

The shortcomings and misunderstandings in the introduction notwithstanding, the quality of editing of the Arabic text, by Muhammad Hadi Gerami, is to be praised. He has done a tremendous amount of work to make the text accessible to a wider readership. The indexes are prepared meticulously and facilitate use of the edited text. All in all, Gerami's edition of *Hikmat al-ʿarifin* is a major contribution to the history of intellectual and political life in Safavid Iran.

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*The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature.* By HAMID DABASHI. New York: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019. Pp. xvii + 249, illus. \$35.

As an undergraduate in the early 1970s, studying ancient Near Eastern and medieval European literatures, I once had a conversation about the *Shāhnāmeḥ* with the Iranian-Russian historian Firuz Kazemzadeh. When I asked him which translation I should read, he replied that I shouldn't bother. Not only did he consider Ferdowsī's poetry to be untranslatable—even learning Persian would hardly suffice. An entire mode of cultural experience, unknown in America, would be needed for a true appreciation of the epic's power; one should really be spending an evening with friends in a garden, listening deep into the night to an eloquent recitation. In his new book, Hamid Dabashi sets out to prove such views wrong.

Drawing on years of teaching the *Shāhnāmeḥ* in translation to his Columbia undergraduates, Dabashi offers an introduction to the epic for students and general readers. While he emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural context, he rejects the idea that the epic can be appreciated only by speakers of Persian or by area specialists. To the contrary, he argues that the epic's reception was long constrained by imperial and then nationalistic interests, and equally by Western philological approaches accessible only to specialists. Yet now the epic can find a new life as world literature in translation, as the field begins to expand beyond Europe and as the epic is neglected in postrevolutionary Iran and no longer serves the interests of the Ghaznavids, the Safavids, or the Pahlavis.

Dabashi presents the epic as a window into "a whole different *world*, in fact multiple *worlds*" (p. 17), both of its own time and then of the subsequent eras through which it has passed. He argues for the *Shāhnāmeḥ*'s renewed relevance in a postcolonial world, as "a renegade epic" (p. xi) that has always challenged the hegemony of any imperialism and any limited national identity. His first chapter discusses the epic's pre-Islamic and cross-cultural genealogy, focusing on the prominence of non-Persian characters and on recurrent failures of imperial ambition in a work "that at once sustains and dismantles any and all empires that come close to it" (pp. 45–46). Next comes a chapter on Ferdowsī's life and times, and then a chapter in which Dabashi charts the traditional division of the epic into mythic, heroic, and historical sections and summarizes several of the epic's most famous episodes, placing special emphasis on the heroic narratives. There follows an overview of the epic's reception in subsequent empires, and a chapter on its uses and abuses in the era of the modern nation-state. A conclusion returns to his argument that the *Shāhnāmeḥ* poses a fundamental challenge to Euro-American conceptions of world literature. As "a deeply subversive text" (p. 221), the *Shāhnāmeḥ* can play a key role in dismantling the "incurable parochialism" of "what today passes for 'World Literature'" (p. 204).

This is a highly personal book, warmly evoking the pleasures of reading and teaching the *Shāhnāmeḥ* while also sharply criticizing many area specialists, and the entire field of world literary studies, for having failed to give the epic its due or to see it as he does. Thus, scholars who explore the oral formulae detectable in the epic are not simply taking a different approach but are mounting "an insane assault" on the epic (p. 108). Against philological approaches in general, Dabashi claims that "[w]hat the poet actually sees and shows is far more important than what he hears and says" (p. 110), and he finds a better analog for Ferdowsī's artistry in the cinematography of Sergei Eisenstein and Akira Kurosawa than in Homer or Virgil. Emphasizing visuality over poetry, Dabashi evokes the great tradition of

illustrated manuscripts of the epic, and he praises Dick Davis's "widely admired and justly celebrated translation" (p. 15), saying that it "captures the soul of the original" even though it is largely in prose (p. 80).

Dabashi sarcastically attacks the Eurocentrism of world literature studies ("the imperial wet dream of European literature," p. xii), yet he frames his own discussion in surprisingly Eurocentric terms, ranging from Freud to Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Gilles Deleuze. Building on his controversial claim in *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2012) that Shi'ism is based in a traumatic Oedipal conflict between fathers and sons, Dabashi asserts that the *Shāhnāmeḥ* centrally concerns parricidal sons and their filicidal fathers. Even in the celebrated episode in which Rostam unwittingly kills his son Sohrāb in battle—a scene whose tragedy depends on their mutual nonrecognition—Dabashi asserts that father and son unconsciously *wish* to murder each other. Rostam "kills his own son to prevent him from replacing him as a kingmaker," and, not to be outdone, Sohrāb seeks to kill and thus "foreclose the father figure he has never seen" (p. 61). More strangely still, following a "Deleuzian psychoanalytic trope," we later learn that Sohrāb is really killing his father by allowing *himself* to be killed: "the son has substituted his body for the body of the father in revenge," and at the same time, "by directly or indirectly killing his son the king in effect commits regicidal homicide" (p. 136). Anyone wishing a genuinely non-Eurocentric introduction to the *Shāhnāmeḥ* will want to look elsewhere.

It may well be the case that Persianists have done less than they could to bring the *Shāhnāmeḥ* to a wider readership, while the lingering Eurocentrism of much Western literary study has too often neglected this and many other non-Western works. Yet other works have fared better, as a result of the—in fact, extensive—efforts of many world literary scholars in recent decades to combat Eurocentrism and American cultural imperialism. If non-Western epics such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* and major narratives such as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Story of the Stone* are better known today than the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, this is because successive generations of scholarly activists have produced new and better translations and introductions to these works. As good as Davis's prose translation is (*Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, exp. edition [New York: Viking Penguin, 2016]), we need equally ambitious verse translations, and Dabashi's book will have served a useful purpose if it not only leads new readers to the *Shāhnāmeḥ* but also inspires Persianists to create new, and better, guides of their own.

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