

PERSIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

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THE PURELY literary output of Persia, in the pre-Islamic period between the sixth century B.C. and the seventh century A.D., consisted primarily of the sacred books of the Zoroastrians, to which were added a few secular works. The sacred books included the Zend Avesta, the Gathas, and the later translations and commentaries on the Avesta. The secular literature was, first, narratives, of which the most famous was the lost translation from the Sanskrit of the Fables of Bidpai; and histories dealing with the exploits and adventures of the Sasanian kings, of which only a few examples have come down to us. All these were in the old Persian as written in the Pahlevi script, which is so difficult that it is little more than a code. The sacred books naturally had no influence on Islamic literature; the historical, however, were mainly responsible for Ferdawsi's great epic of the kings.

With the arrival of the conquering and proselytizing Arabs in Persia, Zoroastrian literature was supplanted by the Qur'an; and for a century or more the illiterate masses of Persia, to whom the clumsy Pahlevi script had been quite unintelligible, were brought face to face with a sacred book written not only in a practical alphabet, but also in a language actually spoken by those who taught it, so that the people as a whole were rapidly becoming literate. Not all the Persians accepted Islam, but the vast majority did, and thus, while Persian in its various dialects continued to be spoken throughout the country, the intelligentsia were learning Arabic. Indeed, many of the finest works in the Arabic language were written by Persians, so that in estimating the literature of Persia we must not consider only works in the Persian language. The great Avicenna, for example, who wrote in Arabic was Persian by birth. No evidence is forthcoming as to the first attempts made to write the Persian language with Arabic letters, but there are indications that this was done in the eighth century very shortly after the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate at Baghdad.

The Persians originally took their verse forms and meters from the Arabs, but later added new forms and meters of their own. The Arabs had written mainly in the style known as the *Qasīda*, invented

by the desert people in pre-Islamic times, an ode or panegyric composed of a large number of couplets on one single rhyme. From this the Persians derived the *ghazal* or lyric, which does not usually run to more than ten or a dozen couplets. They also introduced for long narrative poems the *mathnavi* form, composed of rhyming couplets varying with each verse.

The earliest examples of Persian poetry which have come down to us are isolated poems of the lyrical type, and we do not reach really well-authenticated composition until the rule of the Sasanids in Bukhara, which was the center of a real nationalist revival in the tenth century, and saw the full development of the new Persian language, written in the Arabic alphabet and containing an enormous quantity of Arabic loan words.

The blind poet Rudāki, in addition to panegyric and odes which had for their model the *qasīda*, also produced the first poem in the *mathnavi* or epic style, setting a model which was later followed by many of the greatest poets of Persia. Rudāki's *mathnavi* was a rendering in rhymed couplets of the Arabic translation by Ibn Muqaffa' of the *Kalīla and Dimna* book of fables. Unfortunately only isolated verses of this work have come down to us by quotations in dictionaries and elsewhere, for the book itself has unaccountably disappeared.

The next poet of importance to compose in this style was Daqīqī (tenth century), a professed Zoroastrian, who had begun to write an Epic of the Kings of Persia, when his life was brought to an untimely end by the hand of an assassin. This Epic was next taken up by the greatest poet of the court of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (eleventh century), Firdawsi, who lived to complete in sixty thousand verses his famous *Shahnama* or Book of Kings, which is one of the most valuable documents in the modern Persian language. It was possibly due to the fame of this work, which was so essentially nationalistic in character, that the *Kalīla and Dimna* of Rudāki, which was non-Persian in origin, sank into comparative oblivion. Since Firdawsi, as it were, exhausted the materials of the heroic age, only a few writers after him attempted to treat of the early kings. He himself turned to the romantic epic in *mathnavi* form in his *Yusuf and Zalaykha*, and set a model which was to be copied and surpassed by later poets like Nizāmi and Jāmi. It was this style



THE ASCENT OF MUHAMMAD TO HEAVEN
 Sixteenth Century
 (British Museum, London)

of composition which proved most attractive to the great painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The range of topics dealt with by the *mathnavi* writers is strictly limited. It was no part of a poet's ambition to discover new subjects. His business was to give a perfect setting to a familiar story, very much as the religious artists of Europe seldom went outside a limited number of stereotyped subjects, to which they gave the impress of their style without any attempt to treat their subject in an original way. The favorite themes were the story of Joseph as told in the Qur'an, the story of the Loves of Layla and Majnun, and of Khusrau and Shirin as told in the *Shahnama*, and the fabulous adventures of Alexander the Great.

It is not, however, in the *mathnavi* that we must look for the chief beauties of Persian poetry, but in the *ghazal* or love-lyric, in which the great Hafiz of Shiraz (fourteenth-fifteenth centuries) reigns supreme. Persia is the land of poetry, and the number of poets who have left behind them large volumes of *qāsidas*, *ghazals*, and *rubaiyat* is very great. These volumes of collected poems are known as *dīvāns*, and in them each type of verse-form is arranged alphabetically according to the rhyme.

Persian prose is mainly confined to history, though there are one or two works of *belles lettres* which are of outstanding excellence, notably the *Chahār Maqāla* or the Four Discourses, of Nizami Aruzi (twelfth century), which contains anecdotes regarding poets, astronomers, doctors, and state officials; and the *Siyāsat-nāma* or Book of Government by Nizām ul-Mulk (twelfth century), the great prime minister of the Seljuks. Both these are models of simple style and clear thinking. For works on theology, philosophy, and science the Persians employed the Arabic language, but many Persian writers, including Sa'di, the poet, wrote in both.

The histories are of two kinds, those in which the author's sole object is the recording of events in the form of uncritical chronicles, and those in which the author regards the recording of events as of secondary importance to the display of his own gifts of rhetoric. The truth is that the Persian language, which owing to the simplicity of its grammar and syntax, lends itself to the most lucid and concise treatment, was at an early stage in its history converted into an instrument of mental torture for the

reader by prose writers whose whole aim was to exhibit their knowledge of the Qur'ān and of the Arabic language. Thus, for example, one of the most important histories of the Mongols, known after its author's name as the *History of I'assāf*, while it contains the most valuable and accurate information regarding the history of Persia during the thirteenth century, is so over-charged with rhetorical phraseology and irrelevant passages in Arabic as to render it almost unserviceable. This style commanded such admiration and respect among the intelligentsia that it came to be the model both for histories and for correspondence, especially among the Indian Muslims. The great history of the Emperor Akbar by his trusted minister, Abul Fazl, is written throughout in this fantastic manner. In Persia this style is no longer admired and modern authors aim at simplicity of form, while there is a tendency to replace Arabic loan words by old Persian words which had fallen into disuse. Nevertheless, the influence of the high-flown style has survived in the conventional phraseology of private letters, which usually begin with meaningless expressions by way of introduction, acknowledgment of letters received and inquiries after health.

The influence of Persian literature on that of the other Muslim languages, except on Arabic, from which, as we have seen, the Persians themselves derived their verse forms, meter and rhymes, has been overwhelming. It is most noticeable in the case of the Ottoman Turks, who imitated the Persian poets and prose writers with slavish fidelity, in spite of the utter dissimilarity of the Persian and the Turkish languages. It never occurred to any Turkish poet to break away from this self-imposed tutelage till the middle of the nineteenth century, when a first step was taken by writers who attempted to compromise between French and Persian models. As is well known, the last few years have seen a wholesale break-away from all the old traditions, so that there is rapidly being formed a Turkish style, freed from all the old bonds of exotic Arabo-Persian culture.

A similar influence was exercised by Persia on the poetry and prose of the Urdu language, but in this case there is less excuse for any radical change, since this language would never have existed in upper India except for Persian, and it owes its entire literature to purely Persian models. On the other hand, Persia's contribution to the literature of the West has been slight compared to that in

the fine arts. Only three of her poets have attained to anything like world fame,—Omar Khayyām (twelfth century), Sa'di (thirteenth century), and Hafiz (fourteenth century). Of the great European poets, Goethe and Rückert were the first to appreciate the beauties of Persian poetry, which in England found its interpreters in Thomas Moore, Matthew Arnold, and Edward FitzGerald. The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyām, which in Persia itself was more or less ignored for centuries, has by the inspired renderings of FitzGerald done more to make Persian literature known to the West than any other work. The reason is not far to seek, for the whole essence of the Persian lyric lies in its harmonious choice of words and its musical meters, neither of which can be reproduced in any Western language, while the subject matter is so conventional and its metaphors so highly stylized that they can appeal only to one versed in the traditions of the country. The Rubayi differs from all other Persian verse not only in form but also in contents, so that it is universal in its appeal. It concentrates on one particular thought, and is bound by no conventions other than those of meter and rhyme, and thus it is readily translatable into other languages, though it required the genius of a FitzGerald to make so faithful a rendering into an English classic.

Many attempts have been made to render some of the lyrics of Hafiz into English, and the complete *divān* was admirably rendered into German verse by Rosenzweig-Schwannau. Of the English renderings the most successful in conveying the meaning of the originals are those of Miss Gertrude Bell, although she made no attempt to imitate the Persian meters or rhymes.

Of Sa'di's *Gulistan* several translations have appeared in English, but this most delightful collection of anecdotes in mixed prose and verse by one of the most gifted sons of Persia has never received that measure of appreciation in the West which it certainly deserves.

The following translation of a lyric by the poet Jami (fifteenth century) offers a typical example of the Persian *ghazal*. It also illustrates a form of rhyme much favored by the Persian poets, in which the actual rhyming words are followed throughout by a repeated phrase. It was the rule for the poet to introduce his own name at the conclusion of a *ghazal*.

AN ODE OF JAMI

Translated in the Persian Form and Measure
by Sir William Jones (d. 1794)

How sweet the gale of morning breathes!
Sweet news of my delight he brings;
Now that the rose will soon approach
The tuneful bird of night he brings.
Soon will a thousand parted souls
Be led his captives through the sky,
Since tidings, which in every heart
Must ardent flames excite, he brings.
Late near my charmer's flowing robe
He pass'd, and kissed the fragrant hem;
Thence, odour to the rose-bud's veil,
And jasmine's mantle white, he brings.
Painful is absence and that pain,
To some base rival oft is owed;
Thou knowest, dear maid! when to thine ear
False tales contrived in spite, he brings.
Why should I trace love's mazy path,
Since destiny my bliss forbids?
Black destiny! my lot is woe,
To me no ray of light he brings.
In vain a friend his mind disturbs,
In vain a childish trouble gives,
When sage physician to the couch,
Of heartsick love-lorn wight, he brings.
A roving stranger in thy town
No guidance can sad Jami find,
Till this his name, and rambling lay
To thine all-piercing sight he brings.