ci ha sono hoggi poco intese; e chi da i piu antichi poeti persiani, come Ferdausi, Azrachi, Ispanghi, Chemol Ismail, et altri a questi simiglianti non le racapezza, come habbiamo noi fatto, non puo cavarne costruito al(cuno).¹⁰

At the same time, Giovan Battista’s brother, Gerolamo Vecchietti, was the first to import into Italy a manuscript of Firdausi’s *Shahnama*, from Cairo in the 1590s. The manuscript passed into Raimondi’s personal book collection, but as a result of the collection’s various misfortunes, the manuscript was buried for centuries in the Florence National Library, under an old catalogue file describing it as an ‘Arabic Commentary on the Koran’: eventually the precious manuscript was identified and recovered by Angelo Michele Piemontese in 1978. The manuscript, which includes only the first half of the poem – 22,000 verses up to the reign of Kay Khusrau – seems to originate from Turkey, among the Akhi brotherhood of Anatolia; it is dated 30th of Muharram 614 AH, corresponding to 9 May 1217, and is considered the oldest extant manuscript of the *Shahnama*. It constitutes one of the key texts used for the publication of the most recent full edition, completed in New York in 2007 under the supervision of Jalal Khaleqi-Motlaq.¹¹

It is not possible to establish with certainty the extent to which Raimondi’s study of Persian involved the *Shahnama*. Indeed, it seems that, as a mathematician and a linguist, and true to the last vestiges of European Renaissance humanism, Raimondi’s main interests were in scientific treatises, dictionaries and grammars. However, his print

samples of a *ghazal* by the 15th-century poet, Shahi Sabzavari, datable to the 1590s, survive in the Florence State Archive (see p. 125), and, even though not previously published, they represent the first Persian text in Arabic script ever printed with movable type

جانم جراحت از مژه تیز چنگ تو گردن نهاده ام چو اسیران بچنگ تو خالی مباد این چمن از آب و رنگ تو ای خاکسار گشته سر ما بسنگ تو آری حجاب راه تو شد نام و ننگ تو	ای در درون خسته نشان خدنگ تو گر لطف می نمایی و گر تیغ میزنی ای تازه گل که رشک بهارست عارضت ما خود فتاده ایم ز ما بر مدار دل شاهی زنگ بود که نامت نبرد یار
Oh, your arrow's mark's on my afflicted spirit!	My soul's hurt by your eyelash's barbed claw.
Whether you show grace or draw your sword,	As a prisoner, I bend my head under your assault.
Oh rosebud, whose cheek makes the spring jealous,	Never be this field empty of your honour!
We've fallen already, don't take our heart	Oh, for your stone our head turned into dust.
Shahi, by shame the friend did not use your name	Yes, the veil on your road became your fame and shame

But Raimondi's love for the Persian language shines – with the glow of a pearl, as a Persian poet would say – above all in a short note included in one of his personal papers, which probably constitutes the first conscious European description of Persian, reflecting a knowledge that is as deep, as it is precocious. In the course of a sketchy philosophical dissertation on language as the feature distinguishing human beings from beasts, Raimondi observes:

se ben pare che queste siano le tre celebrate dall'orientali et da quelli che hanno piu lingue imparate, cioè la greca, l'arabica, et la persiana, tutta uolta da quelli che piu esquisito gusto hanno hauuto nelle lingue è stato giudicato il p. loco di ragione douersi alla Persiana per essere la piu bella, la piu leggiadra et la piu saporita lingua che sia nel mondo et per essere in quella scritti libri d'ogni facoltà et d'ogni scientia et in particolare la poesia abundantissimamente, che parve propriamente essere data all'homo da Dio, per far'esprimere li concetti di Poesia. Dunque la lingua Persiana principalmente da tutti si deue perfettamente imparare.¹²

Although it seems that these three languages, namely Greek, Arabic and Persian, are the most celebrated by Oriental peoples and by whoever has learned many languages, nevertheless those who have more exquisite taste in languages have judged, reasonably, that the first place should be given to Persian, for it is the finest, the prettiest and the wittiest language in the world, and because books of every genre and science are written in that language, particularly a great amount of poetry. And in fact it seems to be a gift from God to mankind in order to express the conceits of Poetry.



Rustam mortally wounds Suhrab.
Leaf from a disbound manuscript of Firdausi, *Shahnameh*, copied for Ibrahim Sultan, c. 1430, Shiraz.
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Ouseley Add. 176, fol. 92r.

This passage can be read as a beautiful summary of the Persian contribution to human culture. Raimondi's efforts in producing the first Persian grammar for European scholars were continued by one of his pupils, Flavio Clementino Amerino, but the draft of this well-informed book never reached publication and it is now preserved in manuscript in the Vatican Library. The torch of Persian language knowledge was to be carried further by the Dutch and French orientalist schools with the publication of the first Persian grammar, Louis de Dieu's *Rudimenta linguae persicae*, in Latin in 1639, and the second significant translation of a Persian literary work into a European language: André du Ryer's French version of Sa 'di's *Gulistan* in 1634.¹³ Also, the classic collection of Arabic animal fables known as *Kalila wa Dimna*, which had circulated in many languages throughout Eurasia during the Middle Ages, was re-translated from a Persian version into French, and published in 1644 as *Le Livre des Lumières ou la Conduite des Roys*: it was to be among Jean de la Fontaine's sources for his *Fables*. As for European knowledge of Firdausi, after Giovan Battista Vecchietti's first brief mention of the name of the poet from Tus, we owe to a French scholar the widening horizon that gradually develops around his figure and personality. The scholar, Barthélemy d'Herbelot, visited Florence in 1666, where he carefully examined the papers and manuscripts of Raimondi's personal library, stored in Florence under the patronage of the Medici family. This research provided the basis for d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, a work grounded in the scrupulous analysis of vast quantities of Arabic, Persian and Turkish historiographical sources. It is here that we can read one of the first – although quite restrained – sketches related to Firdausi in a European language.

Ferdousi le composa en soixante mil vers, dont chacun est proprement un de nos Distiques, à la requisition du Sultan Mahmoud fils de Sebeckteghin, qui ne l'ayant recompensé que de soixante mille drachmes d'argent, ce Poète irrité en eut tant de dépit, qu'il quitta la Cour du Sultan, & fit des vers contre lui.¹⁴

In the same period, a few vague notes also were reported by the French traveller Jean Chardin. We can appreciate that the focus of these first accounts is not so much on the content of the *Shahnama*, as it is on the legendary story of the poet's conflicted relationship with Sultan Mahmud. This will become one of the main motifs surrounding the European acquaintance with Firdausi.

Between Achilles and Rustum

More generally, during that same 17th century, recognition of the Persian language was evolving in various countries in Europe (the Netherlands, France, Great Britain, Italy, Austria, Poland, Russia, and others) as a result of a number of intersecting factors: the personal and institutional interests of travellers and merchants; the evolution of diplomatic relations with Safavid Persia; the acquisition of manuscripts by private collectors and royal libraries, and the establishment of courses in Persian in missionary language schools and universities, where Persian was taught initially as a language ancillary to Arabic. It is worthy of note that, throughout this process of encountering

Persian language and culture, Firdausi was not given the importance that he actually had in the history of Persian literature and in the esteem of his countrymen. Although we can observe some progress in the knowledge of the *Shahnama*, Firdausi did not enjoy the fashionable fortune enjoyed by other Persian poets in Europe: he never had a Pietro Della Valle or a Goethe, who imported the fame of Hafiz into Europe through their passionate reading, their crowded lectures, and their inspired evocations. Neither had he, like Khayyam, an Edward Fitzgerald who, even if by misunderstanding and betraying him, nevertheless gave him an immortal fame and a modern vivid cultural role, transforming his poetry into a 'manifesto' of late-19th century Decadentism.

From the end of the 18th century, however, a few scholars had begun to collect and translate the first extracts of the *Shahnama*. In 1774, the British linguist and orientalist, William Jones, provided the Latin and English translations of some passages of the work in his *Poeseos Asiaticae Commentariorum Libri Sex*, as well as in other writings. Considered by many to be the father of the new current of Indo-European studies, he observed:

The work of Ferdusi remains entire, a glorious monument of Eastern genius and learning; which, if ever it should be generally understood in its original language, will contest the merit of invention with Homer himself, whatever be thought of its subject or the arrangement of its incidents.¹⁵

Other fragmentary translations or summaries were published in Europe, particularly in Great Britain, France, and Germany, between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries.¹⁶ But it was after the first print editions produced in India (by Lumsden, 1811, incomplete, and Macan, 1829) that we can see a real development in Western engagement with Firdausi's work. Between 1838 and 1878 the French orientalist, Jules Mohl, provided a new complete edition, accompanied by the first unabridged translation in French prose.¹⁷

Italy re-entered quite late into this process, due in part to the diminishing tradition of Iranian studies after the end of the 17th century. However, the re-engagement of some Italian scholars with the field in the 19th century produced an outstanding result: in 1885 Italo Pizzi (1849–1920), Professor of Persian and Philology in Turin, undertook his own complete verse translation of the *Shahnama*, 'Libro dei Re', published in eight volumes between 1886 and 1888. This was the second complete version of the work in a European language, and the first in verse.¹⁸ The first complete English translation was to be produced a few decades later (by Arthur G. and Edmond Warner: nine volumes published between 1905–25). In the case of German translations, after Schack's (1851 and 1853) and Rückert's (1890–95) partial verse translations, a German complete edition is yet to be produced.

With regard to the laborious process by which Firdausi entered into European mainstream culture, we can observe three main features in the way he was presented to, and received by, the general public. While, in so doing, there is a risk of some oversimplification, our aim here is to demonstrate precisely the degree of selectivity and, in

some cases, of superficiality, that was still affecting the reading of his work in Europe. The first characteristic of European engagement with Firdausi was the inevitable comparison with Greek epic literature, and the figure of Homer. In the context of the English-speaking world, such a comparison also entailed reference to the endearing poetic style of the most celebrated English translator of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Alexander Pope. (For example, William Jones described how Firdausi wrote 'with the spirit of our Dryden, and the sweetness of Pope').¹⁹ In this vein, Joseph Champion wrote the following in the dedicatory prelude to his partial translation of the work:

For Homer only did the epic muse
Weave the bright wreath, impearl'd in orient dew?
For our Ferdosi did the fates design,
The Poet's crown, and fancy's richest mine?
Does Hector or Achilles rage in fight?
A Rustem equals with undaunted might!
Do envious gods the fierce contention raise?
Ahermen rises, and the daemons blaze!
Does filial piety Eneas warm,
Through seas immense, and through the hostile storm?
Read in great Munochere's illustrious reign,
The same bright moral, and exalted strain.²⁰

A second element of Firdausi's work that touched the Romantic soul of 19th-century European poets and intellectuals was the Persian poet's unjust fate. The theme of the caravan sent by the regretful sultan, which enters the city overflowing with riches just as the poet's mourning procession departs through the other gate, was recorded in many orientalist and semi-orientalist works.²¹ It even inspired a surprising poetic homage by the German poet Heinrich Heine, in his *Romanzero*, with the poem 'Der Dichter Firdusi', in 1851:

[...] Wohl durch das Westtor zog herein
Die Karawane mit Lärmen und Schrein.

Die Trommel scholl, das Kuhhorn klang,
Und lautaufjubelt Triumphgesang.

«La Illa Il Allah!» aus voller Kehle
Jauchzten die Treiber der Kamele.

Doch durch das Osttor, am andern End'
Von Thus, zog in demselben Moment

Zur Stadt hinaus der Leichenzug,
Der den toten Firdusi zu Grabe trug.²²

But the third and probably main trait that attracted the European intelligentsia in search of the secret core of the Persian cultural tradition, was the mythical story of Rustam and his son Suhrab (see p. 128). The tragic fate of the son unknowingly killed by his own

father possibly resonated for Europeans as an echo of the theological myth and concept of Abraham and Isaac, as well as an ante-litteram counterpart to the identification of the psychological myth of Oedipus, killer of his own father, that was to become a foundational feature of the upcoming new psychoanalytical discipline. The evident resonance that this story of Rustam found with European readers is reflected in a number of ways: the episode was the subject of several relatively free translations that were produced and published separately; also, the vogue for the story prompted influential rewritings, as well as original works of poetry. These included: Friedrich Rückert's *Rostem und Sohrab. Eine Heldengeschichte*, in German (1838); Vasilij Zhukovski's *Rustem i Zorab*, in Russian (1849), and Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, in English (1853). More generally, European readers identified the story of Sohrab and Rustam as the essence of the *Shahnama*, while the focus on the tragic fate of the great Iranian champion may well have accompanied the development of late Romantic ideals:

Lass aus dem Königsbuch der Perser dir berichten
Von Rostam und Sohrab die schönste der Geschichten,
Von Heldenruhm, wie leicht er Frauenlieb' erwarb,
Und wie der eigne Sohn, erlegt vom Vater, starb!²³

In the case of one of the most noted interpreters of the famous story, Matthew Arnold, we find that the poet had no knowledge of the Persian language. Instead, the professor of poetry at Oxford, and the celebrated author of *On translating Homer* and *Culture and Anarchism*, based his poem on a few notes found in historical studies and on the French translation of the *Shahnama* that Jules Mohl was in the process of completing. Yet, as John D. Yohannan observed, despite Arnold's very partial knowledge of the *Shahnama*: 'only the Rubaiyat [by Khayyam] has had better success than his "Sohrab and Rustum" in making Persian poetry familiar to English readers.'²⁴ This was a poem that, in Arnold's aim, was to 'animate' the soul of the reader, with his colourful description of the struggle between father and son, and the heroic acceptance of their unjust destiny:

Father, forbear! for I but meet to-day
The doom that at my birth was written down
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven's unconscious hand.
Surely my heart cried out that it was thou,
When first I saw thee; and thy heart spoke too,
I know it: but Fate trod those promptings down
Under its iron heel; Fate, Fate engag'd
The strife, and hurld me on my father's spear.
But let us speak no more of this: I find
My father; let me feel that I have found.
Come, sit beside me on this sand, and take
My head betwixt thy hands, and kiss my cheeks,
And wash them with thy tears, and say: 'My son!'

Quick! quick! for numbered are my sands of life
And swift; for like the lightning to this field
I came, and like the wind I go away—
Sudden, and swift, and like a passing wind.
But it was writ in Heaven that this should be.²⁵

Aside from the success of a number of works like Arnold's poem, we would be justified in lamenting Europe's tenuous knowledge and appreciation of the greatest epic narrative in the Persian literary tradition at the cusp of the 20th century. This was also a time when the discipline of Islamic art history began to emerge from under the shadow of general history in European academic circles. This shift coincided with colonial expansion and the consequent rise of artistic and scholarly travels in the Middle East. As a result, the period witnessed the first specialist publications and journals on Islamic art, as well as the first important art collections in the West, built up with coins, manuscripts, glass, pottery, metalwork, woodwork, lacquer, textiles, carpets, and so on. Of course, as the circulation of manuscripts increased in Europe, so too did direct contact with the most ancient extant versions of many Persian literary masterpieces, including the *Shahnama*. Yet, regrettably, the attention of European collectors and dealers focused almost exclusively on the miniatures that commonly adorned the texts, at the expense of the texts themselves. It was these remarkably beautiful images that were treated as fashionable pieces of art suitable for the growing 'orientalist' market, with the result that, outside the specialist academic milieu (and sometimes also within it), some priceless manuscripts were dismembered and sold by the page. This, sadly, was the case with the formerly named *Demotte Shahnama*, the celebrated manuscript called thus after the Belgian dealer Georges Demotte. In his hands, the immeasurable literary patrimony that the text represented was destroyed in order to make the most of its economic value by selling its individual illustrated pages. Nowadays, this manuscript, one of the most beautiful versions of Firdausi's poem, more appropriately is known as the *Great Mongol Shahnama*, but its folios are scattered all over the world: Tehran, Boston, Dublin, London, New York, Paris, and elsewhere.²⁶

A Monument at the Crossroads

Of course, in terms of modern European scholarly engagement with the *Shahnama*, a slightly more optimistic picture emerges: in the course of the 20th century, and at the beginning of the present century, a number of important initiatives and studies have animated Western scholarship of the *Shahnama*, contributing a rich array of new analyses and debates concerning the poem, new translations, conferences, and celebrations of the various anniversaries of the work, and even digital survey projects that provide the means to collate and disseminate the enormous and colourful physical presence of the *Shahnama* to a potentially vast global audience. Still, if one were to conduct a survey of informed non-scholars about which texts were the most important in the literary traditions of Asia, it is likely that they would have at least a sense of the quatrains of



Statue of Firdausi, Rome.
Author's photo.

Khayyam, or of the Indian epic of the *Mahabharata*, much more than they would have of the *Shahnama*.

Instead, in outlining the key features of the *Shahnama* and its various intersections with the literary traditions and readership of the West, I have attempted to show that these very intersections, and the great human themes that the poem explores, reveal the *Shahnama* as inextricably linked to the development of world literature. The *Shahnama* is now ready to enter fully into the general consciousness of non-Iranian readers, and to assume the status that such a heightened awareness would confer on the masterpiece. Indeed, only a few years ago, Amin Banani evoked the familiar comparison between the *Shahnama* and the *Iliad*, to make the following point:

It is perhaps time for us in the West . . . to embark upon a thoughtful reading of the *Shahnamah*. Along with the breath-taking beauty of its overall design and structure, the compelling profundity of its ethical message, and the heart-breaking fates of its guileless youthful heroes, . . . the alert reader will soon discover that legitimacy of authority and rulership is conditional It is an honest assessment of the human condition.²⁷

This may well be the task of the Muse of *our* Coming Age, some 150 years after Hans Christian Andersen's prediction.

A useful visual illustration of this point can be made by way of one of the few full figure statues of Firdausi that exist outside Iran (opposite). The statue is located in the city of Rome, in Italy, the place where Firdausi's name first appeared in Latin characters. It was made in 1958 by the Iranian sculptor Abu 'l-Hasan Sadiqi, in the atelier of his Italian colleague, Ugo Quaglieri, and was presented to the municipality of Rome, under the patronage of the city of Tehran. The statue stands at the edge of the beautiful Villa Borghese gardens, in 'Piazzale Ferdowsi' (Firdausi Square), appropriately at the end of 'Via Omero' (Homer Avenue), and it also faces Rome's Gallery of Modern Art, in 'Piazzale Cervantes' (Cervantes Square): the location itself constitutes a metaphorically ideal literary crossroads. The epigraph on the base of the statue is composed of a selection of Firdausi's verses, calling the reader to the task of intellectual equilibrium, human understanding, and moral rectitude, which are the values that in many respects encapsulate the core of the *Shahnama*:

بد آنکه که بگشاد راز از نهفت
خرد یار و فرهنگ آموزگار
به مردی جهان زیر پای آوری

نگه کن که دانای ایران چه گفت
هنر باید و گوهر نامدار
چو این چار گوهر به جای آوری

See what the wise man of Iran said
When he unveiled the hidden secret:
Art is needed, and a noble birth,
Cultivated intelligence and culture learnt.
When you have these four jewels set,
By virtue, you'll have the world at your feet²⁸