

An Interview with

Dick Davis**Professor and Translator****Part Two**

Tell us about Jahankhatun...what attracted you to her work?

Many things. To begin with as far as I know she's the one Persian woman poet from before the 19th century (she's 14th century) whose complete divan has come down to us (and it's a big divan, she has three times as many ghazals as Hafez for example). This in itself would make her of major interest. Then what we know of her life makes her a fascinating figure – a princess, the daughter of a king, her father murdered when she was in her teens, a poet at her uncle's court until he too is murdered after a coup d'état when she's around 30; then the slim available evidence points to her enduring imprisonment and exile, until she finally makes it home again and lives to a fairly ripe old age. Her uncle, at whose court she lived, was the major patron of Hafez as well as of a number of other important poets; she certainly knew Hafez's poems because she quotes them, and it's extremely likely that she knew him personally.

She was lucky in that the family she was born into didn't segregate women in the way that was done at many Islamic courts in the Middle Ages; aristocratic women took part in their court's life along with the men. Also she was taught to read and write as a child, which was quite rare for women at the time. And then there is her poetry, which is just marvelous. When you start to read it, it can sound like the same old stuff as it were - nightingales, and roses, and cypress trees, and the absent beloved, and midnight tears, and moths fluttering around candles, and the whole kit and caboodle of medieval Persian lyric poetry. But, as you read, her own voice emerges, and it's an extremely beguiling, individual voice – tender, plaintive, angry, witty, acerbic, very conscious of the precariousness of her situation as a woman in a man's world and, in what we can take to be her later poems, as a member of a deposed and despised dynasty. There's no-one quite like her, and her best poems are heart-breakingly beautiful.

I read that you memorized the Rubayat as a child. I personally consider Omar Kayyam one of the lesser poets. I wonder why Fitzgerald chose him and how good was his translation?

It's pretty certain that virtually none of the quatrains attributed to Khayyam are actually by him, and so his status as a poet is not really discussable. Though, as you indicate, collections of medieval Rubayat are not generally thought of as among the major productions of Persian poetry. FitzGerald changes the status of the poems in his translation; in Persian the quatrains are discrete poems (and probably by a variety of poets), but FitzGerald selects and arranges, and produces a kind of narrative out of his selection. It's been accurately said that he translated a poem that didn't exist (though most of its separate constituents existed). He's pretty free in some places (he "mashes" – his word – quatrains together sometimes, a couple of the quatrains are taken from other sources than the ms. of "Khayyam" that he mainly worked from, and at

least one quatrain he seems to have simply made up, as no original has been found for it). It's been implied that his Persian wasn't very good, but his letters to his Persian teacher, Cowell, about his work on the poems still exist and it's clear from these that his Persian was more than up to the task. For example, he queries a reading because it doesn't scan properly – to be able to pick that up implies quite a sophisticated knowledge of Persian verse. And there are other similar examples of his noticing things a novice in Persian would almost certainly miss.

The reason he chose to translate "Khayyam" was probably because he found the quatrains extremely sympathetic to his own circumstances and world-view; he was a homosexual atheist, and he (in my opinion quite correctly) thought he discerned both homosexuality and atheism in the quatrains he was translating. And there was an even more personal reason; he was almost certainly in love with his Persian teacher, Cowell. Cowell married, and then sailed for India; his parting gift to FitzGerald was the ms. of "Khayyam"'s poems that FitzGerald worked from. His letters to Cowell in India about the translation were his way of staying in touch with the person he loved, and indeed his Rubaiyat can be seen as a sort of disguised love poem. How good a translation is it? Well, as I said, it's fairly free in places. On the other hand there is no other translation of Persian poetry into English that comes so near to conveying to a reader who is without Persian what Persian verse is actually like. The feeling is right, the tone is right, the sentiments are right, the form is as right as it can be given the different rules of Persian and English verse. It's an extraordinary achievement, and every English speaker who loves Persian poetry is immeasurably in FitzGerald's debt. To carp at what he did, in the name of more accurate scholarship, seems to me to be churlishly ungrateful. We should all do so well, and then perhaps we can begin to nit-pick.

Which of the many works you have translated proved to be the most difficult and why?

Hafez is by far the most difficult poet I've tried to translate, and in fact I once published an essay, which achieved some notoriety, called *On Not Translating Hafez*, in which I set out why I thought his work was impossible to translate. Nevertheless, a few years later I found myself trying to undertake the task. The richness of his language, his constant allusiveness, his almost equally constant ambiguity, the way he can – seemingly out of nowhere - completely change the direction of a poem, the play of different registers within the same poem – all these things make his poems a veritable mine-field for a translator. And one cannot but fail in translating Hafez; the only thing you can try to do is, as Beckett says, "fail better".

Which is your favorite chapter of the Shahnameh? How long did it take you to translate that?

Very hard to choose, but it would have to be either the story of Seyavash or the story of Esfandiyar. Those stories belong together in a way; they are about the same problem, but their protagonists find different solutions to the problem, both fatal. Ferdowsi's writing in those tales is a thing to marvel at; spare and strong as it always is, but rich and nuanced, compassionate, at the same time; profoundly human and humane. Translating the Shahnameh took me seven years. They were wonderful years too, I learned an enormous amount from that experience.

Who was your favorite professor of the Persian

studies you took at university and why? Did you ever study under Richard Frye?

You know I hardly studied Persian at university. My undergraduate degree, and MA, are in English Literature. My advisor for my PhD was Norman Calder, who was really an Arabist, though he knew Persian very well too. But when I was officially his student he didn't spend a lot of time teaching me – mainly he said, “Go away and read the Shahnameh and come back with a Dissertation subject”. Before I ever did my PhD, Norman and I had shared a house in Tehran, and when I started to learn Persian he took me through classical Persian poems. I remember almost the first thing we read together was the first book of Rumi's Masnavi, which is like starting to read poetry in English by opening Paradise Lost and embarking on Book. But Norman was a good teacher, extremely patient and extremely meticulous, and he made me work hard at it. Perhaps that's the reason he felt he didn't have to browbeat me too much when he became my PhD advisor, years later. But by far my best Persian teacher has been my wife, Afkham, bless her, in that she's always been there and she's always been my first recourse when I get stuck on something. I could never have done any of the work I've done in Persian without her, none of it.

I never studied under Frye, though we have met, and I have great admiration for his writings.

What was the subject of your doctoral thesis?

I can't remember its title exactly, but it was about father-son and king-subject conflicts in the Shahnameh. The basic thesis was that although the Shahnameh is clearly a text that celebrates both patriarchy and monarchy, when there is conflict between father and son, or between king and subject, the reader's sympathies are clearly directed towards the “inferior” – the son or the subject – in the relationship. The fathers and the kings have the power, but the sons and the subjects occupy the moral high ground as it were. This isn't in fact always the case, but it is the case often enough for it to be a recurrent structural motif in the poem, and of course it substantially complicates the poem; good and bad in such conflicts become inherently ambiguous, with society pulling one way and conscience pulling the other way.

When did you first go to Iran and in what capacity? How did you end up teaching at Tehran University and what did you teach?

The British Council was recruiting people to teach English at Tehran University; I applied and got one of the positions; that was in 1970. After a year there was a row between the Council and the University and the contracts were cancelled, but by that time I had met Afkham, who later became my wife, and I wanted to stay because of her, so I found another teaching job at a liberal arts college. I stayed at that job for 7 years, until 1978.

Tell us about the unique features of classical Persian poetry? About its meter and format, which make it different than other poetry and does the artistry of the calligraphy of the Arabic script itself influence the poetry which would be lost in translation?

This would require a book to answer properly. The first thing to be aware of is its extreme formality. It's metrically highly dexter-

ous, complex, and various (Hafez uses over 20 different meters); it rhymes obsessively – there is no such thing as an unrhymed line in Classical Persian verse (what looks like an unrhymed line in a rubai is a half line; the line as a whole rhymes). And in fact a minor medieval poet, Shatranji, says in one of his rubaiyat, “The beauty of a verse is in its rhyme”. The meters of Persian poetry are quantitative, depending on syllable length. Though it has many meters it only has two common forms – mono rhyme (the same rhyme sound is used throughout the whole poem, and this can go on for over 30 lines sometimes) or couplets. Narrative poems are in couplets, virtually all other poems are in mono rhyme. There are a couple of hybrid forms, that have the equivalent of a refrain in English, but they are rare. So, broadly, we can say that Persian has many meters but only two forms, whereas metrical English poetry has only two meters that are at all common but many forms (blank verse, the couplet, the sonnet, the ballad ... and so on). It's a rather sweeping statement but it's generally true that much of classical Persian poetry's rhetoric, particularly but not exclusively in the short poem, derives from the rhetoric of praise poetry, and this rhetoric is used fairly indiscriminately to talk about a beloved, or a patron, or God. Some poets, e.g. Hafez, deliberately write poems in which it's very hard to decide which of these three is being addressed, and in fact this multiple ambiguity, the indeterminacy of what the poem is actually about, is a large part of the aesthetic point of the poem; it's what the poem is doing. Confronted with such a poem a western reader's instinct tends to be to want to say it's “really” about God, or it's “really” about a beloved, but this instinct should be resisted; the indeterminacy is a major part of what the poem is, which can be discomfiting at first for people used mainly to European literatures. Of course many such poems really are about only one referent, but some aren't, and one has to be open to that possibility. Perhaps that's enough to be going on with.

It's true that calligraphy is a much prized art in the Islamic world, including in Iran, but I don't think it has particularly influenced the forms of Persian poetry. The main reason is that writing a poem down was always seen as secondary to performing the poem, often with musical accompaniment of one kind or another. We say, “to write a poem”; the equivalent phrase in Persian means “to speak a poem” and this indicates the essentially oral nature of the art form in the classical Persian world. Both Hafez and Jahan Khatun (and many other poets) talk with pride and pleasure about the musical performance of their poems. The writing down came later, as a kind of after-thought, so that others could perform the poems too; but the performance was the thing that really mattered, that's what the poem was seen to be, not the words on the page. Over time that changed, and the text itself became more important, but in the “classical” period this performance aspect of a poem was still paramount.

I read that you have no desire to go back to Iran since the revolution and want to remember it the way it was.

Personally I was pro revolution even though I had friends in the royal family and among the old aristocracy like the sons of the famous PM Mirza Hassan Ashtiani Mostowfi al Mamalek of Vanak. I shared your experience of marching along with the protestors and the euphoria of the Iranian Spring albeit short lived. Both the Pahlavis and the IRI have their good points and bad and what I did note when I went back in 2008 for the first time since the revolution was a greater sense of equality and less class barriers than before.

I was in Iran in 2008. It was great seeing old friends. There was a certain sadness due to the economic stagnation caused by the crippling sanctions but the culture and the civic sense survive as do the values of friendship and family. I think you should go back. Any thoughts on that you wish to share?

Well, the heart has its reasons that Reason knows nothing of, as Pascal says. I might go back to Iran one day, but as I say I'm in no hurry to.

Tell us about your own poetry. How would you characterize your style? Is there a common theme or motif or subject or do you write it on everything?

Well, as you might expect from what I've said above, it's metrical, and tends to be written in traditional forms. Poetry was my first love, before pretty well everything else, and it has remained at the center of my life. I'm not sure why, and I suspect it's as much something atavistic as explicable by conscious decision. My style is fairly plain and fairly understated; I don't shout much in my poems. If they were pictures I guess they'd be water-colors, or pencil or charcoal drawings. My themes come out of the life I've lived; a lot of love poems, a lot of poems about travel, a lot of poems about what happens when different cultures come up against each other. Getting to know Persian poetry has definitely influenced the way I write; for example I've written some poems in mono rhyme, imitating Persian models. And I write quite a lot of epigrams, a form that Persian delights in. But it's also influenced my poems in more subtle ways that it's harder for me to put my finger on; perhaps an interest in a certain delicacy of sensibility that I think of as particularly Persian. I want people to like my poems, obviously, but I don't proselytize for them as I do for my translations. With the translations I feel I know I'm doing something useful in putting them out into the world; but with my poems, who knows? I feel it's for others to decide the worth of my poems, if they have any. Of course I hope they do, or I wouldn't write them.

Of all your literary awards which one do you value the most?

I was elected a Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature in 1981; at the time I think I was the youngest Fellow. This meant a lot to me, especially coming from the background I did – very much a “wrong side of the tracks” sort of a background. I felt the life I had chosen for myself, a life of books and poetry, had been in some sense validated, that it hadn't been an awful, idiotic mistake.

Did you find the business of getting your writing published and marketed and sold, difficult and daunting?

I've always been lucky with my Persian translations. Penguin Classics took the first one, which was a real stroke of luck, and since then everything of that nature that I've done has been published by Mage Publishers in very beautiful hardback editions; Mage then typically sells the paperback rights to Penguin, or in one case to Random House. I've been generally lucky too with my own poetry, in that I've always found a publisher for my books, but that has sometimes been more of a shop-around. I very rarely send poems to journals; usually only if an editor asks me for something, which happens from time to time.

Iranian Researcher MARYAM MIRZAKHANI Receives the 2014 Clay Research Award



Maryam Mirzakhani, an Iranian university professor and mathematician at Stanford University, is the recipient of the 2014 Clay Research Award from the Clay Mathematics Institute. Mirzakhani well-known for her prominent theories on geometry and ergodic theory, received the award along with Peter Scholz, another prominent mathematician on Algebraic geometry.

Mirzakhani was introduced as one of 10 selected young minds in North America by Popular Science Journal in 2005. She has received several scientific awards so far.

Her research interests include Teichmuller theory, hyperbolic geometry, ergodic theory, and symplectic geometry.

Mirzakhani is an alumna of the National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET), in Tehran, Iran. She studied at *Farzanegan* High School. She found international recognition as a brilliant teenager after receiving gold medals at both the 1994 International Mathematical Olympiad (Hong Kong) and the 1995 International Mathematical Olympiad (Toronto), where she finished with a perfect score.

Mirzakhani obtained her BS in Mathematics (1999) from the *Sharif* University of Technology. She holds a PhD from Harvard University (2004), where she worked under the supervision of the Fields Medallist Curtis McMullen. She was a Clay Mathematics Institute Research Fellow and a professor at Princeton University.

Mirzakhani has made several important contributions to the theory of moduli spaces of Riemann surfaces. In her early work, Maryam Mirzakhani discovered a formula expressing the volume of a moduli space with a given genus as a polynomial in the number of boundary components. This led her to obtain a new proof for the celebrated conjecture of Edward Witten on the intersection numbers of tautology classes on moduli space as well as an asymptotic formula for the length of simple closed geodesics on a compact hyperbolic surface.

Her subsequent work has focused on Teichmuller Dynamics of Moduli Space. In particular, she was able to prove the long-standing conjecture that William Thurston's earthquake flow on Teichmullerspace is ergodic.