

Lexical and Stylistic Features in Dick Davis's English Translation of the Shahnameh

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ABSTRACT

Abulqasim Ferdowsi's 11th-century monumental masterpiece, the Shahnameh (The Book of Kings), stands as a defining pillar of Persian cultural identity and a supreme monument of world epic literature. Comprising approximately 50,000 rhymed couplets, its vast structural, prosodic, and mythological scope has historically presented Western scholars with an enduring dilemma between rigid metrical fidelity and narrative readability. Previous 19th- and early 20th-century English renderings either succumbed to archaic, Victorian verbiage or reduced the poetic vigor into dry prose, thereby obscuring the aesthetic resonance of Ferdowsi's original motaqarib meter.

Keywords: *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi, Dick Davis, translation strategies, prosimetric approach, dynamic equivalence, Rustam, Persian epic, comparative literature, translation studies

INTRODUCTION

Abulqasim Ferdowsi's monumental 11th-century masterpiece, the *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings), stands as a defining pillar of Persian literary tradition and a monumental artifact of world epic heritage. Comprising approximately 50,000 rhymed couplets, the epic seamlessly weaves myth, history, tragic humanism, and ethical governance into a grand narrative continuum. Beyond its historical function in preserving the Persian language, the *Shahnameh* explores universal existential

themes: the transience of earthly power, the tragic collisions of filial duty and fate, and the perpetual struggle between justice and tyranny. Consequently, the integration of this masterpiece into global literary discourse relies heavily on the efficacy of its cross-cultural translation methodologies.

Transposing an epic of such immense structural, prosodic, and cultural complexity into Western languages presents a profound hermeneutic challenge [1: 154-166; 2: 65-89]. Historically, early English renderings ranging from James Atkinson's truncated nineteenth-century selections to Arthur and Edmond Warner's monumental nine-volume verse translation struggled to balance fidelity with readability [3: 20-34]. While rigid poetic translations often lapsed into archaic, cumbersome diction, literal prose versions frequently flattened the rhythmic vigor and emotional pathos intrinsic to Ferdowsi's *motaqarib* meter.

In contemporary translation studies, the scholar and poet Dick Davis represents a major methodological shift in resolving this tension. Davis introduced a hybrid, prosimetric strategy interweaving lucid narrative prose with elevated, formal verse to render the epic accessible to contemporary Anglophone audiences while preserving its aesthetic weight.

Despite the widespread acclaim of Davis's work, a systematic academic inquiry into his specific translation strategies remains essential. Existing scholarship often evaluates his translation either on purely literary grounds or as a popular adaptation. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the formal, stylistic, and cultural mechanisms through which Davis balances domesticating accessibility and foreignizing fidelity. By examining his dual approach, this paper demonstrates how Davis re-contextualizes the *Shahnameh* at the intersection of Eastern epic traditions and Western literary expectations.

METHODS

To evaluate Dick Davis's translation methodology in rendering Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, this study employs a comparative textual and stylistic analysis grounded in Eugene Nida's translation

theory of formal versus dynamic equivalence [4: 159-172]. While formal equivalence prioritizes the preservation of the source text's structural mechanics such as literal syntax, strict metrical schemes, and rigid rhyme patterns dynamic (or functional) equivalence aims to recreate the emotional, aesthetic, and psychological impact experienced by the original audience within the target language culture.

The theoretical framework integrates a qualitative comparative approach, juxtaposing the Persian critical text (*Shahnameh*, critical edition edited by E. E. Bertels) against Dick Davis's 2006 English translation (*Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*). Specifically, two illustrative mythical-epic passages featuring the hero Rustam are selected as case studies:

1. The Heroic Mythos: Rustam's introduction to the royal court and his physical/symbolic portrait.
2. The Cosmic Dualism: Rustam's final ordeal in the *Haft Khon* (Seven Trials) the defeat of the White Demon (*Div-e Sepid*) and the restoration of King Kay Kavus's sight.

By analyzing these passages through the dual lenses of lexical choices, prosodic adaptations, and metaphorical additions, this study demonstrates how Davis synthesizes structural elements with dynamic equivalence to achieve an aesthetically engaging prosimetric rendering for modern readership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 21st-century Anglophone Orientalism and literary translation, Dick Davis's rendering of the *Shahnameh* represents a landmark shift. To make Ferdowsi's narrative cadence accessible to modern readers, Davis employs a prosimetric synthesis: sweeping narrative progressions and detailed descriptions are cast in fluid, aesthetic prose, whereas dramatic dialogues and poetic climaxes are rendered in refined verse structures.

In the Persian original, Rustam's entry onto the epic stage underscores his mythic stature as the invincible guardian of the realm:

*Yakikūh bud guftāzjāyjunbad,
 Va gar bārayeāhanīn bar rambad.
 Baguftīdarmanambandayeshahriyār,
 Bar-āramzikhasmāne shah kārzār.
 Tan andarmiyānsipīdchūnsīm,
 Zidildūrkarnejafā u bīm.*

[5: 80-82]

Davis seamlessly blends modern poetic sensibility, metrical flexibility, and classical formal structure. Leveraging his expertise as a practicing poet, he capitalizes on English rhyme, assonance, and rhythm:

A mountain moved; the world had never seen
 A warrior of such terrifying mien.
 I am the servant of the King, he said,
 And on my enemies I bring pure dread.
 His limbs were silver and his heart was light,
 A blinding beacon in the darkest night.

[6: 84]

A comparative analysis reveals key translation strategies. Davis's opening phrase, "A mountain moved," offers a concise, modern reformulation of the mountain simile found in earlier 19th-century translations (such as James Atkinson's). The immediate coupling of noun and verb accelerates the narrative dynamic, conveying Rustam's sheer physical weight and force.

Furthermore, the line "His limbs were silver and his heart was light" serves as a poetically and semantically faithful translation of the Persian phrase *Tan andarmiyānsipīdchūnsīm* (lit. "His body in the middle white as silver"). Davis introduces the quality of silver into English poetic tradition as a metaphor for physical purity, formidable strength, and nobility. Meanwhile, the addition of "A blinding beacon in the darkest night" [7: 12-35; 8: 42-48] represents a creative metaphorical amplification by the translator. This added trope emphasizes Rustam's symbolic role as the sole agent of light and salvation within a chaotic, demon-haunted mythological cosmos.

By discarding archaic Victorian diction in favor of a modern, lexically transparent English register, Davis transforms the epic from a static historical artifact into a vibrant, aesthetic masterpiece.

In Ferdowsi's epic architecture, Rostam transcends the archetype of a mere mortal warrior; he functions as a cosmic savior of Iran and the realm of Light against the forces of darkness and evil. The *Haft Khon* (Seven Ordeals), undertaken to rescue King Kay Kavus and his army from the demons of Mazandaran, culminates in his climactic battle against the White Demon (*Div-e Sepid*):

*Bizaddast u bardāshdashnarra-dīv,
Bar-āmadzilashkargahidīvgīv.
Furū-burdkhanjarburīdashjigar,
Dar-āmadzidīvānhamakarr u farr.
Chūbishkastkhanjarburūnkashaddil,
Zikhūnashbishustandchashmeshāhrā.* [9: 106-108]

Davis translates this pivotal confrontation by leaning into the dualistic binary of Darkness vs. Light a core philosophy rooted in Zoroastrian cosmology (*Ahura Mazda* vs. *Angra Mainyu*):

Into the gloom where the White Demon lay,
Rostam advanced, and darkness turned to day
With flashing steel. He ripped the creature's heart
And tore its dark and sinister life apart.
Then with its blood he washed the King's blind eyes,
And light restored the Persian vaults and skies. [10: 183]

Here, Davis frames the spatial transition "Into the gloom... darkness turned to day" to highlight the existential shift brought about by Rostam's intervention. The imagery of "flashing steel" and the restoration of light to the "Persian vaults and skies" reinforce the dynamic equivalence of the passage, capturing the dramatic urgency and cosmic stakes of the original Persian couplets for a modern audience.

CONCLUSION

The cross-cultural translation of Abulqasim Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* by Dick Davis represents a paradigm shift in modern Anglophone translation studies and Orientalist scholarship. By

synthesizing formal accuracy with dynamic equivalence, Davis effectively navigates the long-standing tension between rigid literalism and loose adaptation. His prosimetric strategy strategically deploying fluid prose for expansive narrative exposition and heightened verse for emotionally charged climaxes preserves the structural momentum and tragic depth of the Persian original without alienating contemporary readers.

As demonstrated through the comparative textual analysis of Rustam's epic portrayal and his cosmic encounter with the White Demon, Davis successfully modernizes the poetic register while preserving core Zoroastrian and epic dualisms (Light vs. Darkness, Order vs. Chaos). By replacing archaic 19th-century diction with a clear, resonant English poetic voice, he transforms a complex classical masterpiece into a vibrant, living text within world literature. Ultimately, Davis's translation not only re-contextualizes Ferdowsi's universal humanism for a global audience but also provides a seminal methodological framework for future scholarship in translating classical Eastern epics into Western languages.

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