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Classical Persian Epics – Conscious Authorship and Tradition

Abstract

The article is exploring the concept of authorship in early (10th–11th century A.D.) classical Persian epic poetry, on the examples of its three representative works: Ferdousi's *Šāhnāme*, Asadi's *Garšāsp-nāme* and Gorgāni's *Vis-o Rāmin*. As the analyzed passages show, all three authors, in spite of their works being based on the existing, traditional sources, have a strong sense of their individual authorship. They understand their role as saving pre-Islamic Iranian patrimony from oblivion, as a modernization of literary language and style and finally, as a search for their personal fame. An attempt at discovering inner senses of the inherited literary material, beyond its external meaning, seems to be another aspect of authorial creativity, as perceived by Ferdousi and Gorgāni.

Keywords: Persian epics, tradition, innovation, authorship.

The concept of authorship in early New Persian epos is challenged by two powerful traditional factors: the existence of the earlier written records of epic tales on one hand, and their long-lasting oral transmission – on the other. Hence the questions – about the room for an individual author's expression within a conventional literary system; about the range of his creative possibilities and, finally, about the author's own understanding of his role in the process. The questions may be extended to other old literary genres, as well as to traditional literatures in general.

The traditional research on Ferdousi's *Šāhnāme* (turn of 10th–11th centuries A.D.) and on other early New Persian epic works, concentrated on establishing the written, in majority disappeared, sources of the text. Due to the work of the 19th and 20th centuries scholars, the presumed written (Middle Persian, Arabic and New Persian) sources have been established for almost all the stories and narrative motifs of the *Šāhnāme*.¹ The stories whose written sources have not

¹ See Th. Nöldeke, *Das iranische Nationalepos*, Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie II, Strassburg 1896–1904, p. 130–146, 164–165; Z. Safā, *Hamāse-serāyi dar Irān*, Tehrān 1973 [1352], p. 204–206;

been identified, were supposed to be of oral origin.² An author's reliability was considered to depend of how closely he was reproducing his source. Ferdousi did not invent his stories. He thoroughly transmitted what he had found in his sources, and what he believed to be the real history of Iran.

Can we then consider his work authorial? If yes, so what does his authorship consist in? In which field was he able to display his creativity? Where should we look for the literary greatness, so firmly attributed to him by the Iranians? For them the question is especially sensitive because, in their ranking of national great poets, Ferdousi has always been one of the leaders.

It has been accepted that Ferdousi's merit was to create a poetical form for the epic narrative which earlier had been transmitted (either in writing or orally), in prose only³, although the names and some short passages preserved of the poets who preceded him in this task⁴, had been known.

However, the investigations on the style of the *Šāhnāme* verse reveal its strongly formulaic character, as well as a number of its other peculiarities which clearly point to a long oral transmission of Persian epic texts in versified form, most probably to be performed by singing.⁵ The metrical form and traditional melody of the *Šāhnāme*, the wealth of its constant metaphors, epithets and rhymes, the formulaic structure of its verses, descriptions built on permanent patterns but never repetitive, traditional devices of the "machinery" of its action, and last but not least, the regularity of its narrative macrostructures – all testify to an oral provenience of the poetical text. This may signify that both Ferdousi and his predecessors (Marvazi, Daqiqi and possibly some others) could have heard the epic *dāstāns* orally performed in verse (maybe even being the singers themselves), and have made a creative use of a well established, traditional art. This of course does not exclude their use of written sources, it suggests only the existence of two parallel and probably mutually interfering, ways of transmission, still in the 3rd–5th centuries of Hijra.

E. Yarshater, *Iranian National History*, "The Cambridge History of Iran" 1983, nr 3(1), Cambridge, p. 359–366; D. Akbarzāde, *Šāhnāme va zabān-e pahlavi. Moqāyese-ye dāstāni va zabāni-ye Šāhnāme bā manābe '-e bāzmānde az zabān-e pahlavi*, Pārine, Tehrān 2000 [1379].

² Z. Safā, op. cit., p. 74–88, 178–179; cf. F. Machalski, *Firdausi i jego "Szāh-nāme"*, „Nauka dla Wszystkich” 1970, nr 113., 21: "To the basic source at his disposal, i.e. the New Persian Book of Kings [Ferdousi] added an amount of material derived from the oral transmission and folklore" (transl. by the author of the article).

³ See M. Minovi, *Ferdousi va Še'r-e u*, Tehrān 1975 [1354], p. 70.

⁴ From the work of Mas'udi-ye Marvazi only three short passages survived (see G. Lazard, *Les premiers poètes persans*, Téhéran–Paris 1964, t. I, 22, 73; t. II, 47), and a part of Daqiqi's text was incorporated in Ferdousi's *Šāhnāme* (*Šāhnāme-ye Ferdousi. Matn-e enteḡādi VI*, Moskva 1967, p. 66–136).

⁵ cf. Y.N. Marr, *Vazn-e še'ri-ye Šāhnāme* [in:] ed. E. Sediqi, "Hezāre-ye Ferdousi, Tehrān 1943 [1322], p. 188–197; A.A. Romaskevič, *Hamāse dar Irān-e bāstān-o Irān-e kānumi* [in :] ed. E. Sediqi, *Hezāre-ye Ferdousi*, Tehrān 1943 [1322], p. 162–166; M. Boyce, *Some Remarks on the Transmission of the Keyanid Heroic Cycle*, "Serta Cantabrigiensia", Mainz 1954, 49–51; O.M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, Ithaca – London 1994; A. Krasnowolska, *Elementy stylu epiki ustnej w Šāh-nāme Ferdousiego* [in:] ed. A. Czapkiewicz, *Poetyka orientalna i jej recepcja w Europie*, Kraków 1989, p. 137–154.

Thus, the presumed dichotomy: old, anonymous texts (written and oral) in prose, versus the new, authorial ones, written down in verse, should need reconsideration.⁶

Iranian scholars do not like the idea of oral epic poetry as Ferdousi's source of inspiration, because this would deprive him of a part at least of the space for his, traditionally conceived, authorial competence and therefore, of his glory.

Yet, the field of authorial invention and creativity should be not necessarily limited to the purely poetical skills. It is interesting to see how the poet himself perceived his role and what his understanding of the inherited epic material was. Although the main target of this paper is the *Šāhnāme*⁷, the material used for the exploration of an epic poet's concept of his own authorship, has been broadened to the two other early epic works, namely Gorgāni's *Vis-o Rāmin*⁸ (ca 1050) and the *Garšāsp-nāme* by Asadi Tusi⁹ (completed by 454 h.q. = 1060 A.D.).

The literary space, the most appropriate for an author's own commentaries on his work are the frames and margins of the – both principal and secondary – narrative units of his work. In Persian epic narrative style a frame construction seems to have been inherited from the oral stage of transmission, as well. The frames of the epic stories (*dāstāns*) have several functions, both dividing the parts of the text from one another and bridging them through a number of connecting stylistic devices ("hooks").¹⁰ They are the best places for an introduction of a new subject, for evaluation and reflection on a story told. And, what is important for our topic, this is a space for the most personal expression of the author. Here he speaks in the first person, addressing his reader/listener directly. Here he tells about the origins of his story and the reasons for which he decided to undertake the work on it. Sometimes he supplies some information on himself (the time and place of his work, his age, his private life, his affiliation to a court or a patron, his religious and political views etc.). In this way the author places himself outside his imaginary world, that enables him to take a critical distance from the story being told, to comment on it and to possibly formulate his own interpretation. What is more, here he can express some general views on his work, on literature in general, and on his own role as an author.

In the 4th–5th centuries of Hijra (10th–11th A.D.) Persian literature fervently revives. The heritage of the Sasanian Iran, already partly lost, partly absorbed by Arabic literature, is being rediscovered and presented in a new form to Muslim Iranian readers. Local courts offer their support to the poets who perpetuate pre-Islamic epic tradition. The formation of the new Persian literature needed not only a passage from the Middle- to the New Persian stage of the language, a change of the alphabet and new metrical principles, inspired by the Arabic poetics; it also

⁶ According to Olga Davidson's proposal, the sources of royal history might be written, while those of the Rostam's saga – oral.

⁷ *Šāhnāme-ye Ferdousi*, op. cit., t. I-IX, Moskva 1960–1971 (*Šn*).

⁸ Faxroddin As'ad Gorgāni, *Vis-o Rāmin*, M. Toduā, A. Gvaxāriyā (eds.), Tehrān 1970 (*VR*).

⁹ Hakim Abu Nasr ... Asadi-ye Tusi, *Garšāsp-nāme*, H. Yaqmā'i (ed.), Tehrān 1938. (*Gn*)

¹⁰ Cf. Krasnowolska, *Ferdowsi's Dāstān – an Autonomous Narrative Unit?* [in:] eds. O.M. Davidson, M. Shreve Simpson, *Ferdowsi's Shāhnāma. Millennial Perspectives*, Harvard–London 2013, 12–26.

involved a search for a new style, a new literary idiom and a new interpretation of the old stories in the changed cultural context. The epic poets of the period, as can be seen from their commentaries, were fully conscious of the tension between the tradition and a need for its modernization, and of their own role in this process.

All three poets in question consider themselves continuators and transmitters, whose task is to save from falling in oblivion the valuable literary patrimony, inherited of the Sasanian past. At the same time they perceive themselves as innovators. The author presents himself as a poet more talented and more professional than his predecessors, hence he feels authorized to rewrite an old story in a new, more refined, style. As a matter of fact, this style preserves many peculiarities of the old epics, the language keeps a number of inherited archaisms. Besides the wish of reviving the past glory of Iran, a poet's hope for his own eternal fame is another argument decisive for the undertaking of his task.

The above motifs recur in the poets' talks with their patrons, being a canonical part of an epic introduction, i.e. a part of the most external "frame" of an epic poem.

Ferdousi refers to a "friend" who, while passing him an old version of the *Book of Kings* (probably the *Šāhnāme-ye Abumansuri* in prose)¹¹, encourages him to remake it in a new style:

تو گفتی که با من بیک پوست بود
 به نیکی گراید همی پای تو
 به پیش تو آرم مگر نغزوی
 سخن گفتن پهلویت هست
 بدین جوی نزد مهان آبروی

بشهرم یکی مهربان دوست بود
 مرا گفت خوب آمد این رای تو
 نبشته من این نامه پهلوی
 گشاده زبان و جوانیت هست
 شو این نامه خسروان باز گوی

12

There was a dear friend in my city, one would say we were two in one skin; – I like your idea – he told me, – you head in a right direction. I will give you this Pahlavi book, so that you won't sit idle. You are young and eloquent, you know the Pahlavi language, go on, set anew this royal book, in this way seek for recognition from the rulers.¹³

Gorgāni, in his introduction to *Vis-o Rāmin* recalls a conversation with his patron, who orders him writing a new version of an old love story, and mentions the old recensions of the subject:

¹¹ The text not preserved, except for its introduction. cf. Monchi-Zadeh D., *Topographisch-historische Studien zum iranischen Nationalepos*, Wiesbaden 1975, p. 9–15.

¹² *Šn* I p. 23: *Aqāz-e dāstān*, v. 157–160.

¹³ This one and the subsequent translations are by the author of the article.

چه گویی در حدیث ویس و رامین
در این کشور همه کس داردش دوست
ز گرد آورده شش مرد داناست
ندانند هر که بر خواند بیانش
و گر خواند همی معنی نداند

بگفتند آن سخندانان پیشین
کجا در فارسی استاد بودند

مرا گفت یک روز آن قبله دین
که گویند چیزی سخت نیکوست
بگفتم کان حدیثی سخت زیباست
و لکن پهلوی باشد زبانش
نه هر کس آن زبان نیکو بخواند

...
کنون این داستان ویس و رامین
هنر در فارسی گفتن نمودند

14

One day that Model of the Faith (*qeble-ye din*) asked me: – What do you think about the story of Vis and Rāmin? It is said to be very fine, everybody in this country likes it. – The story is beautiful indeed – I replied, it has been collected by six wise men, but its language is Pahlavi, not everybody can read it, and even those who can, cannot do it correctly, and those who could, would not understand it properly. [...] Now, those ancient erudites wrote down the story of Vis and Rāmin. They displayed mastery in Persian language, since they were its masters, indeed.

Minorsky¹⁵ observes the ironical overtone of these verses. Those old “masters of the Persian language” were, as he supposed, identical with the before mentioned six wise men, who compiled the text at Gorgāni’s disposal, awkward and deprived of poetical values, according to the criteria of his period. Minorsky thinks them to be Zoroastrians, ignorant of the new, Islamized and refined literary idiom. In any case, Gorgāni puts himself in contrast with his predecessors, considering himself competent to remake the old story according to the taste of his contemporary public.

Also Asadi relates the arguments, used by his patron in order to encourage him to create a new, poetical version of an old book (*nāme-ye bāstān*), i.e. the *Garšāsp-nāme*: since Ferdousi had passed over the story of Garšāsp in his *Šāhnāme*, Asadi should fill the gap, first, because he is Ferdousi’s compatriot (in the West of Iran where he lived, this was probably enough to follow the great precursor), secondly because he is talented in poetry:

¹⁴ *VR*, p. 28–29.

¹⁵ V. Minorsky, *Vīs-u Rāmīn. A Parthian Romance. I. Texts and References*, „Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies” 1943–1946, nr 11/4, p. 742–744; see also: M. Molé, *Vīs-u Rāmīn et l’histoire seljoukide*, “Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli” 1959, n.s. IX, p. 25–26.

هم اندر سخن چابک اندیشه ای
بشعر آر خرم یکی داستان

بمانی که هر گز نگردد نهان
هم از بر گرفتن نگیرد کمی
که همواره نام تو ماند بی پای

تو همشهری اورا همیشه ای
بدان همره از نامه باستان

...
تو زین داستان گنجی اندر جهان
همش هر کسی باید از آدمی
بوی مانده فرزند ایدر بجای

16

You are his compatriot and his fellow-poet, you are gifted in the art of the word. Using these skills put in verse a nice story from an old book. [...]. Thus you may leave in the world a treasure which would never disappear and no matter how many people would draw from it, it will never run out. It will stay after you like a child, so that your name remains forever.

The quoted passages reveal the double role, which the poet ascribes to himself: that of a rescuer of the disappearing tradition and simultaneously – of a promoter of a new literary style, which makes the forgotten old stories attractive in the new times. The poets underline the value of their own art, and an exceptional importance of their mission. While putting stress on their proper striving towards fame, they also mention a poet's duty towards his readers, who are expecting a story understandable and beautifully written.

Gorgāni:

بباید در جهان گردد مسافر
بجز قاعل مرو را کس نخواند

سخن باید که چون از کام شاعر
نه از ان گونه که در خانه بماند

17

The world which comes out from a poet's mouth, should become a traveler all over the world. Not in the way that it should stay at home and be uttered by nobody but its author.

The poet, in the closing passages of his book, underlines its exceptional value and expresses his hope for its durability and survival beyond his own life time.

Ferdousi, being in the middle of his enormous work, writes in his ode in praise of Sultan Mahmud:

که از باد و باران نیابد گزند
همی خواند آنکس که دارد خرد

پی افکندم از نظم کاخی بلند
برین نامه بر سالها بگذرد

18

I have erected a high castle of poetry, which cannot be ruined by the wind or rain; the centuries will pass over it and those who are wise will still read it.

And while finishing his task after some thirty years of hardship and poverty, he adds:

¹⁶ Gn p. 14.

¹⁷ VR p. 29

¹⁸ Šn V, p. 238: *Jang-e bozorg*, v. 65–66.

چو این نامور نامه آمد بین
 از آن پس نمیرم که من زنده ام
 ز من روی کشور شود پر سخن
 که تخم سخن من پراکنده ام
 پس از مرگ بر من کند آفرین
 هر آن کس که دارد هوش و رای و دین

19

As this famous book has come to an end, the whole country is going to talk about me. After this I won't die, I'll remain alive, since I've sown the seeds of the words. All those who have wisdom, spirit and faith, will praise me after my death.

The two other poets express similar opinions about their respective works and expectations as to their future.

Gorgāni addresses his patron:

نثارت آوردم مهرگانی
 بدین جشنت نیاورد ایچ کهتر
 به فرمانت بگفتم داستانی
 درو چون میوه از حکمت مثلها
 ...
 به فر نام تو گفتار چاکر
 ...
 اگر یابی ز هر کس نظم گفتار
 چو بر اسب سخن آیم به جولان
 بیان من بود روشن چو شعری
 به نکته چون ز گوهر تاج کسری
 روان چون آب چشمه زندگانی
 نثاری از نثار بنده مهتر
 ز خوبی چون شکفته بوستانی
 چون ریحان بهاری خوش غزلهها
 رود بر هر زبانی تا به محشر
 ز من یابی تو نظم در شهوار
 مرا باشد مجره جای و کیوان
 به نکته چون ز گوهر تاج کسری

20

I bring you a gift on the festival of Mehrgān, bright like the waters of the spring of life; none of your subjects has given you a gift better than mine. On your order I composed a story, beautiful like a blossoming garden. Its wise exempla are like fruits, its verses like the scent of spring. [...] Due to the greatness of your name the words of this humble servant will be on every tongue till the Last Judgment. [...] If everybody composes poems, mine is like a royal pearl. When I mount the horse of words, I reach the Milky Way and Saturn. My discourse is as bright as Sirius, full of subtle sayings, like a royal crown set with jewels.

Asadi:

چنین نامه ای ساختم پر شگفت
 چو گنجی که داننده آرد برون
 چو باغی که از وی بدست خرد
 چو نخچیر گاهی پر از رنگ و بوی
 ...
 ز جان زاده فرزند بیش از شمار
 سراسر ز دست هنر خورده نوش
 همه غمگسارند خواننده را
 که هر دانشی زو توان گرفت
 باندیشه زو هر گوهر گوناگون
 گل جان چند و هم چون بگذرد
 که نخچیر دانش نهد دل در او
 بیاراستم هر یکی چون بهار
 پدرشان خرد بوده و دایه هوش
 ز دل دانش آموز داننده را

21

¹⁹ *Šn IX*, p. 383: *Yazdegard* v. 863–865; p. 230: *Xosrou Parviz*, v. 3682–3684.

²⁰ *VR*, p. 540–541.

²¹ *Gn*, p. 477–479.

I wrote such an amazing book, full of every kind of knowledge – like a treasury from which a wise man’s mind draws various jewels; like a garden in which the soul picks flowers with its hand of wisdom, if the imaginary allows it; like a blossoming hunting ground in which the game of knowledge is pasturing. [...] Innumerable progeny is born from my soul, each one of them I have made beautiful like spring. They all drunk the beverage of art, intellect was their father, and wisdom – their nurse. They are all good companions to the reader, they are sincere teachers of the wise.

Although such boastings have a traditional character and belong to the poetical convention of the period, one can notice a deeply personal attitude of the poet towards his work and thus, his strong feeling of his individual authorship. The composing of a poem is being compared to fathering a child, sowing seeds, building a castle.

Some of the poets’ statements allow an insight into their own understanding of the inherited text. Ferdousi says about the Royal Book (*nāmvar nāme-ye šahriyār*):

برنگ فسون و بهانه مدان دگر بر ره رمز معنی برد	تو این را دروغ و فسانه مدان ازو هر چه اندر خورد با خرد
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22

Do not consider it a lie and fairy tale (*fesāne*), do not think it magic or charms; [accept] all that conforms to [the principles of] reason in this book, otherwise the metaphor (*ramz*) will lead you towards the [true] meaning (*ma’ni*).

Gorgāni, whose apparently frivolous tale ends in an unexpectedly serious way, concludes:

چو اندر زر نشانده در شهوار فراوان چون ستاره زان میانه بدان تا زان بسی معنی بدانند فرو خوانند از بهر فسانه	معانی تابد از الفاز بسیار نهاده جای جای اندر فسانه مهان و زیرکان آن را بخوانند همیدون مردم عام و میانه
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23

Many meanings radiate from [my] words, like royal pearls incrusting in gold. Inserted here and there in the tale, they are countless like the stars [in the sky]. The great and the clever will read my book in order to understand its [true] meaning (*ma’ni*), while the common and average [readers] will be interested in the story (*fesāne*) only.

In both cases the external content (plot) of the text (*fesāne*) is being opposed to its true message (*ma’ni*), hidden under a metaphor or secret code (*ramz*) which however, is accessible only to a narrow circle of elite readers (*mehān-o zirakān*), distinct from the simple and average (*āmm-o miyāne*), as Gorgāni puts it. That seems to point to the author’s belief in a possibility of double reading of the story he is going to tell, its having an overt and covert (*zāher* and *bāten*) sense. Ferdousi’s invocation to Reason (*xerad*) in the opening part of his epos²⁴, testifies

²² *Šn* I, p. 21: *Āqāz-e dāstān*, v. 124–125;

²³ *VR* p. 28–29.

²⁴ *Šn* I, p. 13–14: *Āqāz-e dāstān*, v. 16–34.

to the poet's conviction, that his text needs an intellectual effort to be understood and interpreted.

The poet's task is then not only a simple transmission of the inherited material, or its adaptation to the aesthetical taste of his times, but also an attempt at its hermeneutic: while telling his readers that the hidden message of his story needs to be discovered, first he has to decipher it for himself.

In the *Šāhnāme* we can follow Ferdousi making such effort in the course of his thirty year writing experience. Out of the structural regularities of the old mythical patterns at his disposal he tries to draw conclusions as to the nature of the World and to find out some general rules of the history of mankind. Throughout the whole poem Ferdousi's effort of conceptualizing the tangle of inherited tradition is visible. But a documented demonstration of his quest would need a long and laborious study.

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