

## Classical Persian

Olga Merck Davidson

The study of oral traditional elements in Classical Persian poetry was recognized by Albert Lord (1986:476). The monumental poem known as the *Shâhnâma* of Ferdowsi is a case in point. Its poetic diction reveals a system of phraseology that approximates Lord's definition of the formula in oral tradition studies (Davidson 1988). To the extent that formulaic structure is a basic feature of oral traditional poetry (Lord 1960), the diction of the *Shâhnâma* provides conclusive evidence for the oral traditional poetic background of this poem.

In the study of Classical Persian poetry, the concept of oral tradition is problematic for those who assume that "orality" and "literacy" were incompatible in medieval Persian civilization (see Davidson 2000 for a survey of the ongoing debates). But recent work on oral traditions has made it clear that the essence of oral poetry does not depend on the absence of writing. In his later works, especially in *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (1991) and *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (1995), Lord showed that there exist patterns of coexistence and even compatibility between literacy and oral poetry in various poetic traditions. Lord's focus was on medieval Western European traditions, but there are striking parallels in Persian medieval traditions (Davidson 2000).

Perhaps the most dramatic parallel is the conceptualization of oral performance in terms of a written book. The Persian *Shâhnâma*, which in fact means "Book of Kings," is not only an actual book that records the composition of the master poet Ferdowsi; it presents itself as a figurative performance, describing itself simultaneously as an ongoing performance and as a book waiting to be activated in performance. So also in medieval French and English traditions, among others, the concept of the book is linked not only to the recording of performance but also to the performance itself (Davidson 1994).

An essential feature of Ferdowsi's *Shâhnâma* is its performativity, which is expressed by the poetry itself in its various references to the authoritative performance of its stories by performers conventionally

described as wise men who know by heart the traditions of the poetry that conveys the essence of their civilization.

A most interesting new direction in oral tradition studies as applied to Classical Persian poetry has to do with the testimony of the prose texts that serve as prefaces to the manuscript versions of the *Shâhnâma*. These “prose prefaces” are mythologized or quasi-mythologized accounts of the poet’s life and times (Davis 1998). Such myths, however, are also a matter of history. They provide evidence for the historical contexts in which the actual performance traditions of the *Shâhnâma* took shape; they are in effect aetiologies of the oral traditions that became recorded in the Book of Kings (Davidson 2001).

A source for electronic publications on oral tradition studies as applied to Classical Persian poetry and to Near Eastern and Mediterranean studies in general is <http://ilexfoundation.org/public/index.html>.

*Harvard University*

### References

- Davidson 1988                      Olga Merck Davidson. “A Formulaic Analysis of Samples Taken from the Sh’hn’ma of Ferdowsi,” *Oral Tradition*, 3:88-105.
- Davidson 1994                      \_\_\_\_\_. *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Davidson 2000                      \_\_\_\_\_. *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*. Bibliotheca Iranica: Intellectual Traditions Series, 4. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda.
- Davidson 2001                      \_\_\_\_\_. “Some Iranian Poetic Tropes as Reflected in the ‘Life of Ferdowsi’ Traditions.” In *Philologica et Linguistica: Festschrift für Helmut Humbach*. Ed. by M. G. Schmidt and W. Bisang. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag. Supplement, pp. 1-12.
- Davis 1996                          D. Davis. “The Problem of Ferdowsi’s Sources.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 116:48-57.

- Lord 1960                    Albert Bates Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24. 2nd ed. with Introduction by Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy, 2000. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lord 1986                    \_\_\_\_\_. "Perspectives on Recent Work on the Oral Traditional Formula." *Oral Tradition*, 1:467-503.
- Lord 1991                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lord 1995                    \_\_\_\_\_. *The Singer Resumes the Tale*. Ed. by M. L. Lord. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.