



The Legend of Seyavash (Persian Classics)

By Abolqasem Ferdowsi

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The Legend of Seyavash comes from the middle section of the Shahnameh, Iran's national epic by the poet Ferdowsi (c940-c1020) and presents a world of warfare, military prowess, romance, guile, and fierce tribal loyalty. Ferdowsi's epic style and mastery of poetic organisation, however, is matched by the psychological and ethical depth of his insight and his concerns for the primal struggle between good and evil, and man's continual attempt to create justice and civilized order out of the chaos of human greed and cruelty. The Legend of Seyavash begins with the stuff of romance -- a foreign girl of royal blood, found as a fugitive and introduced into the king's harem, gives birth to a son, Seyavash, who is raised not by his father the king, but by the great hero Rostam. On Seyavash's return home Sudabeh, his stepmother, attempts to seduce him, and when he spurns her she accuses him of having attempted to rape her. He undergoes a trial by fire to prove his innocence, and goes on to battle successfully against Iran's rival, Turan, concluding a truce with the Turanian king, Afrasyab, on amicable terms. But Seyavash's father, Kavus, insists that Seyavash surrender the Turanian hostages to slaughter, and with a conflicted conscience and no one to turn to, Seyavash flees to the Turanian court, where he is first given safe harbour, but is once again abandoned. Dick Davis has made a masterful translation of the poem and written a penetrating introduction.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

ABOLQASEM FERDOWSI was born in Khorasan in a village near Tus, in 940. His great epic the Shahnameh, to which he devoted most of his adult life, was originally composed for the Samanid princes of Khorasan, who were the chief instigators of the revival of Persian cultural traditions after the Arab conquest of the seventh century. During Ferdowsi's lifetime this dynasty was conquered by the Ghaznavid Turks, and there are various stories in medieval texts describing the lack of interest shown by the new ruler of Khorasan, Mahmud of Ghazni, in Ferdowsi and his lifework. Ferdowsi is said to have died around 1020 in poverty and embittered by royal neglect, though confident of his and his poem's ultimate fame.

DICK DAVIS was born in Portsmouth, England in 1945 and educated at King's College, Cambridge (B.A. and M.A. in English Literature), and at the University of Manchester (Ph.D. in Medieval Persian Literature). He is currently professor of Persian at Ohio State University. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

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THE LEGEND OF SEYAVASH

And now, o expert story-teller, make
A well-turned narrative for us; whenever
A poet's words conform to wisdom's ways
His spirit brings us comfort (while the man
Whose thoughts are ugly finds his purposes
Spoilt by that ugliness, he crucifies
Himself and is a laughing-stock to those
Who understand; though no man sees his own faults,
You think your character's all spotless brilliance!)
But, if a work's to last, first make it well
And then you must present it to the learned;
If they approve, it's passed the test and on
It flows like water in the stream you've made.
Now make a story from the words the lord
Who gathered ancient legends¹ has passed on,
See you recite the matter faithfully.
These stories have grown old, but now, through me,
They'll live again, renewed, among the people—
And if a long life's granted me, if I'm
To stay a while here in life's pleasant vineyard,
A fruit-tree will remain when I am gone,
Displaying splendid fruit above the meadows.
A man who's lived to fifty-eight like me
Has seen innumerable wonders happen,
But his ambition stays as strong as ever,
And still he combs through almanacs or has
His fortune told to know what's going to be.
But wise men say, What's old cannot grow young.'

In all your eloquence be circumspect,
Seek fame throughout the world, and when you've gone
It's God who will decide if hell or heaven
Awaits you. But remember, as you sow
So shall you reap, and what you say will be
The words you'll hear men speak of you; the man
Who's gently spoken never hears harsh words—
Seek only justice in the world. Return
Now to the story which that lord collected;
Watch for the words the poet will recite.
the beginning of the story
A priest of Zoroaster² said: One day,
At cock-crow, Tus and Giv, Gudarz's son,
Accompanied by a group of horsemen, left
Their king's court in good spirits to hunt wild asses
With hawks and cheetahs on the plain of Dagui.
They killed enough to last for forty days.
They weren't that far from Turkish territory—
The land was black with Turkish tents—when in
The distance, near the border with Turan³
They saw a thicket; Tus and Giv rode on,
A few retainers following them; the two
Approached the place and circled it,
And, hidden in the bushes, there they found
A beautiful young girl; both laughed aloud
And hurried forward, for in all the world
She had no equal, in her loveliness
There was no fault. Giv spoke to her, 'You are

As heart-bewitching as the moon, how have
You made your way to this dense thicket here?'
She said, 'Last night my father set on me—
I ran away from home. He'd come back late,
The night was dark and he was tipsy from
Some marriage-feast; when he caught sight of me
While he was still a long way off, he drew
His glittering dagger, threatening that he'd hack
My head off from my body there and then.'
The warrior asked her next about her lineage;
She answered him precisely, 'I am from
The family of Garsivaz, we trace
Our line back to king Faridun himself.'⁴
'But how' he urged, 'did you get here on foot,
Without a horse or guide?' She said, 'My horse
Collapsed, exhausted, under me; I'd brought
A quantity of gold and jewels, and I'd
A gold crown on my head—men robbed me on
That hill-top over there, they beat me with
The scabbard of a sword. And when my father

Discovers what has happened he is certain
To send his horsemen chasing after me,
My mother too is sure to hurry here—
She wouldn't want me to desert my homeland.'
The warriors' hearts were softened by her words,
But Tus the son of Nozar lost all shame
And said, 'I found her, since I got here first—
She's mine.' Giv answered him, 'My noble lord,
Weren't you with me and all the rest of us?'
But Tus snapped, 'My horse got here first!' Giv said,
'Don't talk such rubbish! My horse led the field—
Don't stoop to lying for a slave-girl; a man
Who's chivalrous is never quarrelsome.'
Their argument grew so intense that they
Were ready to decapitate the girl;
Their angry wrangling only ended when
A warrior interposed, suggesting that
They take her to the king and there they both
Abide by his decision on the case.
Neither objected and they turned back to
The Persian court. But when Kavus beheld
The young girl's face he laughed, then gnawed his lip;
He said to both the warriors, 'Well, I see
You've lightened your long expedition's trials!
Now we can pass the day recounting how
Our warriors catch the sun with hunting cheetahs;
She is a deer, a beautiful young doe,
Such prey is worthy of the best there is!'
He asked her then, 'What family are you from?—
Because your face seems like an angel's face.'
She said, 'My mother's from Khatun, and on
My father's side we trace our lineage back
To Faridun. My father's father is
The great commander Garsivaz, and in
The border marches his tent's at the centre
Of our encampment.' King Kavus replied,
'And you were ready to abandon to
The winds this face, this hair, this family?
You're worthy of a gold throne in my harem,
I'll make you first among the women there.'
She said, 'I saw you, and before all others
I chose you for my own, my lord.' The king
Dispatched this lovely idol to his quarters
And ordered that they seat her on a throne;
There she was dressed in cloth of gold, arrayed
With rubies, turquoise, lapis-lazuli,
And given every gift her state deserved;
She was herself a ruby, pure, uncut.

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