Iranian Studies, 2019
Vol. 52, Nos. 5–6, 657–662, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1658449

Julia Caterina Hartley

Guest Editor's Introduction

Saʿdi at Large

This special issue of *Iranian Studies* is devoted to the dissemination of the medieval Persian poet Saʿdi's writings in Asia and Europe. Its primary focus is on translations of Saʿdi's *Golestān* into European languages, but its articles also explore comparative readings between Saʿdi and Western texts, editorial practices, and creative appropriations and rewritings. In his inaugural lecture as the Chair of Persian at the Collège de France, the nineteenth-century Orientalist Casimir Barbier de Meynard declared that "of all Oriental poets, Saʿdi is perhaps the only one who could be understood in Europe, the only one who could maintain a part of the popularity that he enjoys among his Muslim readers."[1] Barbier de Meynard praised the wisdom, charm, and wit of Saʿdi's narration and the "indulgente raillerie" (indulgent mockery) with which he censures human error and vice. These qualities, Barbier de Meynard suggested, make Saʿdi stand out from other Persian poets and resemble Western authors such as Horace, Ovid, Rabelais, and La Fontaine.[2] As well as being compared to these authors, Saʿdi is described as corresponding to "modern aesthetics," particularly in the *Golestān*.[3] Barbier de Meynard's introduction picks up on features of Saʿdi's reception outside of Iran that go beyond nineteenth-century France. The

I wish to thank editors Ali Gheissari and Cameron Cross for their invaluable assistance in preparing this volume.

[1]"De tous les poètes orientaux, Saadi est peut-être le seul qui puisse être compris en Europe, le seul qui puisse y conserver en partie la popularité dont il jouit chez les lecteurs musulmans." Barbier de Meynard, *La Poésie en Perse*, 47.

[2]Ibid., 48.

[3]Ibid., 47.

first feature is Saʿdi's popularity abroad: the *Golestān* has historically been the most widely translated and circulated work of Persian literature.[4] The second feature is the universality of Saʿdi's wisdom and the fact that this wisdom is carried across through humor, an aspect of Saʿdi's work that Barbier de Meynard captures with the lively semi-paradox "indulgent mockery." The third feature is the availability of parallels between Saʿdi's work and European culture: this is brought across through references to the contemporary ("l'esthétique moderne"), as well as to the past through the naming of classical and Renaissance authors. These three features will be a recurring thread in this volume.

Barbier de Meynard describes Saʿdi as the most popular Persian author in the West, a status that is the direct result of the work of his European translators, who are active from the seventeenth century. In a recent article taking its cue from Stephen Greenblatt's observation that "[w]hen it comes to the past, the enterprise of tracking the restless and often unpredictable movements of text, ideas, and whole cultures is still at a very early stage," Elio Brancaforte has examined the seventeenth-century French, Latin, and German translations of the *Golestān* that made Saʿdi's name familiar to the European literary public of the Enlightenment.[5] The volume goes further down this path by analyzing editions and translations of his writings produced across the world, including France, Germany, India, and Turkey, between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. The contributions by Pegah Shahbaz, Mateusz M. Kłagisz and Renata Rusek-Kowalska, Nina Zandjani, and myself explore the different strategies used in four English, two Polish, three German, and two French translations of the *Golestān* ranging from the seventeenth century to the present day, which are in some cases being compared for the first time. Balafrej's article studies two compilations drawn from Saʿdi's *Bustān* showing the role played by editors in shaping the reading public's understanding of Saʿdi through processes of elision and re-sequencing. The sheer variety of these sources confirms the status of the writings of Saʿdi as the most travelled Persian texts and also remind us that far more work waits to be carried out in this area. For this reason the special issue includes an annotated bibliography on Saʿdi in European languages and literatures with the aim of encouraging and assisting future scholars working in this area.

The second and third features identified by Barbier de Meynard, universality and comparability, recur explicitly in the paratexts of translations and are implicit in creative appropriations. For example, the *Golestān*'s nineteenth-century Polish translator Wojciech Biberstein-Kazimirski described "the spiritual and intellectual vicinity of the work conceived in the Muslim world, foreign in appearance, but familiar in substance" and compared it to Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a medieval work that remained highly readable for modern audiences (Kłagisz and Rusek-Kowalska). The contemporary German translator Kathleen Göpel similarly argues that she was motivated to translate the *Golestān* because it was "based on profound wisdom and immense

[4]See Lewis, "Golestān-e Saʿdi."

[5]Brancaforte, "Persian Words of Wisdom Travel to the West"; Greenblatt, "Cultural Mobility: An Introduction," 7.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1658449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insight into human nature, without losing any of its actuality, validity, or fascination over the centuries" (Zandjani). And creative appropriations such as those of Voltaire (Whiskin) and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (Hartley) are made possible by the continuities that these authors perceived between themselves and the medieval Persian poet: Voltaire identified with Saʿdi's irreverence towards power and the religious tolerance that travel writers claimed characterized Iran, and Desbordes-Valmore identified with his meditations on the limits of poetic language. Daniela Meneghini goes a step further by formulating her own original analogy between Saʿdi's *Golestān* and a work of Western literature: Bono Giamboni's *Libro de' vizî e delle virtudi*. Her comparative reading shows how these contemporary works written in different religious contexts both emphasize the importance of the virtue of temperance, but with notable differences between the two authors' treatments of the relationship between the individual and the general, and the importance of the afterworld in choosing a virtuous life on earth.

As well as being of interest in their own right, the receptions of Saʿdi explored in this volume also raise wider issues pertaining to the cross-cultural circulation of literature. Describing Saʿdi's status abroad confronts us with a specific set of issues. It makes us re-evaluate the merits and limitations of the translation strategies known as "domestication" and "foreignization."[6] It brings us to question and to stretch critical concepts such as intertextuality and literary influence, since these terms are typically used to describe the relationships between texts belonging to one language, tradition, or culture. And it confronts us with the issue of perceptions of Iran abroad and how these have evolved over time. It has indeed been noted by John Yohannan that European perceptions of Saʿdi have been radically different depending on current perceptions of the nation state and the status of international relations: for the Enlightenment philosophers, the *Golestān* was evidence that despite the variety of customs and traditions that differentiate different regions, underneath this surface man was the same everywhere and had always benefited from the pursuit of reason, but for British colonialists, the *Golestān* was a text that should be studied in order to better understand the differences between Westerners and so-called Orientals.[7] The contributions by Whiskin and Shahbaz explore the counter-examples chosen by Yohannan, revealing their complexity: the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire did identify with Saʿdi, but he also exoticized him through the hyperbolic and overornate use of language used in the preface to *Zadig*. And Shahbaz demonstrates that the central place held by the *Golestān* in the syllabus aimed at East India Company officers was determined by the Indian *monshi*s, who considered its emulation to be a necessary exercise in acquiring the Persian epistolary style.

The volume shows that the dilemma between presenting Saʿdi in terms of his similarity or difference is a persistent one. Saʿdi is mainly known today for his universalism, most famously exemplified by the verses found adorning the United Nations, which describe the whole of humankind as one body. In Homa Katouzian's words:

[6]Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*.
[7]Yohannan, *The Poet Saʿdi*, 1–5.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1658449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> His *Golestan* and *Bustan* contain much about timeless good and bad life that makes them relevant to any time and place where questions about moral beliefs, personal conduct and social behavior make up an important part of the intellectual discourse.[8]

But his *hekāyāt*, with their Asian settings and stock characters such as kings and dervishes, are also deeply situated. The relatable nature of Saʿdi's stories and the exotic color of their distant setting have historically been equally strong points of attraction for his Western readers. As a result, several of the translations cited in this volume feature both elements of domestication and elements of foreignization, demonstrating that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. The volume also contains three important case studies of translation as a site of intercultural mediation. Shahbaz shows the essential role played by the Indian *monshi*s who personally assisted British officials in translating the *Golestān*: these translations would not have been possible without this collaboration, though this was of course an exploitative relationship since the *monshi*s most often went unacknowledged. Kłagisz and Rusek-Kowalska demonstrate that the first Polish translation of the *Golestān* was a translation by relay based on a Turkish translation, likely completed while its author was posted in Istanbul. Ottoman Turkey was thus an intermediary space, geographically closer to Europe and culturally Islamic and Persian-speaking. Zandjani, finally, explains that Kathleen Göpel's 1997 German translation is by relay based on the Afghan translator Omar Ali-Shah's English translation and proof-read by Ali-Shah himself. These cases show translation between Persian and European languages as a dynamic relationship that involves other players beyond the author of the original text and the named author of its translation, and this seems to have remained the case from the seventeenth century to the present day.

The volume overall aims to exemplify an approach to world literature which remains aware of issues of translation and mediation, and thus does not fall into the pitfalls persuasively and pugnaciously outlined by Emily Apter in *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*.[9] Texts travel across languages and cultures and have done so for a long time, but it is important to analyze the specifics of such cultural transfers. Voltaire may claim to have "translated Saʿdi," yet, as shown by Whiskin, this means something very different in his case than it does for the translators studied by Kłagisz and Rusek-Kowalska, Shahbaz, and Zandjani. The compilations studied by Balafrej may not be acts of translation in so far as they are in Persian, but they are certainly acts of interpretation in so far as they redeploy the text in a determinedly different manner. Finally, Meneghini's contribution exemplifies

[8]Katouzian, *Saʿdi: The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*, 145.

[9]The two pitfalls that Apter has identified in North American world literature syllabi are, on the one hand, the presentation of literature in universal terms which assume cultural equivalence and ignore the mediating effects of translation and, on the other hand, "the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded 'differences' that have been niche-marked as commercialized 'identities'." Apter, *Against World Literature*,5.

the value of comparative approaches to Christian and Islamic texts: by exploring their continuities and differences we can highlight new features in both, while respecting their cultural specificity.

Edward Said in 1978 presented Western interest in Asian languages and cultures as tainted by colonial ambitions and inevitably characterized by a hierarchical belief in the superiority of European civilization. *Orientalism* had a field-changing impact: it brought a critical self-awareness to Western scholarship and enabled the development of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline, creating entire sub-fields such as Francophone studies. But it also tainted the entirety of European literary engagements with Asia and North Africa, making them seem an inherently suspect topic for academic research. Forty years later it appears that enough time has passed for scholars to return to the subject and bring new perspectives to it. 2018 alone saw the publication of Alexander Bevilacqua's *The Republic of Arabic Letters*, which has demonstrated that Renaissance and Enlightenment European scholars were able to view Islam in terms of its elements of commonality with Christianity as well as difference, and Faith E. Beasley's *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal*, which has shown that the place of India in seventeenth-century French salon culture, literature, and material culture was far from being one of inferiority. Beasley suggests that cases such as these compel scholars "to dismantle a globalizing notion of 'Orient' as well as recognize that not every Eastern country elicited the same response from every Western country."[10] The special issue should thus be considered as a contribution to this growing movement towards building a more nuanced picture of the Western reception of Asian literature, showing that it is multifaceted and differs based on context. If we are to make a case for the relevance of Persian literature to the study of the global circulation of texts, then it is fitting that we should begin with Saʿdi, himself a great traveler and defender of cosmopolitanism.[11]

Bibliography

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.

Barbier de Meynard, Casimir. *La Poésie en Perse: Leçon d'ouverture faite au Collège de France, le 4 décembre 1876*. Paris, 1877.

Beasley, Faith E. *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France*. Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 2018.

Bevilacqua, Alexander. *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Brancaforte, Elio. "Persian Words of Wisdom Travel to the West: Seventeenth-Century European Translations of Saʿdi's Gulistan." *Daphnis* 45 (2017): 450–72.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Cultural Mobility: An Introduction." In *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Ines Zupanov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pal Nyiri, and Friederike Pannewick, 1–23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Katouzian, Homa. *Saʿdi: The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*. Banbury: Oneworld, 2006.

[10]Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal*, 25.

[11]See Keshavarz, *Saʿdi on Love, Cosmopolitanism and Care of the Self*, esp. 64–74.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2019.1658449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Keshavarz, Fatemeh. *Lyrics of Life: Saʿdi on Love, Cosmopolitanism and Care of the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
Lewis, Franklin. "Golestān-e Saʿdi." *Encyclopaedia Iranica* XI, no. 1: 79–86. Originally Published December 15, 2001. Last Updated February 14, 2012. http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golestan-e-sadi
Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
Yohannan, John D. *The Poet Saʿdi: A Persian Humanist*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987.