

## THE STUDY OF POPULAR LITERATURE IN THE PERSIAN CONTEXT

The following remarks aim at outlining a number of theoretical questions that play a role in the study of popular literature in the Persian context. The term "Persian" is used here for more or less standard versions of this language. This means that it does not fully reflect ethnic diversity, and to some extent suggests a non-existent homogeneity of Iranian culture, a suggestion that may be strengthened further by the fact that most research on the cultures and literatures of Iran is published in the Persian language. The term "popular literature," to be defined below, is used indiscriminately besides "folk literature," as a differentiation between these two concepts has no practical value in the present context. While in the following general remarks reference will be made primarily to the Persian tradition, many of the points discussed are also relevant for the study of other Iranian popular literatures, and of popular literature generally. Some of these points will therefore be discussed again, and in greater detail, in some of the following chapters, notably those on the popular literatures of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

After a brief glance at the history of research and the various academic approaches to popular literature, this chapter will offer a general survey of popular literary genres, and go on to focus on cultural components in the specifically Persian sphere. This will be followed by a discussion of the relations between popular and elite literature, and between the individual and the collective; furthermore, arguments will be put forward for rejecting the traditional approach of defining popular literature by way of content. After a brief reference to the influence of printing on Persian popular literature, the final passage will consider the present condition as well as future requirements of the study of popular literature in the Persian context.

## 1. Academic approaches to popular literature

The study of popular literature requires one to consider a variety of genres over a considerable period of time, while also taking into account different forms of tradition, of performance or documentation, and of scientific approach. In terms of academic disciplines, “popular literature” falls under the rubric of both Comparative Literature and Comparative Folk Narrative Research. Although these disciplines share the same object of study, their interest in it derives from very different preoccupations and backgrounds: Comparative Literature is mainly concerned with “elite” literature, while Comparative Folk Narrative Research deals chiefly with “folklore” or “oral tradition.”

Traditionally, Comparative Literature tends to argue in dichotomies, regarding “popular” literature as a lesser offspring of acknowledged forms of literary activity that are practiced and appreciated by the elite. Accordingly, popular literature is often judged as a form of “gesunkenes Kulturgut” (literally: “sunken cultural goods”) (H. Naumann; see Dow 1998), as a type of literature originating among the elite which came to “sink” to lower, popular levels. The kind of literature that can only be appreciated by those who have enjoyed a privileged education is seen as superior to literature whose imagery and wording make it accessible to large numbers of people. This view implies both decline and degeneration, and risks looking at popular literature with a heavily biased, judgmental eye.

The discipline of Comparative Folk Narrative Research originated in the age of Romanticism. In contrast to Comparative Literature it tends to regard popular literature as resulting from the creative act of an anonymous collective. This collective is held to possess the capacity to preserve ancient forms of expression essentially unaltered over long periods of time, and hence to guarantee continuity. The discipline of Comparative Folk Narrative Research was initiated by German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm with their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Nursery and Household Tales) (first edition 1812–15) early in the nineteenth century, and developed into a full-fledged academic discipline through the joint ef-

forts of predominantly Northern European scholars early in the twentieth century. Their perspective was Eurocentric. Although they were aware of, and took into consideration non-European data, they did so primarily in order to elucidate the origins of European material, rather than studying those data in their own right.

In the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, both academic disciplines have to some extent adopted each other's approaches. With its various newly developed foci of interest, such as sociological significance, adaptability to context, and interactive, performance-related aspects, popular literature has become a fascinating field of research, offering insights into the mind and perception of humanity informed by a deeply-felt historical experience.

## 2. Specifics of popular literature

In terms of the literary genres concerned, popular literature as it was traditionally understood covers a relatively fixed canon of literary genres, such as myths; historical, religious, and demonological legends; heroic and romantic epics; narrative songs (ballads); fables; fairy tales; jokes and anecdotes; as well as shorter forms of literature such as popular sayings and idioms; children's rhymes; lullabies; and riddles (see in detail Bolukbâshi 2000). Contemporary modern folklore research regards this restriction to a pre-defined and limited set of specific genres as unduly narrowing the products of creative and receptive popular imagination to a range of phenomena that does not adequately represent the true character and meaning of popular literature. Consequently, it seeks to define popular literature on the basis of presentation or performance rather than formal content. This approach defines "popular literature" as the sum of all creative verbal activities, whether oral (in recent research often termed "verbal art") or written (corresponding to the narrow definition of literature as a form of expression in writing). In contrast to elite literature, popular literature is defined as comprising all forms of literature that are transmitted by

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other than dominant elite channels of tradition, whether orally or in writing. The procedure of transmission does not exclude formal or informal education of authors or performers. Even though of ten illiterate, performers need to possess special skills and training. Furthermore, popular literature is appreciated and/or practiced by collective consent by a considerable number of people, conveniently termed the "folk."

Since the introduction of printing, this understanding of popular literature encompasses not only the traditional stock of narrative and non-narrative genres. It also includes the huge mass of literary production aimed at popular reception, such as editions of elite literature adapted to popular usage in content and wording; devotional and trivial entertainment literature; chapbooks and "yellow press" penny-magazines; tracts on the interpretation of dreams; booklets containing common advice of a medical, pedagogical, or otherwise practical nature; and leaflets containing preprinted charms or verses from classical literature distributed for purposes of fortune-telling. Even more recently, widespread phenomena such as urban legends have come to be regarded as forms of popular literature, as did standardized forms of expression drawing on popular models practiced within the new electronic media, such as Xerox-lore, e-mail or internet-material. This way of defining popular literature is not so much concerned with the genre aspect. Rather, it is interested in means of production and distribution on the one hand, and in the sociological and psychological implications of the reception of such texts on the other.

### **3. Cultural components of Persian popular literature**

Persian popular literature, as indeed the popular literature of any culture, is of a hybrid character, constituting a unique amalgam of constituent elements originating from various backgrounds. When dealing with this topic, one has to keep in mind that questions of origin of specific forms of popular expression are extremely difficult to solve, and easy categorizations are both misleading and fu-

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tile. The process of sifting out non-Iranian elements might possibly result in finding the “pure” constituent elements of Persian culture, but there are more interesting things to learn from the texts.

In Folk Narrative Research, Iran has long attracted international attention due to its location between Europe and India, where many European folktales were long believed to have originated. As the so-called “Indian theory” (Pfeiffer 1993), propagated above all by German Indologist Theodor Benfey (1859) had it, Indian folktales on their way to Europe would have had to pass through Iran. This implied both that they influenced the Iranian tradition and that they were shaped and remodeled by standards prevalent within the Iranian context. The diversification of Iranian popular tradition and culture in general is further related to a number of historical events.

In prehistoric times, the Indian and Iranian traditions were closely related, as is shown above all in the ancient Iranian mythological and religious traditions. Since the days of Alexander the Great, who conquered Iran in 331 BCE, the Iranian tradition comprises Greek, or rather Hellenistic influences. The Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE introduced elements from the Arabic-Islamic tradition that were later followed by various traits of Turkish, Mongol, and Western European origin. Disentangling this amalgam is a tedious task, promising results that might be of interest to nationalists rather than scholars. If, beyond considerations of genre and context, all Persian popular literature has one characteristic feature, it is its dualistic world-view of the competing forces of Good and Evil, besides the general human virtue of righteousness. Elements deriving from Islam, though dominant in both elite culture and popular expression, appear as normal features of everyday life, but have not—as might be expected—shaped popular literature in any decisive manner.

#### 4. The relation between popular and elite literature

Traditional research has often posited a dichotomy between elite and popular literature. Today, it is commonly acknowledged that these two spheres can only be understood in relation to each other. Relevant research on this particular aspect within the Persian context is scarce. Studies in the neighboring field of Arabic literature have proposed various models, parts of which can also be applied, albeit in a modified form, to Persian literature. Karel Petráček (1987) distinguishes between three literary levels:

1. Classical literature, written in classical Arabic and intended for the educated.
2. Popular literature, originally oral and eventually fixed in classical or middle Arabic, aiming primarily at uneducated members of the urban and rural middle classes.
3. Folklore, i.e. (in Petráček's view) oral literature in dialect, mainly aimed at the uneducated rural and nomad population.

Peter Heath (1996), discussing the Arabic epic of Antār (*Sirat Antār*), has further differentiated this model by outlining the specific characteristics of elite, popular, and folk literature in several respects, such as producers, venues, texts, audiences, aesthetic goals and social as well as geographical contexts. Heath stressed that different layers of literary production are not to be regarded as separate, independent spheres, but remain in constant interaction. Moreover, he pointed out that elite culture often "draws itself out of popular culture and to a large extent identifies and defines itself against it" (Heath 1996, p. 46).

These models, developed for the field of Arabic literature, can be applied to Persian literature with only a few adaptations. This application would lead to distinguish between:

1. Persian classical literature and more recent Persian literature written in the classical language.
2. Popular literature, often fixed in writing while continuing to be performed by professional storytellers, and using motifs prevalent in oral tradition while at the same time influencing subsequent oral tradition.

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3. Folk literature, rarely committed to writing before the twentieth century, showing affinities to popular literature both in terms of motifs and language, and mainly performed and transmitted orally.

Beside these general classifications, one has to take into account several characteristics that are peculiar to the Persian context. First, the Persian language does not know an exact equivalent to the diglossia of classical Arabic (*fushâ*) versus spoken (dialect) Arabic (*âmmiyya*). While this element of distance between the learned and the popular is lacking, at certain periods in history Persian elite literature employed styles heavily laden with figures of speech and other adornments as well as words and phrases borrowed from Arabic, which probably rendered them unattractive to popular taste. Yet, even this kind of literature both profited from and influenced popular literature as far as themes and motifs are concerned. To quote but one example, both Abu'l-Ma'âli Nasr-Allâh Monshi's *Kalile o Demne*, compiled in the twelfth century, and Hoseyn b. Vâ'ez Kâshefi's (d. 1504) *Anvâr-e Soheyli* constitute Persian adaptations of the famous collection of animal tales and fables originally translated into Arabic from a Pahlavi original by the Persian secretary Ebn al-Moqaffa' (executed 759). Both remained popular over the centuries and helped to popularize the compilation's tales and motifs, which resulted in their reception in popular literature and verbal art.

Secondly, particularly in the early centuries after the Islamic conquest, a large number of texts written in Arabic were conceived and compiled by Persian authors, and might therefore be regarded as Persian literature written in the lingua franca of their time. Compilers of large medieval encyclopedias of jocular and entertaining narratives such as Abu Mansur al-Âbi (d. 1030) with his *Nathr al-dorr* (The Scattering of Pearls) or al-Râgheb al-Esfahâni (d. early 10<sup>th</sup> century) with his *Mohâzarât al-odabâ'* (Lectures of the Cultivated) wrote against the background of their Persian experience and potentially also incorporated material of Persian origin into their collections. Moreover, from the earliest known sources and well into the nineteenth century, many Persian authors were bilingual, fluent in Persian and Arabic, as numerous instances in popular

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works of narrative literature prove beyond reasonable doubt, e.g. Jalâl-al-Din Rumi's (d. 1273) *Mathnavi*, Obeyd-e Zâkânî's (d. 1371) *Resâle-ye delgoshâ* or Fakhr-al-Din Ali Safi's (d. 1532) *Latâ'ef al-tavâ'ef*. Their works, besides many others, have introduced into Persian literature a large number of narrative texts originally compiled in Arabic.

A third point to mention concerns the interaction between elite and popular layers of literature, which to some extent correspond to written and oral traditions. In simple terms one might say that, on the one hand, Persian authors exploited themes and motifs prevalent in oral tradition; on the other hand, their literary products—including their artistic adaptations of popular themes—might at times earn such fame as to become integral parts of popular tradition in their own right. The most striking examples of this type of interaction are probably the didactic tales from Jalâl-al-Din Rumi's *Mathnavi*, many of which are taken from contemporary popular tradition, but also influenced subsequent popular tradition which they reached through various channels of reception (Mills 1994).

### 5. The relation between the individual and the collective

Particularly when considering the interaction between written sources and oral literature, one has to keep in mind the specific situation of Persian literature in the course of history. The Persian classics were widely read and formed a standard component of traditional education throughout the Persian-speaking world, at times also including the Ottoman and Mughal empires. Classical literature was not only—and probably not even predominantly—read individually. Rather, it was common practice to read the classics aloud, to memorize and recite the text, to retell and orally perform the text in various ways, e.g. by short quotations or allusions to commonly known passages. In Iran, as in most other Near Eastern regions, the historical role of orality was different from today. It

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constituted a way of codification of knowledge and instruction. If only because of the cost of its production, written literature was predominantly accessible to the rich and powerful. Oral tradition, therefore, was not necessarily equivalent to "popular" tradition, since it relied on a solid command of mnemonic devices by individually trained tradition bearers.

In any case, it must be acknowledged that the collective production of popular literature, as posited by the Romantic views of the nineteenth century, exists only in a limited sense. Every item of popular literature is in the first place created by an individual author. This author acts against the traditional background and within the context of the surrounding society, with its collectively accepted system of values. As such the author's product mirrors elements produced by, or adapted to the community's collective consciousness, while at the same time it is further molded by these very elements through a gradual process of reception. Each of these elements originates from a specific historical, cultural, social, or educational background and is subject to various influences from different levels of society. Their sum total constitutes the decisive criterion for distinguishing "popular" from any other kind of literature.

### **6. Persian popular literature as defined by content**

To further complicate matters, any phenomenon that took place in the past can only be evaluated on the basis of extant sources. As for the "popularity" of specific items of literature, research until recently favored themes and motifs as the chief criteria to distinguish popular from elite literature. Prominent scholars of Persian popular literature such as Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub (1959 ff.) and William Hanaway, Jr. (1971) have defined popular literature by criteria relating to form and content. In accordance with his primary interest in epic literature, Hanaway has proposed a rather specific definition of popular literature as "a body of narrative prose literature derived from, or in the formal tradition of the Persian national

legend” (Hanaway 1971, p. 59). Mahjub, on the other hand, was able to profit from his intimate knowledge of the wide array of “popular” reading matter available in his youth. His understanding of popular literature mirrors the factual evidence of published material, though it is still dominated by the evaluation of popular elements in relation to classical literature (see Marzolph 1994, pp. 6–9.). Both approaches share their preoccupation with themes and motifs, and only to a lesser extent take into account linguistic criteria such as formal language and vocabulary, or the repetition and standardization of stereotype passages. Moreover, neither tackles questions relating to the sociological relevance of popular literature, let alone mechanisms of production and distribution, which in recent research are regarded as decisive arguments for the popularity, or popularization, of certain kinds of literature (Marzolph 1994). The limited perspective of such approaches seems permissible given the scarcity of information about the popularity of literature in the past. Even so, Mahjub has opened up new perspectives by introducing the popular reading matter of his own youth, which in many respects corresponds to the literature popular in the nineteenth century Qajar period.

### **7. The influence of printing on Persian popular literature**

The introduction of printing in the Qajar period contributed tremendously, if not decisively, to the present-day notion of what popular literature in the Persian context actually means. Printing from movable type was introduced to Iran during the second decade of the nineteenth century (see Marzolph 2002). As this way of printing was not particularly successful in the early years, it was soon succeeded by lithographic printing, a technique that had probably been introduced around 1830. In printing from movable type, publishers had at first restricted their production to standard texts of religious, historical or classical literature. As of 1844, and exclusively in lithographic printing, publishers gradually freed

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themselves from this restriction. Soon, large amounts of narrative reading matter were made available at comparatively moderate costs, thus supplying "popular literature" in both its connotations of traditional content and general availability, for the first time in Persian history. The extent to which the production of popular reading matter since the mid-nineteenth century has influenced the Persian tradition remains to be studied, as most other aspects relevant to this field. Still, it may safely be surmised that the wide distribution of popular reading matter by way of reading, reciting, and retelling, has left its traces in popular knowledge and appreciation of numerous subjects. These include, for instance, the Persian national legend, i.e. Ferdowsi's *Shahname*, classical romantic tales such as those of *Leylâ (Leyli) and Majnun* or *Khosrow and Shirin*, or jocular narratives such as the ones focusing on popular heroes such as Mollâ Nasreddin or Bohlul. Meanwhile, the distribution of printed books also contributed to popularizing religious, moral, and educational knowledge, e.g. by transmission while common (and often illiterate) people listen to the *âkhund's* exhortations literally *pâ-ye menbar*, 'at the foot of the pulpit.'

As to folk- and fairy-tales, or minor forms of popular literature such as lullabies or riddles, printing did not contribute to their popularity until well into the twentieth century. In Europe fairy-tales had gained prominence by means of a few standard editions only, such as Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (1697), or the above-mentioned tales of the brothers Grimm. In contrast, knowledge and transmission of fairy-tales in the Persian context remained an exclusively oral phenomenon until Western Orientalist scholars as well as Persian intellectuals took an interest in documenting, and consequently popularizing these components of the national Iranian heritage from the first decades of the twentieth century onwards. Details of the historical development of Persian scholarship in folk- and fairy-tales will be given in the chapter on Persian Popular Literature. The activities and publications of Fazlollâh Mohtadi 'Sobhi' in the 1940s, and Abu'l-Qâsem Enjavi Shirâzi (affectionately known as Najvâ) in the 1970s created public awareness for the richness and attractiveness of Persian folklore, and furthermore resulted in a number of widely read (and thus "popular") publications.

## 8. The study of Persian popular literature: present and future

It is difficult to decide whether political developments since the Islamic Revolution can be held responsible for preventing the study of Iranian popular literature from developing into directions other than the collection and documentation of oral tradition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Iranian scholarship in Persian popular literature predominantly remains attached to the Romantic attitude of preserving sources which otherwise are thought to be bound to disappear and be lost forever. This attitude seems justified in light of both historical experience and the present conditions. Yet it neglects the fact that popular literature as a constituent of popular or "folk" tradition has always been in a state of change, that popular tradition is neither static nor monolithic. As in most other parts of the world, popular literature in Iran has been in a constant state of growth and decay for centuries, each stage being connected with specific cultural and societal frame conditions.

If one were to aim at preserving traditional Persian popular literature, as many contemporary Iranian scholars claim, one would not just have to study the conditions in which it exists within the original context, but one would need to create or re-create, and constantly preserve those very conditions so as to enable popular tradition to live on. As any such move would be both impractical and ineffective, the present task for research lies in finding out and documenting as much as possible about the range, content, meaning, and frame conditions of popular literature. This task is imperative, not so much in order to preserve popular literature as a component of Persian culture in a fixed state, as in a museum. Rather, the serious scholarly study of Persian popular literature is a way of understanding Persian tradition by appreciating popular concern as preserved in oral and written tradition.

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