Askari Nasrin
The Medieval Reception of the Shāhnāma as a Mirror for Princes

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This book is an extension from earlier work done by the author in her PhD dissertation (University of Toronto, 2013), "The Medieval Reception of Firdausī's *Shāhnāma*: The Ardashir Cycle as a Mirror for Princes." The results of her extended work confirm the argumentation to be found already in the dissertation: the content of the *Shāhnāma* was generally deemed to be worthy of edifying exemplification for Persianate elites, who would be expected to be familiar with at least the essentials of this great epic of Firdawsi, completed around the beginning of the tenth century CE. Using almost exclusively the eight-volume edition of Djalāl Khāleghi-Motlagh (the full bibliography for his volumes is conveniently supplied at p. 256), Askari has painstakingly traced citations of the *Shāhnāma* in a variety of later works that can be classified as examples of a genre generally known as *mirror for princes* or *speculum principum*. For the research of Askari, a prime example of this genre is the *Rāḥat al-ṣudūr va āyat al-surūr* ("A comfort for the heart and wonders of joy"), a prose work by a protégé of Saljūk sultans, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Sulaymān al-Rāvandī, whose composition can be dated from 1202 to 1207 CE.

The texts of such citations, juxtaposed with the corresponding texts of the original verses of Ferdowsi, can be found in a series of Appendices, p. 256–388, starting with the citations made by Rāvandī himself, which take up the lion's share of the available evidence, p. 257–326.

As we read in Rāvandī (p. 57–58 in the 1921 edition of Muḥammad Iqbāl), novice poets were advised to enhance their own poetic skills by selecting and then memorizing 200 verses from the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsi (Askari p. 40). So, the "mirror" composed by Rāvandī himself in his prose work can be seen as a hands-on demonstration of the kinds of selection that would be recommended for such novice poets. Although his work is in prose, Rāvandī and other such authors of "mirrors" demonstrate their own skills in poetry, since their selections of citations often reveal a keen understanding of the contexts in which their cited texts are embedded. The citations may even skip over a series of verses in order to make poetic connections between verses that are separated from each other in the attested poetry of Firdawsi.

Such authors, then, demonstrate a proven familiarity with the poetic traditions of Ferdowsi. So, what are we to make of situations where they quote verses that cannot be found in, for example, the edition of Khāleghi-Motlagh? Here is what Askari says about such situations (p. 45): "The verses that are in the form, metre, language, and style of the *Shāhnāma* but could not be located in [his] edition are left unidentified." Of course, there is not much choice but to leave such verses "unidentified," but what does all this say about the poetic repertoire available to those who had cited such verses? It may be, then, that the textual tradition of the *Shāhnāma* as we have it has to be seen in the wider context of a poetic tradition that is not limited to the evidence of the texts that have survived. "In general," however, as Askari adds (again, p. 45), "very few verses have been left unidentified [by her]."

A most important contribution of Askari is to prove (p. 46–49, with bibliography) that some of her predecessors, like J. S. Meisami, were mistaken in thinking that Rāvandī took a short cut, as it were, by using a compilation of selections from the *Shāhnāma* instead of the *Shāhnāma* in its entirety—as he knew it. Askari shows most convincingly that Rāvandī had a deep understanding of the poetics that fueled the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsi, and that he used this understanding "to teach the Saljūk sultans how to rule" (p. 49).

The author deserves the highest praise for achieving a precise and most creative work of research. She has admirably enhanced the study of Persian literature.

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