

The Tragedy of Sohráb and Rostám, Revised Ed., Translated by Jerome W. Clinton

(Seattle: Washington 1987)

The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam is an important section of the *Shahname*, an Iranian national epic that the Persian poet and scholar Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi revised in the tenth century amid the revival of both Persian literature and nationalism. In it, the great warrior Rostam fathers a child, Sohrab who fields a great army to defeat the shah of Iran and install Rostam on the throne. Rostam must destroy his son to ensure the victory of Iran and the continuing rule of the shah. While dubious as a source for early Persian history, it gives an interesting insight into the psyche and aspirations of the Persian people of the tenth century.

The story of Rostam begins as the great hero is on a hunt. Thieves take off with his horse, Rakhsh, and Rostam seeks aid in the Turkish city of Semengan. There, Tahminé, daughter of the shah of Semengan seduces Rostam and becomes pregnant with their child. Rostam leaves her a token to give to their son or daughter so that he might later identify the child as his own, then returns to Iran. Tahminé gives birth to a son, Sohrab, who becomes a very great warrior even as a child. When he is twelve, he demands to know the truth about his parentage, and when Tahminé tells him, he becomes flushed with pride. He decides to use a Turkish army to unseat the shah of Iran and place his father on the throne. Then he would return to Turan, unseat the Turkish king and himself rule. The Turkish king is pleased to give Sohrab an army, thinking to allow the boy to conquer Iran and then take it for himself, and so Sohrab sets off.

Sohrab's first battle is at the White Fort, where he captures the hero, Hojir and does battle with a young warrior woman called Gordafarid. When she realizes that she cannot defeat him by force of arms, she tricks him and returns to the Fort. The people of the fort manage to get word out to the shah, who immediately calls upon the national hero Rostam. Rostam tarries before answering his shah's call, angering the shah, and Rostam almost leaves in

disgust, but the shah and his men plead for the sake of Iran and Rostam remains to lead the army.

Finally, the two armies face each other. Rostam sneaks into the camp of the Turks and kills an important member of Sohrab's retinue, without whom Sohrab cannot identify his father. Despite threatening Hojir, Sohrab takes to the field ignorant of which of the men could be his father, and in turn when they meet, Rostam denies his identity to the boy. They fight a full day without a winner and return the following day to single combat. At first, Sohrab has the advantage, but Rostam, the wily old wolf, tricks him into giving up that advantage, and ultimately, Rostam deals the boy a deadly blow. Only then does Rostam learn that the boy is his son, and he laments the cruel fate that made him kill his own child. A plea to the shah for a healing potion fails and the hero takes his son home for the proper funeral rights.

It is difficult to measure the complete success of a translation without knowledge of the original source language. However, a successful translation should read smoothly while trying to retain the meter and beauty of the original. In this case, Jerome Clinton has created a work that is rich and evocative, while remaining readable. He has avoided archaic anomalies and the result is a pleasure to read. It is interesting to note that Clinton used the early 1276 British Museum copy of the *Shahname* for his source, so that the translation should avoid the later additions to Ferdowsi's original work.

The value of the *Shahname* and of *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* in particular as a source for early Persian history is doubtful. Ferdowsi wrote his version of the work in the tenth century, many years after the events he described. In the intervening period, written Persian had essentially disappeared from use and the story was preserved in oral form and as Arabic translations. It is inevitable that changes occurred during this time that

makes the Shahname more legendary than historical. In addition, Ferdowsi wrote within his own cultural milieu, and at the behest of the Samanid Dynasty of Iran, and thus we cannot ignore the influences of his time upon the work.

However, if we discount the *Shahname* as a source for early Persian history, it can be a valuable source for the culture of Persia at the time of Ferdowsi. The tenth century was a period of cultural and political flux, when the Arabic influence of the previous three centuries had declined and Persian nationalism had begun to find a more insistent voice. The Arabic caliphs of the Abbasid Empire no longer had any effective control over the Samanids of Persia and this allowed a resurgence of Persian literature that in turn gave rise to the likes of Ferdowsi and his *Shahname*. While the *Shahname* was at once a result of the Persian revival, it might also have been an impetus to further expressions of Persian nationalism. The Samanids could use these tales of great Persian heroes, of divinely ordained shahs, as a justification for their increased authority.

As a source, *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* can thus tell us a great deal about the culture of the Iranians, their fears and their strengths. In particular, it defines the virtues necessary in a good man. Rostam is the ideal hero: physically perfect, undefeated on the battlefield and a great leader of men. He can also be wily and even deceptive, if needs be, and is not above using stealth as well as combat prowess to serve his shah. He is the exemplar for all Persian men, the hero from the past for them to emulate and from whom they may take strength. Yet, his story ends in the tragedy of the death of his son and his own hand, and yet it could not have been any other way. Rostam's first duty was to serve his shah, however weak and incompetent the shah could be, for God had appointed the shah and Iran would not survive without him. Rostam realizes this, although not without some conflict, and does what he must do, just as Ferdowsi seems to be telling the Persians of the tenth century that they must put family second to the needs of the Persian people.

The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam may also inform the reader about the external concerns of the

Iranians. Ferdowsi portrays the Turks of Turan in a very poor light. They are the aggressors against Iran; their wicked shah Afrasiyab intends to use Sohrab to kill Rostam then kill him in turn; Sohrab kills men as they wait by their tents after the first day of fighting while Rostam does not kill Turks in the same manner. Yet not only would this all remind the readers of the time that the Turks had been a threat in ancient Persia, but spoke to their continuing nature as a serious menace to the nascent independence of Persia in the tenth century. The Turks endangered Persia on multiple fronts: not only did the Turks on the North Eastern frontier continue to range into Persia, but also the Turks had gained control of the military machine of the Abbasid Empire and through it, control of the caliph and the empire itself. As well as serving as a reminder, this identification of the Turks as the enemy of Persia may also have held a cultural rôle: by defining an enemy, a culture helps to define itself.

Finally, *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* may bring insight into the attitude towards women in Persia. It is certainly interesting that both of the women – Tahminé and Gordafarid – described in the work are not in the least passive. Women are clearly active in the elite, whether or not it is appropriate. The beautiful Tahminé knows what she wants and goes out to get it, seducing Rostam and bearing his child. However, whatever her intent, the result is tragedy. This may reflect the concern that the peril – *fitna* – of women is not that they are wicked, but that nevertheless giving into their desires leads to unknown dangerous consequences. Gordafarid is a warrior, but it is her feminine wiles that save her when she cannot defeat Sohrab in combat. She demonstrates that women have a place to play in defending the honor of their family and their community, even if it is not by the same means as men.

The question remains whether it is valid to use literature as a source for history. Certainly, it does not seem advisable to use the *Shahname* as a source for the details of early Persian history. However, if we consider the sources carefully within the context of the times of

their writing, they can be valid and valuable. Annemarie Schimmel for example, used Persian poetry as a useful source for medieval attitudes towards Mohammad.¹ Scholars can also use poets such as Abu al-Atahiyah for insight into religious and social thought in the early Abbasid period. Of course, some poetry would seem to have more value than others do. While Abu Niwas or Omar Khayyam are enjoyable to read, individually, their work has less historical implications than Ferdowsi's. However, considered as a whole, the 'wine, women and song' tradition of verse in both Arabic and Persian gives an interesting alternative view of medieval Islam. Ferdowsi's *Shahname* thus is one of many works that bear consideration as a source for what it can tell us about medieval Persia, as long as scholars take care to consider the work within its proper context. As a source, it may be valuable to any scholar of medieval Persia, but beyond that, it is an accessible, enjoyable and interesting work for anyone with an interest in Iranian history or culture.

The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam is an important source for the history of Persian culture and literature. The work, smoothly translated by Jerome Clinton, brings insight into the aspirations and fears of Persians in the period of cultural awakening under the 10th century Samanid dynasty. The place of virtue, the attitude towards state and shah, the position of women are all addressed in this work, and as a whole, its buoyant nationalism and attitude to the Turkish menace further expand its message of Persian national pride and independence.

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is his Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985)