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Books

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Iran's other book

by [Russell Seitz](#)

A review of the "Shahnameh."

Abolqasem Ferdowsi
Shahnameh,
translated by Dick Davis,
Viking, 886 pages, \$45

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Beware of the man with just one book. Having seen what Osama bin Laden's misinterpretation of a single text has inspired, many fear single-minded Islamists going nuclear in Iran. Fortunately for the world, Iranians have another well-thumbed book on their shelves. Persia's classic Book of Kings, *Shahnameh*, is a national epic par excellence, an *Iliad*, *Anabasis*, *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost* all rolled into one. It, too, has done a lot of mischief in the wrong hands, but the nation whose real and legendary history it relates is not the one whose borders we see today. So perhaps what we need fear most in considering policy between the Caspian and the Indus is the counsel of those who have yet to read it—there is no one book as bad as none.

Unlike Western epics that grasp the events of a single generation, whether of men or angels, Persia's Book of Kings encompasses whole ages of the world, chronicling the stratagems of kings and heroes as real as Alexander the Great and as legendary as Rostam. That it also spans the interplay of regional religions lends it special relevance in times when some fear Iran's nuclear ambition more than they do the echt Islamic and Hindu bombs sleeping back to back on the Pakistan-India border. The historical scope of *Shahnameh* suggests some reasons why. Not long after the tenth-century Persian poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi assembled it, the dynasty he served imploded, leaving a gap in the map large enough to accommodate a Central Asian horde.

In 750, a revolt in northeastern Iran brought the Abassids to power in Persia. More sympathetic to Persian culture than the Umayyids who had stormed up from Mecca the century before, they built Baghdad close by the ruins of the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon. Ferdowsi's hard-riding Islamic patrons were receptive to his Homeric celebration of empire, invasion, and bloody war, yet it contains much that Islamic puritans, Shi'a or Wahabi, still frown upon. It takes Dick Davis's delightful and animated translation of Persia's classic 623 pages to get around to banning wine-drinking, a prohibition ended by royal decree two pages later, with 257 pages of music, seduction, and polo matches left to go.

All this action, myth, and history fairly fly off the page, for Davis renders Ferdowsi's 50,000 sesquipedalian lines of poetry as a prose narrative that here and there erupts into sonnet-sized

snatches of verse. The scheme works brilliantly. Repeated for pages on end, Ferdowsi's lines, each longer than an heroic couplet, breed *longueurs*, but Davis's carefully rendered snatches of the best classic Farsi poetry illuminate the English text like so many Persian miniatures.

Here's how he begins:

Now in the name of God whose power controls
Wisdom and has created human souls
Exalted beyond all that thought or speech
Is able to encompass or to teach
The lord of Saturn and the start of night
Who gives the sun and moon and Venus light
Above all name and thought, exceeding all
Of his creation, and unknowable ...

Shahnameh begins in a mythic age of tribal heroes, becoming a blend of myth and history around the time of Zoroaster and Alexander the Great, but this is not the world we know from Herodotus or Plutarch. Sasanid court historians have reduced the Achaemenid and Parthian empires to ciphers to emphasize the achievements of their dynastic patrons, whose works and days occupy the book's last third and conclusion.

An ample glossary helps sort real from mythic people and places, but readers may need to keep an atlas handy to sort out Asian Dark Age geography. An historical introduction likewise helps make sense of the sometimes literally Byzantine dynastic politics, but more footnotes would make for less flipping back and forth. The lack of maps is unfortunate, because Teheran's past diplomatic enormities and present animus towards Israel tend to distract us from an important dimension of recent history. "Iran" is not the name of the ancient nation to which this classic belongs, but a twentieth-century coinage like "Iraq." Both states were crafted with scant regard for ethnic divisions, and this old book brings into sharp focus the cultural and linguistic frontiers and frictions smoldering beneath the cartographic surface.

Though Persian provides the literary substrate of much of South Asia, inflecting common speech from Baluchistan to Bengal, it divides as much as it unifies. If Iran's President Ahmadinejad expects the Mahdi's arrival, he is not preparing to greet him in Osama's flowery Arabic. Teheran has ordered the replacement of alien words, like "pizza," with usage vetted not by mullahs, but by Farhangestan Zaban e Farsi, a body as jealous of linguistic integrity as the Académie Française. It is interesting to note, in light of last year's Danish cartoon controversy, that *Shahnameh* has long been among the most profusely—and gorgeously—illustrated of books. The manuscripts produced in fifteenth-century Savafid Persia rival the greatest productions of the Renaissance in artistic achievement.

Just as the animus between Greeks and Turks antedates the Ottoman Empire, the *Shahnameh*'s guarded view of present Iran's neighbors took form long before the Shia-Sunni split in the eighth century. Old Persia centered three millennia ago on the Oxus River, not the Persian Gulf. It was the tribal world of the nomadic steppes, not the settled, agricultural one of the Fertile Crescent, and its view of kings appointed by their peers is a far cry from the anointed theocracy of Babylon or Byzantium. It's not democracy, but then neither was the Magna Carta.

Shahnameh's attitude towards Islam is necessarily respectful—Ferdowsi, like his poetic predecessor Ahmad ad-Daqqi, was himself subject to a Caliph's whims. But it is nonetheless full of tales told at the expense of the Arab invaders who superimposed Islam on the existing monotheism of Zoroaster, and hostility towards Turks and Greeks as well. Alexander the Great makes an anachronistic

appearance as a Christian prince, but stranger still to those accustomed to think of the Turks as Anatolian is their *Shahnameh* debut on the far side of Iran. Since then, Central Asian demography has reversed itself, but reading *Shahnameh* restores the original perspective of a Persian historic and dynastic space spanning Afghanistan and abutting India. Little wonder some of the details of the *Mahabharata* have spilled over into the epic next door, along with a veritable arsenal—a thousand years ago, proliferation worries focused on *wootz*, the exotic weapons-grade steel of indomitable temper that poured out of India into the arms bazaar of Damascus.

It is germane to today's politics that while the Assassins, expelled from medieval Persia, fled westward to Syria, this seminal book looks seaward more to the Caspian than the Mediterranean—it relates one Sinbad-esque voyage of a thousand leagues to confront the King of Barbary, but hardly touches on Levantine shores. It chronicles centuries of conflict involving Arabs, Byzantines, and the Hunnish horsemen of the Asian plains, but the main Persian actors are not the Assyrians who figure in the Old Testament's Babylonian captivity, but the Sasanians, the post-Alexandrine power that outdid Rome in extirpating the Parthians as a military force.

Shahnameh remains a fount of quotation and a source of role models, some few at odds with the ideals of Islamic pietism. Written not in Arabic, but that eminently Indo-European language Farsi, its Sanskrit roots have enabled Dick Davis to produce a rendering of the Persian equivalent of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* strangely resonant with the early English of *Beowulf* and the Romances of King Arthur. Now that he has rendered them so readable, many tales filtered across time and space leap out at us as we recognize in them similarities to everything from the Welsh *Mabinogion* to Schwarzenegger movie storyboards.

If Davis's translation sometimes seems to overlap the imagined worlds of Tolkien or C. S. Lewis, it still serves to illuminate the gap between real and imagined "Persian" literature opened by Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It is all the richer and stranger because its account of creation owes less to the Bible or the Koran than to the ancient monotheistic religion of Zoroaster—*Shahnameh's* kaleidoscopic view of the conflict of good and evil is more reflected in vanished Eastern Christian heresies than in present Western beliefs.

If you want to know your enemy, you can do worse than to read what he heard on his father's knee. The Islamic zealots who overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty doubtless got their first taste of political intrigue from Ferdowsi's voluminous tales, and it cannot comfort Teheran that a new generation is reading it today. Some have bridled at Davis for pruning the thicket of archaic and later verses surrounding Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in order to let modern English illuminate the older text. Seeking a Farsi reality check, I turned to Irshad Ullah Kahn in Lahore, a Rhodes Scholar and accomplished poet with the benefit of an Iranian-born Zarathustran wife, Hushi. They found Davis work "enthraling."

"That poetry which is the most difficult," wrote Irshad Ullah Khan, "has been rendered into English ... with the comparative strength of the inspirational truth and elegance of the Persian. His work shall not die." It is hard to vouch for any volume's immortality, but this ranks among the best Persian translations of the last thousand years. Still going strong after a millennium, the Book of Kings conveys a view of the human condition too broad for theocrats to embrace—or statesmen to ignore.

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