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Which Translation?:
Identifying the True Source of Patten Wilson's *Shahnameh* Illustrations

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Recent scholarship has stressed the influence of translation on late nineteenth-century literary and artistic developments (indeed, 'Decadence and Translation' was the theme of a [Volupté special issue](#) in 2020). Focusing on the British context, Annmarie Drury describes how English poetry at this time was 'profoundly pervious, susceptible to historical-cultural currents arising from the territorial expansion and imperialist tensions that Britain experienced at the time'.¹ Translators, in her phrase, 'ministered to this susceptibility', mediating foreign genres and prosodic forms that by their assimilation into anglophone literary culture both 'tested' and 'transformed' English poetry. Given the importance of translators at this time, and the potential ramifications of their decisions and methods in translation, an obvious question to ask when trying to gauge the reception of a single work of foreign literature by one individual British writer or artist is, 'which translation were they using?' Take the poetry of Sappho: until relatively recently, most translators of her 'Ode to Aphrodite' gendered the speaker's beloved as male. But as early as 1835, the philologist Theodor Bergk proposed the opposite – a distinction of perhaps major significance for a contemporary reader into whose hands *his* translation happened to fall.² Similarly, any scholar investigating a fin-de-siècle dramatist who was influenced by Ibsen is likely to consider which of the various English translations then available he or she consulted, and if both, then which was preferred. The subtle differences between Gosse's and Archer's versions are even the subject of a comic misunderstanding in J. M. Barrie's 1891 farce, *Ibsen's Ghost*, when it emerges that two characters in dialogue have been speaking their lines from variant play texts.³ If translational variants were conspicuous enough to be a subject for popular humour in the 1890s, then for us in the present they must be an object of serious enquiry.

Verifying which translation was used is not always straightforward: it may require careful comparison of variants with some unattributed or fragmentary notes kept by the author we are studying, or perhaps a consultation of their surviving library or marginalia. Nonetheless, the work is done on the understanding that such details matter. Consider Gina's line in *The Wild Duck* (1884), 'mandfolk er nu så underlige, de; de skal altid ha' noget at dividere sig med'.⁴ A British reader's perception of this as a *decadent* remark might depend on whether they had Archer's 1890 translation to hand ('men are strange beings; they must always have something to pervert themselves with'), or a different version that appeared in the same year by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor: 'men folk are such queer creatures; they must always have something to divide themselves with'.⁵ Both translators were attempting, with greater or lesser success, to convey the irony of Gina's malapropism, by which she describes the pistol Hjalmar keeps for rabbit-shooting as an instrument not of diversion [divertere] but of division [divider] – a seeming mistake, but one that annoys Hjalmar nevertheless. Archer deviates somewhat from the text by choosing to evoke the concept of perversion, used so memorably and repeatedly a few years later by Arthur Symons in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), whereas Eleanor Marx Aveling adopts the more literal 'divide' (though she does venture the singularly English 'queer'). Notably, in neither case would the British reader have got the benefit of the 'nu' in Gina's remark: men are *now* so odd, so 'underlige' (literally, un-straight), she does in fact say. So translators' omissions may be as significant as their inventions.

We are not yet accustomed, however, to exercising such diligence with texts from Asian traditions. Even as they are apt to celebrate the cosmopolitan reading habits of the late nineteenth century, too frequently scholars have neglected to identify the specific book that triggered a certain British poet's interest in Persian lyric, a British sceptic's interest in Buddhism, or a British socialist's interest in the Quran. Occasionally a vague reference to the *Arabian Nights* or Omar Khayyam has been considered sufficient to sketch the Orientalist commitments of the era. Sometimes scholars have assumed – not always incorrectly – that whichever was at that time the most popular or most

commonly available version of the Bhagavad Gita, on the Confucian *Analects*, was the one that must have been read by the subject of their investigation. This may seem innocuous enough, but insufficient rigour encourages misattributions, and the toleration and perpetuation of error even in cases of considerable historical significance. A signal example is the famous letter of 1827 in which Goethe predicted the rise of ‘weltiliteratur’ [world literature] after reading a Chinese novel he had borrowed from the ducal library in Weimar. Astonishingly, even within the last decade major publications have misidentified the work in question, leading Leslie O’Bell to conclude that scholars have simply ‘not investigated whether Goethe’s comments about the plot of the novel he was reading correspond to any particular translated Chinese novel’.⁶ Even when they are not so blatant, our lapses recapitulate the devaluing and pigeonholing of Asian literature associated with colonial rule. Consequently, we cannot possibly speak of *decolonizing* the study of the fin de siècle until we accord the same philological respect to Chinese, Persian, or Sanskrit as, to give a recent example, Yopie Prins does to Greek in her study of Victorian women’s engagement with tragic drama. This article is thus in part a call for us to recover our acumen as textual scholars and comparatists.

But there is a further reason why I cite Prins, specifically. Her work highlights how imprecision about sources can be compounded by the historical dismissal of ‘amateur’ work by translators marginal to established scholarship, notably women.⁷ Sometimes well-received at their time of publication, the work of amateur orientalists – active outside the academy or the higher branches of colonial service – was often subsequently sidelined, further obscuring the truth about which translations exerted the most influence over certain individuals or groups. Sometimes these marginal figures brought different emphases of interpretations to the source text, of lasting value and significance. Female translators, for example, were inclined to dwell on female characters long overlooked in the male-dominated tradition of commentary and exegesis: thus *The Iliad of the East*, Frederika Richardson’s 1870 abridgement of the *Ramayana*, gives greater space and agency to Sita than most other translations then available.⁸ For this reason the hard graft and attention to

minutiae that allows us to answer the question, ‘which translation?’, is not worth pursuing merely for the sake of scholarship, but because it allows us to undo the biases that have shaped the field. In this article I will present a single example to highlight the pitfalls of failing to identify the correct source, and the benefits to be gained by doing so correctly. Specifically, I will prove that the drawings of episodes from the Persian epic poem, the *Shahnameh*, by the illustrator Patten Wilson (1869-1934) were not inspired by Matthew Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rostum’, as has commonly been thought, but by *The Epic of Kings* – an abridgement made in 1882 by the female popularizer, Helen Zimmern. But first I will offer an anecdote that demonstrates the significance of Persian poetry for British understandings of decadence, while also illustrating the diversity of late Victorian translation practices, and reminding us of the wide and prolonged influence of Arnold’s poem.

In the 1876-77 academic year, the Dublin students’ magazine *Kottabos* published a series of English translations by an undergraduate, Oscar Wilde, of excerpts from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. In late 1877, Smith, Elder & Co published a translation of the entire play by a more established writer, Robert Browning. The two versions reflect fundamentally different philosophies of translation. As Iain Ross explains, Wilde generally cleaved (with some deviations) to the method laid out by Arnold in the Oxford lectures published as *On Translating Homer* (1861). Arnold’s policy was that Greek should be rendered in a modern English diction that would embody the clarity and inherent ‘nobility’ of the original – just as Homer himself might have written it, had he been born an Englishman. In pursuit of this felicitous effect, Arnold averred, ‘the translator must without scruple sacrifice [...] verbal fidelity to his original’, rather than risk any ‘odd and unnatural effect’ by attempting to reproduce the peculiarities of the Greek. By contrast, Browning’s version was the product of an approach that prized literalness above all else, and that sought through weird idioms and prosodic variation to alienate English readers from the text, emphasizing the cultural distance between them and antiquity. As he announced in his preface, Browning wished to render the *Agamemnon* ‘in as Greek a fashion as English will bear’.⁹ Such an undertaking might even involve the use of modern vernacular or dialect to convey the demotic tone of the original, a strategy

considered ignoble by Arnold, and an insult to classic texts that for him embodied the ‘sweetness and light’ that was so sorely lacking in the debased, fragmented culture of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Among the other things Wilde wrote during his time at Trinity College Dublin was a translation, into Greek, of the dying speech of Sohrab from Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rustum’. It features in an exercise book containing a number of Wilde’s efforts at composition in Greek tragic verse, efforts that were rewarded with the college’s Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek. It was a subject aptly chosen. ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ narrates one of the central episodes in the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi, an epic poem regarded as foundational to the Persian literary tradition. Largely owing to Arnold, late Victorian readers became broadly familiar with the story, which tells of how Sohrab unknowingly battles with and is mortally wounded by his estranged father, the Persian hero Rustem. When Rustem recognizes his son by a jewelled clasp fastened on his arm, he roars in anguish, but the dying youth begs the older man to quell his rage and reconcile himself to what has been ordained by fate:

Father, forbear! For I but meet to-day
The doom which at my birth was written down
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven’s unconscious hand.¹⁰

For Arnold, the episode offered a fit subject for the domesticated ‘Homeric’ English style he would later extol in his lectures on Greek translation, a style that imitated the paratactic quality of Homer, in which a series of grand images are rapidly juxtaposed. It was a method based on his understanding of the *Shahnameh* as a heroic epic akin to the *Iliad* – an idea inherited, it seems, by Wilde, who echoed Arnold’s thinking in a letter he sent a few years later, in 1879, to his friend Helena Sickert. ‘I am sure you know Matthew Arnold already’, Wilde wrote, enclosing as a gift a volume of the poet’s selected verses, ‘but still I have marked just a few of the things I like best in the collection’. One of the poems Wilde marked, with blue silk thread, was ‘Sohrab and Rustum’, which he describes as ‘a wonderfully stately epic, full of the spirit of Homer’.¹¹ Thus the act of

translation was, for Wilde, relatively straightforward: he merely needed to render in actual Greek what Arnold had already reconceptualized as Grecian.

So what bearing does this have on the decadent tradition in which Wilde was to play such a significant role after he left the university? Arnold had himself derived his ideas about the *Shahnameh* largely from ‘Le Livre des Rois’, an 1850 essay by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve. The French critic identifies Firdausi explicitly as ‘l’Homère de son pays’ [the Homer of his country]. Moreover, he vindicates the *primacy* of Firdausi’s tale of tragic filicide, to which later stories on the same pattern (whether in Persian or other languages) constitute increasingly sophisticated and therefore debased iterations of a raw and primitive ur-text. To turn from the Sohrab and Rustem episode to Canto VIII of Voltaire’s *Henriade*, which also narrates the death of a son at the hand of his unknowing father, is to feel, Sainte-Beuve quips, as if one has passed from the banks of the mighty Ganges to a pond at Versailles.¹² Such is the height from which epic poetry has fallen in modern times. This bias in favour of epic reflected a general departure from the interests of earlier Persianists, like Sir William Jones, who had focused their attention on the lyrical odes of Hafez (1325-1390 CE). The consequent ascendancy of Firdausi (940-1019 CE) within mid-nineteenth-century orientalism enabled the establishment of a lineage of decline, attributable in part to European biases and in part to the *Shahnameh* itself, which elegiacally chronicles the kings of ancient, Zoroastrian Persia, a civilization long since overcome by foreign dynasties and converted to Islam. Hafez’s ghazals and other contemporary lyric forms thus came to be read not only as the stylistic zenith of Persian poetry but as its efflorescence, so that by the turn of the century Britain’s pre-eminent Persianist, E. G. Browne, could remark that the entire Persian tradition was ‘essentially the literature of a decadence’, with ‘pessimism’ and ‘pantheistic spiritualism’ being its chief decadent characteristics.

Commissioned to write a two-volume history of Persian literature, Browne could not decide how to chronologically divide the volumes. The evolution of Persian literature, he protested to his publisher, was so much less voluminous than its decadence.¹³ In this way the Persian literary

canon lent itself to European narratives of imperial decline, with the *Shahnameh* standing forth, like Homer, as one of a handful of unadulterated, archaic texts from which ‘primitive’ vitality and the heroic ethos might be recovered. Browne himself confessed to not especially enjoying it, drawn temperamentally as he was to the ‘decadent’ characteristics of later lyric poetry. But among the *Shahnameh*’s other Victorian admirers was William Morris, who valued it for the same reason he valued Icelandic saga. ‘The heroic cycle of Iran had long held in his mind a place next to those of Greece and Scandinavia’, remarked his first biographer, and in 1883 Morris even began work on his own translation.¹⁴ Though he ultimately abandoned it, his Persian interests continued to multiply. Notably, in 1893 he was instrumental in persuading the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) to purchase the Ardabil Carpet, bringing this epitome of Persian craftsmanship to London at a time when the country’s modern industry and manufacturing (including railways, telegraphs and the tobacco trade) were conspicuously dominated by British commercial interests, a situation that had sparked unrest in Iran as recently as 1891.¹⁵ The carpet acquisition was thus only one of many ways in which the country’s glorious past, and its present decay, were juxtaposed in the public imagination.

The relationship of Persia to European decadence and aestheticism had already been developing for some years, therefore, when in 1895 Wilson published a series of remarkable drawings in *The Yellow Book* based on episodes in the *Shahnameh*. They are not accompanied by any text. Only their titles indicate the source of the legend depicted, and even these seem to expect of the viewer some prior acquaintance with the story: ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’ (Volume 4, January 1895), ‘A Drawing’ (Volume 5, April 1895), ‘Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother’ (Volume 6, July 1895), and ‘The War Horses of Rustem’ (Volume 11, October 1896). So influential has ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ been on British understandings of the *Shahnameh*, that Arnold has been commonly credited with inspiring Wilson’s contribution. Gallerists and auctioneers have more than once made this assumption. When one of Wilson’s preparatory sketches of a warhorse came up for sale in 2007, the curatorial notes explained that ‘Ruksh is Rustrum’s [sic] horse in Matthew

Arnold's poem "Sohrab and Rustum".¹⁶ When selling some later works by Wilson, the biography assembled by an online dealer based in Minneapolis, the Grapefruit Moon Gallery, records that his early drawings for *The Yellow Book* were 'inspired by a prose translation of the original epic poem, Rustem and Sohrab [sic] by Matthew Arnold'.¹⁷ As it happens, 'Sohrab and Rustum' is composed in verse, not prose. Though based closely on Firdausi's narrative, it is also not a translation. Indeed, it is not even an indirect translation, for while in theory Arnold could have compensated for his scant knowledge of the original language by consulting the English version of James Atkinson (1832), or the French of Jules Mohl (the first volume appearing in 1838), in practice he drew chiefly if not wholly on Sainte-Beuve's essay, which quotes Mohl at length.

As Reza Taher-Kermani has shown, Arnold in fact never intended a translation of the story: 'rather, he wanted to render it into something resembling a Greek (Homeric) episode'. This is why 'Sohrab and Rustum' does not begin with Sohrab's birth and childhood, as does the equivalent section in Firdausi's original, but with the hero emerging sleepless from his tent on the eve of his fateful combat with Rustem. Thus, like several books of the *Iliad*, Arnold's reworking opens at dawn in the silence before a battle.¹⁸ The distinct martial emphasis Wilson has given to his images may have supported the assumption that they were inspired by Arnold. In the first Rustem, surrounded by his turbaned retainers, twists in his saddle to loose an arrow at Sohrab. In the second the youth, still mounted, has managed to lasso his father, and the two warriors are about to duel at close quarters. Dense cross-hatching on the armour and undergrowth contrasts with large areas of blank page describing the white walls of a fortress, and the smooth flank of Rustem's horse. These are bright, crisp, scrupulous line drawings, closer to Pre-Raphaelitism than the ink nocturnes published by Beardsley in preceding issues of *The Yellow Book* – indeed, they do not quite reproduce Arnold's Homeric vision, but grow increasingly medieval and chivalric as the series progresses. In 'Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother', the departing hero pauses in a loggia supported by painted columns resembling a Norman church. His mother is robed like an Arthurian queen, while behind them rise the towers of a Persian Camelot. Graphic art from colonial India

may also have had its influence: the groom in ‘The War Horses of Rustem’ looks more like a Punjabi *sais* in a drawing by John Lockwood Kipling than an ancient Iranian (fig. 1).



Fig.1: ‘The War Horses of Rustem’, *Yellow Book* 11 (October 1896). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0, with thanks to Professor Lorraine Janzen Kooistra of Toronto Metropolitan University.

Wilson’s drawings belong then to a brand of artistic orientalism that views Asia – more particularly, those parts of Asia under direct or indirect British control – as a fit venue for intricate detail, naturalism, and objectivity. The same aesthetic mindset had prompted Kipling’s son, Rudyard, a few years earlier, to compare a Shia preacher in Lahore to a figure in a Venetian fresco.¹⁹ This was quite a different orientalism from that of Aubrey Beardsley, attracted as he was to the grotesque, the fantastic, and the subjective, and realized in the flat planes of colour he admired in

the volume of *shunga* [Japanese erotica] purchased for him in Paris by William Rothenstein. Ironically, Wilson by no means eschewed this style of orientalism more typically associated with *The Yellow Book*. See, for example, the *japoniste* cover he designed for the sixth issue, which shows two women – one in the act of removing a peacock feather-printed robe – bathing in a pool.²⁰ But otherwise the *Shahnameh* images offer, in the pages of *The Yellow Book*, more than a hint of colonial late Pre-Raphaelitism, and suggest a rejection of decadent aesthetics. The late Matthew Arnold, who himself idealized South Asia as a place where detached observation and ‘the criticism of life’ was practised to a high degree, would perhaps have approved.²¹

But as we look more closely, we perceive that Arnold cannot have been the source of Wilson’s illustrations – or at least he cannot have been the only source. One piece of evidence that clearly disproves this supposition is a fifth *Shahnameh* illustration that Wilson published in 1901, not in *The Yellow Book* but in the Arts and Crafts magazine, *The Studio*. The drawing depicts Rustem encountering the legendary bird, the Simurgh, atop the Alborz Mountains, a scene from the hero’s youth which narratively predates his combat with Sohrab, and which consequently does not feature in Arnold’s poem.²² Another is the article by Walter Shaw Sparrow that appeared in the same magazine a few months later, in which Sparrow – as if to put right a common misconception – states plainly that Wilson’s drawings were ‘inspired, not by the poem in which Matthew Arnold tells how Rustum killed his own son unwittingly in single combat, but by reading a prose translation of Firdausi Tusi’.²³ To which translation can Sparrow have been referring? Setting aside the French text prepared by Mohl, in its six cumbersome and very expensive volumes, as improbable, the English possibilities are few. The earliest translations were Joseph Champion’s, published at Calcutta in 1785, and Stephen Weston’s from 1815. Both were dramatically abridged, and long out of print by the 1890s. They were also verse translations, whereas Sparrow specifies prose. A more likely candidate is James Atkinson’s *Sháh Námeb of the Persian Poet Firduasí*, first published in 1832 and reissued in a cheap reprint series, the Chandos Classics, in 1886. But Atkinson’s translation is only partially in prose. One possibility remains, a text traditionally overlooked in histories of

Persian literary influence in Britain, because it is not an original translation but was produced instead – in the same way as William Morris’ incomplete version – using the French text of Mohl. That its author was a woman, and an unapologetic amateur, has no doubt also contributed to its neglect. Helen Zimmern explained in her preface that competence in Persian was unnecessary, since her goal was to ‘popularize’ the legends narrated by Firdausi ‘in his immortal epic’.²⁴ With a canny eye for the non-expert audience, she persuaded the critic and man of letters Edmund Gosse to write a prefatory poem, ‘Firdausi in Exile’, and further ornamented her book with two illustrations by Gosse’s brother-in-law, Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The first of these, adjoining the title page, shows an early episode in the *Shahnameh* in which Zal amazes a party of women by bringing down a duck in mid-flight with a well-aimed arrow. Significantly, Wilson’s first drawing, ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’ (fig. 2), also depicts a feat of Persian archery.



Fig.2: ‘Rustem Firing the First Shot’, *Yellow Book* 4 (January 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

Zimmern's father, a Jewish lace merchant, had emigrated from Hamburg in 1856, and she naturalized as British in 1881.²⁵ In the same year, Vernon Lee met her during a boating excursion on the Thames and left a sympathetic, if somewhat condescending portrait: 'a pleasant, intelligent little black woman, quite capable of doing good work but who has to do hack reviewing to support her people'.²⁶ Whether it was financial necessity or personal preference that set her course for Grub Street instead of the university, by this point Zimmern had carved for herself a viable niche in literary London. She was assisted in this by several male patrons, among them Gosse and Browning, who as I have already mentioned was strongly interested in translation – not only from Greek, but also Hebrew and Persian. She had evidently struck up a friendship with Browning by late 1882, when she sent him a copy of *The Epic of Kings*. 'Certainly I will read – not "look through" – your beautiful book, and report of it as fairly as I can [...]. Yours affectionately / Robert Browning.'²⁷ Most important of Zimmern's early contacts, though, was Richard Garnett, courteous polymath and chief librarian at the British Museum. 'When next I come to the Museum I shall gladly avail myself of your kind permission to ask your advice in literary matters', she wrote in 1873, at the start of a lengthy correspondence. 'It happens I am just now much in need of some.' It may have been with Garnett's help that she got her first work, reviewing German books for the *Examiner*. Meanwhile he expanded her horizons, discussing with her Buddhism, Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, and Persian literature, of which an early taste was Sadi's maxim, 'O square thyself for use! A stone that is fit for the wall is not left in the way'. 'What a charming Persian proverb that is', she responded. 'Would that I may prove a fitting stone, then I shall not despair of being left on the ground'.²⁸ Crucially, he also introduced her to the *Shahnameh*, and it may even have been Garnett who originally suggested the idea of a popular translation.²⁹

Garnett is also likely to have introduced her to Gosse, who eventually wrote two poems for her – not only 'Firdausi in Exile', which prefaced her *Epic of Kings*, but also a second commemorating the book's publication, addressed to her privately and existing, to my knowledge, only in the form of a manuscript I found tucked among some papers of Zimmern's publisher, T.

Fisher Unwin, at Bristol University. The verses begin by comparing Zimmern to the eighteenth-century woman of letters and Constantinople resident, Mary Wortley Montagu, casting himself in the role of Montagu's spurned suitor, Alexander Pope, and her as the contemporary poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.

If this were Spence's classic parlour,
The epoch seventeen twenty-three,
If I were Pope, that little snarler,
And you were courtliest Winchilsea,

With brilliant points my verse I'd vary,
I'd magnify your Persian feast,
And vow that vapid Lady Mary
Had merely travestied the East.

Her visions thro' half-open portals,
Her bulbuls singing in the vine,
Were but the common-place of mortals,
While yours were gleams of the divine;

That all the heroes of her travels
Were vulgar many living clods,
While your sublimer speech unravels
The battles or the loves of gods.

Gosse quaintly conjures a prior era of British orientalism, one captivated with Persian lyric rather than epic poetry, though his history is imprecise. Montagu lived in the early eighteenth century, before the advent of William Jones' Hafez translations, and thus she never refers to 'bulbuls singing in the vine' (though she was an avid reader of a very different eastern text, the *Arabian Nights*, then in its first novelty). Gosse's goal, however, is to suggest that Zimmern's *Shahnameh* might initiate a fresh oriental craze, which will not only add a new branch to the public understanding of Persian literature, but also rectify the clichés and 'travesty' of past representations. By associating her with two aristocratic predecessors, he also disguises her own rather more straitened circumstances and her debt to him as patron.

There is a touch of gallantry here which does not altogether do Zimmern justice, especially when Gosse goes on to warn of how her genteel dilettantism ('wits', 'arts', and 'lettered graces') may fail to please the modern tribe of male, scholarly pedants, who will pounce upon any mistake

in her research. His patronizing assumption, it seems, is that her work is indeed likely to contain such trifling, feminine errors. It would appear in Gosse's mind there is such a thing as Ladies' Persian, or Ladies' Arabic, which is marked by clumsy transcription and missed diacritics – in the same way that 'lady's Greek', as Romney remarks mockingly in *Aurora Leigh*, is Greek written 'without the accents'.³⁰

It were an easy labour, Helen,
To prove you brightest of your sex,
And swear that men turn pale in telling,
The provinces your wits annex.

But arts like these are out of fashion,
And critics, whom may God preserve,
Might fly into a dreadful passion,
And firk us as we well deserve.

Might find an x or z repeated
In some romantic hero's name, –
A chaste Arabian adverb cheated
Of half its dot, – and cry you shame!

With lexicons and rueful faces
They might pursue an erring word,
Nor more regard your lettered graces
Than cats respect a singing-bird.

I will not tempt these bearded wonders
By any public praise of mine,
Lest they should launch their secret thunders,
And slay us without call or sign.

Your work is done; the antique poet
Beneath his rose-tree cries you thanks,
And pride – the winter flood-waves show it –
Swells old Euphrates' storied banks.

Till time destroys our motley story,
And drowns our century's shame and fame,
This volume will sustain your glory,
And with FIRDUSI's link your name.³¹

Perhaps the most touching aspect of Gosse's tribute is its implied promise that any blame *The Epic of Kings* should meet with will be borne jointly ('firk us', 'slay us'), but that any praise will be Zimmern's alone. On the other hand, though she may 'annex' whole provinces of knowledge,

Zimmern's task is a subsidiary one in service of her antique source, Firdausi. Gosse, it may be noted, does not call her work a translation – the manuscript is headed, correctly enough, "To Helen Zimmern, on receiving her paraphrase of "The Epic of Kings"". And rather than commending the book to its contemporary audience, the clear-sighted Gosse foresees that it must first avoid shipwreck on the rocks of criticism before finding a safe harbour in posterity. In fact, the book was favourably received: complimentary reviews helped it to a second edition, in 1883, and a third in 1886 targeted at a young audience. But in the longer term its reputation dwindled. It re-appeared in 1906 with a small press in New York, and when it was next reissued, in 1926, by Macmillan, Zimmern's preface was removed and replaced with that of Wilfred Jones, the young American who – according to the title page – had 'rediscovered' the text. This is perhaps unsurprising, since from the beginning the book had been triply disadvantaged. It was subject firstly to the deprecation of translation as a derivative undertaking, in contrast to original composition. Secondly, scorn for amateur translators and 'popularizers' as usurpers of scholarly privilege meant it would not be seen as a contribution of lasting significance to Persian studies. Finally, the side-lining of women within orientalism added a third handicap.

But returning to Wilson, the evidence that proves beyond doubt that he took his cue from *The Epic of Kings*, and the reason why we should care, are the same. For our concern as decolonial scholars is to recover silenced voices and occluded perspectives, and from her marginal position as an amateur, a Jew, and a woman, Zimmern saw the *Shahnameh* in a particular way. When her version is compared with those of her male peers, something that becomes noticeable in Zimmern's treatment is her concern for the women of the Sohrab story. As I have mentioned, Wilson's third drawing (fig. 3) shows the impetuous youth bidding a final farewell to his mother Tahmineh, a character who in Arnold's poem is referred to only in passing. The drawing shows an erect, robed woman frowning at her son as she fastens upon his arm the clasp that, she hopes, will identify him to his father Rustem should they meet in battle. In Atkinson's translation, Tahmineh weeps and wails when her son demands to know his true lineage and proposes to sally forth and

prove his valour: ‘Tahmineh wept bitterly, but her entreaties were of no avail – the youth being unalterably fixed in his determination’.³²

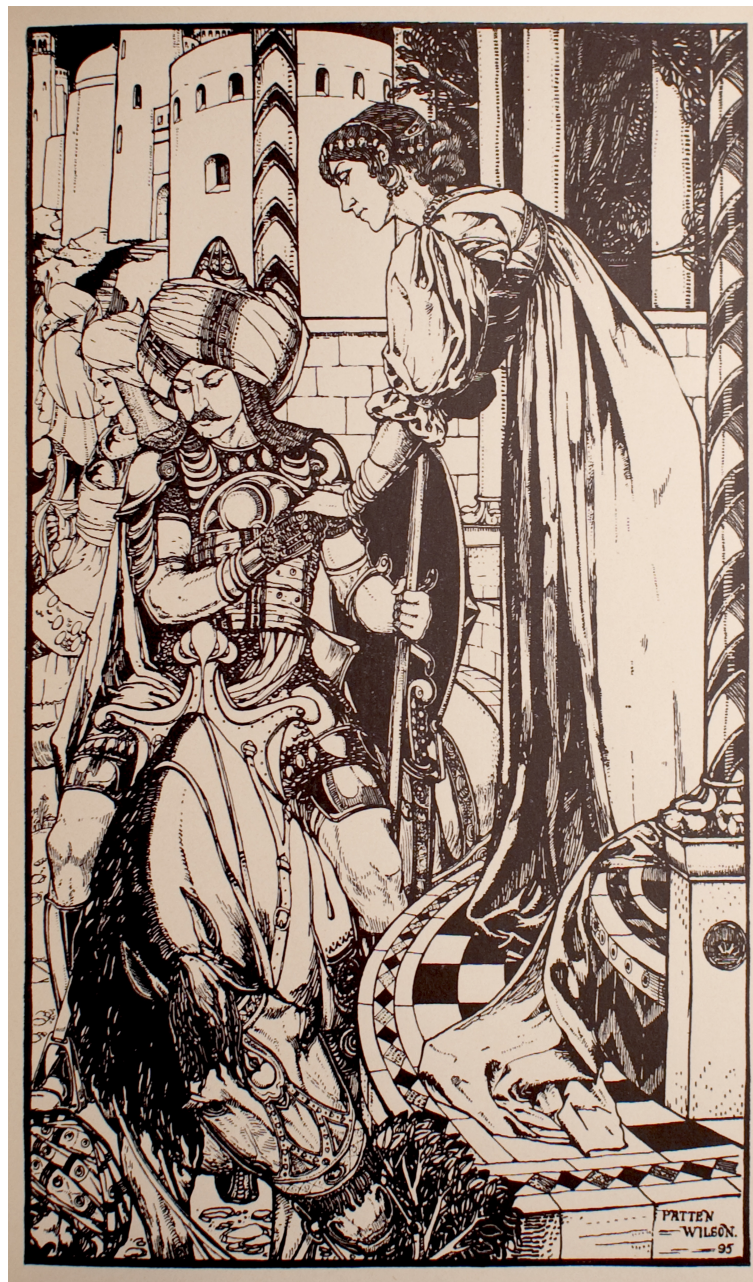


Fig.3: ‘Sohrab Taking Leave of his Mother’, *Yellow Book* 6 (July 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

But in the same scene, Zimmern’s princess only feigns reluctance at Sohrab’s departure, while inwardly rejoicing at his appetite for war, and this bears a much stronger likeness to the haughty and regal figure Wilson has delineated.³³ In Firdausi’s original, Tahmineh’s inner feelings during her exchange with Sohrab are not actually described, and thus Zimmern’s rendering of the scene

is supplemented with her own invention. But nevertheless, her portrayal of a woman who, upon hearing the eventual news of her son's demise, slices off his horse's tail and sets fire to his palace, much better reflects the Tahmineh of Firdausi than Atkinson's matron, who, rather than incinerating Sohrab's possessions, clutches them 'with melancholy joy, / In sad remembrance of her darling-boy', before sinking into a 'trance' of grief.³⁴ Whether this reflects Atkinson's ideal of femininity, or merely his use of a defective manuscript copy, Tahmineh's decision to retain the things as keepsakes instead of destroying them is a clear deviation from the original, which Zimmern, working from the more accurate text of Mohl, rectified in English. Her princess's sorrow is, moreover, of an altogether more passionate order: Tahmineh tears her hair, wrings her hands, and heaps 'black earth upon her head', before marshalling her emotions and carrying out her actions with the ritual propriety expected of a noblewoman.

Then she caused the garments of Sohrab to be brought unto her, and his throne and his steed. And she regarded them, and stroked the courser and poured tears upon his hoofs, and she cherished the robes as though they yet contained her boy, and she pressed the head of the palfrey unto her breast, and she kissed the helmet that Sohrab had worn. Then with his sword she cut off the tail of his steed and set fire unto the house of Sohrab, and she gave his gold and jewels unto the poor. And when a year had thus rolled over her bitterness, the breath departed from out her body, and her spirit went forth after Sohrab her son.³⁵

Another female character who takes on greater stature in Zimmern's version of the story is Gordafrid, the warlike maiden whose cheeks, in the Persian, are said to turn black with rage when she witnesses the humiliation of her lord Hojir at the hands of Sohrab, who with his followers is making a relentless advance across Persia in quest of Rustem. Having watched Hojir roped by Sohrab, bound and led away as a prisoner from the battlements of their castle, Gordafrid decides to take matters into her own capable hands.

So she took forth burnished mail and clad herself therein, and she hid her tresses under a helmet of Roum, and she mounted a steed of battle and came forth before the walls like to a warrior. And she uttered a cry of thunder, and flung it amid the ranks of Turan, and she defied the champions to come forth to single combat.³⁶

Disguised as a boy, Gordafrid engages and temporarily checks the advancing Sohrab. To their single combat Zimmern devotes more lines than to any other in the epic, save that of Sohrab's

final encounter with the warrior who, unbeknownst to him, is really his father Rustem. In her treatment Zimmern did not depart in the slightest from the literal French translation at her elbow – she merely rendered the story in full. The liberty Zimmern took was editorial, as she condensed other episodes to lend more pages to Gordafriid, a character whom Arnold completely elides, and who in Atkinson is made the basis of a donnish footnote speculating whether Firdausi might have poached the figure of the ‘warrior dame’ from Homer or Herodotus.³⁷ While Wilson did not choose to depict this episode, it is noteworthy that, as in the scenes involving Tahmineh, Zimmern’s version shows itself here much more than a mere prose equivalent of Atkinson’s verse. She offers a particular slant upon the legend, sometimes ministering to the original better than the trained Persianist who preceded her, and treating it as something culturally distinct rather than seeking a Grecian antecedent. Then again, could it be that Wilson did turn his pen to Gordafriid after all? The second illustration, titled enigmatically ‘A Drawing’ (fig. 4), shows what appears to be Sohrab and Rustem battling before the walls of a castle, Sohrab having caught his father about the waist with his lasso. It is a weapon used often enough in the heroic duels of the *Shahnameh*, but not, it must be admitted, in the combat of Sohrab with Rustem, as Zimmern tells it. Moreover, the two are said to have locked swords not under the ramparts of a fortress, but on a battlefield between the encampments of their respective armies. Could it be that ‘A Drawing’ shows not Sohrab pursuing Rustem, but Sohrab about to truss the unfortunate Hojir at the gate of his own castle? And in that case, who must be the young smooth-cheeked warrior with waving hair emerging from the bottom right of the frame, her back turned to us, advancing and drawing her sword on Sohrab – who else but Gordafriid? ‘In her we recognize a Brunhild’, remarked the *Saturday Review* in its appreciative notice of *The Epic of Kings* in February 1883, ‘as she rides forth to single combat with Sohrab’. Yet she is no longer recognized today in Wilson’s illustration, which is what happens when female translators are allowed to fade into obscurity, and when scholars fail to verify sources.³⁸



Fig.4: 'A Drawing', *Yellow Book* 5 (April 1895). Courtesy of Yellow Nineties 2.0.

Reuniting Zimmern's text with Wilson's drawings enables us to gauge how the former, and subsequently her readers, intervened in the conversation about Persian decadence. The publication of the Gordafriid drawing, in issue five, coincided with Beardsley's departure from *The Yellow Book*. Tainted by his association with the by now disgraced Wilde, he was removed as art editor and his duties assumed by Wilson. It is tempting to speculate that Wilson chose or was encouraged to proceed with his *Shahnameh* illustrations in order to change the tone of the magazine, substituting a heroic and 'primitive' orientalism in place of the decadent and erotic imagery favoured by his predecessor. I have found nothing to substantiate this, the John Lane papers at the Ransom Centre yielding no clues, though if it were the case, then that too would be in keeping with Zimmern's exposition of the *Shahnameh*. Firdausi, she remarks somewhat oddly in her introduction, 'disdains all bizarrerie'.³⁹ Antedating the exaggeration and 'strained metaphors' that have come to be

associated with ‘Orientals’, she explains, his is a poem of a ‘naive archaic character’, written like all true epics ‘in the infancy of a race or people’. Citing Comte’s law of three stages, outlined in the *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1842), Zimmern proposes that the legendary basis for an epic is laid down in a society’s ‘supernatural’ stage. ‘Only then have traditions their true natural ring and flavour’, she writes, ‘only then can they be put into form and preserved so that they reproduce for all time that peculiar, inimitable fragrance, that aroma of the childhood of the world’. When oral tradition (‘the lay of the native bard’) historically grows silent or corrupt, she proposes, there arises a modern poet, ‘great, large-hearted, national’, to fix these legends in the form of an epic poem. In this the poet acts as the embodiment of the nation’s popular spirit – ‘so long’, she adds significantly, ‘as it is not fatally degenerate’ – and that service Firdausi performed for Iran.⁴⁰

There is nothing very extraordinary about this reading. Zimmern is asserting the primacy of the *Shahnameh*, its irreproachably ‘national’ and classic quality, in the same way that Sainte-Beuve and Arnold did – only she is doing so in the language of the *fin de siècle*, and buttressing the thesis of national degeneration and its cultural manifestation, decadence, by drawing attention to its opposite. At the same time, she is treating the text with a marked philological respect, admitting her ignorance of Persian but emphasizing the epic’s fundamental otherness and the cultural gulf separating the nineteenth-century reader from Firdausi’s tenth-century context. ‘I have tried in all cases to preserve the peculiarities of Eastern imagery and allusion’, her preface explains, while she adopted the diction of the King James Bible in an effort to remove the stories ‘from everyday speech’, and thus ‘to remove them from the atmosphere of to-day’.⁴¹ In this, she followed the translation strategies developed by her friend Browning for Aeschylus, instead of the approach taken by Arnold with Homer. Finally, as a female popularizer, she draws attention to episodes overlooked or elided by professional, male orientalists. She was thus a better custodian, in a sense, of the richness and particularity of the original, even as she shared the same assumptions as her contemporaries about historical and literary decline through vertical tiers of civilization. By offering a way of admiring the *Shahnameh* not inextricably connected to and dependent on Greek

epic, she was enabling new ways of imagining the poem and, if only in small way, advancing British understanding of it at the turn of the century. Matthew Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rostum' was a highly influential poem. It was admired by the young Wilde, and no doubt by other writers who were born in the mid-century and rose to prominence in the 1880s and 1890s. But it was not the text that inspired Wilson. If we don't look for the real vectors of transmission, whereby certain stories, characters, images, and metaphors detached from their native traditions and produced an impact in English literature, then our ideas of cultural exchange will be fundamentally flawed. We will continue to cleave, helplessly, to canonical writings, and recapitulate the same process of marginalization that first removed the true source into critical obscurity. We will do a disservice to the Persian original, by underestimating the extent and complexity of its influence in British fin-de-siècle culture, and while we may have succeeded in decentering the study of decadence from its European hubs, we will not have done the patient and precise work necessary to decolonize our scholarship.

¹ Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 6.

² Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 245-46.

³ Simon Shepherd, *The English Theatrical Avant-Garde 1900-1925* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2023), p. 30.

⁴ Henrik Ibsen, *Vildanden: Skuespil i Fem Akter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1884), p. 118.

⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen's Prose Dramas: Ghosts; The Enemy of the People; The Wild Duck*, trans. by William Archer (London: Walter Scott, 1890), p. 309; Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck: a Drama in Five Acts*, trans. by Eleanor Marx Aveling (Boston: William H. Baker, 1890), p. 71.

⁶ Leslie O'Bell, 'Chinese Novels, Scholarly Errors and Goethe's Concept of World Literature', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 87.2 (2018), 67. The novel was the *Huajian ji*, translated by Peter Perring Thoms, in 1824, as *Chinese Courtship*.

⁷ Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 8.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of *The Iliad of the East* and contemporary *Ramayana* translations, see my *Asian Classics on the Victorian Bookshelf: Flights of Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 152-65.

⁹ Iain Ross, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 86-88.

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1878), p. 54.

¹¹ Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland, eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 83. The blue silk thread became apparent when the volume came up for auction at Sotheby's a few years ago: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/oscar-wilde-l04414/lot.8.html> [accessed 25 October 2022].

¹² 'La même impression que si l'on passait du fleuve du Gange à un bassin de Versailles'. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, 'Le Livre des Rois, par le poète persan Firdousi publié et traduit par M. Jules Mohl', *Causeries du Lundi: Tome Premier*, 3rd edn (Paris: Garnier, 1857), p. 344.

¹³ E. G. Browne to T. Fisher Unwin, 12 May 1901, ALS, Berg Collection, New York.

¹⁴ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), II, p. 92.

¹⁵ Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-92* (London: Cass, 1966), pp. 3-5.

- ¹⁶ <https://www.the-saleroom.com/en-gb/auction-catalogues/david-lay-f-r-i-c-s/catalogue-id-2720213/lot-4809188> [accessed 5 March 2023].
- ¹⁷ <https://grapefruitmoongallery.com/20082> [accessed 28 October 2022].
- ¹⁸ Reza Taher-Kermani, *The Persian Presence in Victorian Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 131.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Pinney, ed., *Kipling's India: Uncollected Sketches, 1884-88* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 269.
- ²⁰ Thanks to Margaret Stetz for drawing my attention to this image.
- ²¹ Arnold arrived at this conclusion from his reading of the Bhagavad Gita. See 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R. H. Super, 11 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-77), III, p. 174.
- ²² Patten Wilson, 'Rustum and the Simoorg', in *Modern Pen Drawings: European and American*, ed. by Charles Holme, special number of *The Studio* (Winter 1901), 51.
- ²³ Walter Shaw Sparrow, 'Some Drawings by Patten Wilson', *The Studio*, 23 (August 1901), 193. The epithet "Tusi" refers to Firdausi's home town of Tus.
- ²⁴ Helen Zimmern, *The Epic of Kings: Stories Retold from Firdusi* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1882), p. v. For an example of the disregard with which her book has typically been treated, see John D. Yohannan, *Persian Poetry in England and America* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1977), p. 316, where it features only in the bibliography, classed under 'secondary' works.
- ²⁵ 'Naturalization Certificate: Helen Zimmern', HO 334/10/3427, National Archives, London.
- ²⁶ Amanda Gagel, ed., *Selected Letters of Vernon Lee, 1856-1935*, 2 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016-20), I, p. 296.
- ²⁷ Robert Browning to Helen Zimmern, 22 November 1882, ALS, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University.
- ²⁸ Zimmern to Garnett, 21 June - 24 July 1873, ALS, MS-1545 (Richard Garnett Collection), 64.7, Harry Ransom Center, Texas.
- ²⁹ In her preface, Zimmern acknowledges her obligations to Garnett, 'to whom I owe my first introduction to the beauties of Firdusi'. Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. vii.
- ³⁰ Prins, *Ladies' Greek*, p. 7.
- ³¹ Edmund Gosse, untitled poem, Papers of Jane Cobden Unwin, Box 1, DM 851, Bristol University Special Collections, Bristol.
- ³² James Atkinson, *The Sháh Námeb of the Persian Poet Firdausi* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1832), p. 182.
- ³³ Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. 136.
- ³⁴ Atkinson, *Sháh Námeb*, p. 603.
- ³⁵ Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. 171.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ³⁷ Atkinson, *Sháh Námeb*, p. 560.
- ³⁸ 'The Epic of Kings', *Saturday Review*, 55.1425 (17 February 1883), 220.
- ³⁹ Zimmern, *Epic of Kings*, p. xxiv.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. vi, xi, xxv.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.