

Did Sir Richard Burton Translate Sadi's *Gulistan* ?

BY J. D. YOHANNAN

IN 1928 the publishing firm of Philip Allan and Co., of London, brought out a volume called *Tales from the Gulistan or Rose-Garden of the Sheikh Sadi of Shiraz*, translated by Sir Richard Burton. The identity of the editor was not apparent, the Introduction carrying only initials R. F. B. and the date 1888. When two years ago I sought to discover who the editor was, a letter from Mr. Eric Finlayson, receiver for the firm of Philip Allan and Co., defunct since 1937, explained that because of dispersal of company records during the war it was impossible to establish his identity.¹ The information is important in determining the grounds upon which the translation was attributed to Burton.

I am not aware that it has ever been noted that this translation is nearly identical with one published by the so-called Kama Shastra Society, of Benares, in the year 1888, and distributed among subscribers only. The earlier translation has been generally attributed to Edward Rehatsek, the Austro-Hungarian Orientalist, who resided during most of his life in India and who is known chiefly as the translator of Mirkhond's *History of the World*. It is quite clear that either the earlier publication has been wrongly attributed to Rehatsek or the later one wrongly to Burton. Their somewhat obscure collaboration in the Kama Shastra Society, and the reckless handling of Burton's papers after his death have made the present ambiguity possible. The facts are about as follows.

In the year 1883, Burton, Rehatsek, and F. F. Arbuthnot, along with possibly others, formed the Kama Shastra Society, for the publication of Oriental erotica. Many works were projected from the Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, but only five were published (six if Burton's *Arabian Nights* be included); namely: *Kama Sutra* (1883), *Ananga Ranga* (1885), *The Perfumed Garden* (1886), *The Beharistan* (1887), and *The Gulistan* (1888). These works, issued anonymously, purported to be published at Benares but were actually printed and bound at Stoke Newington and mailed to sub-

¹ Professor Arthur J. Arberry has conjectured, in a letter to me, that the editor might have been the late Sir E. Denison Ross.

scribers by Burton from Trieste. The collaboration of the three men on these translations is variously described by various writers:—

(1) F. F. Arbuthnot himself, in an obituary notice of Edward Rehatsek for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* of 1892 (pp. 581–595), attributed both Kama Shastra translations from the Persian—i.e. Jami's *Beharistan* and Sadi's *Gulistan*—to Rehatsek.

(2) Thomas Wright, biographer of Burton, who relied in part upon Arbuthnot for his biographical material, assigned the introduction of *The Beharistan* to Arbuthnot but the translation of all the Persian works to Rehatsek, noting that an unpublished manuscript of Jawini's *Nigaristan* also existed in Rehatsek's hand.¹ Elsewhere Wright says that all of the Kama Shastra publications except *The Arabian Nights* and *The Perfumed Garden* (both from the Arabic) were by Rehatsek; the latter are credited to Burton.²

(3) Norman M. Penzer, Burton's bibliographer, assigned both *The Beharistan* and *The Gulistan* to Rehatsek.³

(4) David L. James, jun., writing on Burton in 1928, said Burton's hand was in all publications of the Kama Shastra Society. Though he did not explain what this meant, he claimed only the two Arabic works for Burton entirely, assigning all others to Rehatsek.⁴

Now the weight of these testimonials is overwhelmingly in favour of Rehatsek as translator—of the two works from the Persian, at least. Moreover, Professor Arthur J. Arberry has confirmed my belief that there is not much ground on which to ascribe to Burton any degree of proficiency in Persian. It is true that at about the middle of the century, while in India, Burton learned the language sufficiently well to pass the India Service examinations. Yet during the late '60s and the early '70s, when Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* was having a vogue among a limited number of the English literati, Burton was unable to decide whether the work was a genuine translation or an English poem. Certainly there is no evidence that he had the kind of mastery of the language that would enable him to undertake a serious work of translation.⁵

¹ *The Life of Sir Richard Burton*, 2 vols. (London, 1906), ii, 66.

² *The Life of John Payne* (London, 1919), p. 74.

³ *An Annotated Bibliography of Sir Richard Francis Burton* (London, 1923), pp. 161–2.

⁴ *Open Court*, xlii (Chicago, 1928), p. 157.

⁵ Wright charges Burton with a lack of self-sufficiency even in Arabic, of which he was presumably master. Wright adduces considerable proof that much of Burton's *Arabian Nights* is taken wholly from the earlier translation of his

The most then that can be claimed for Burton in connection with *The Gulistan* is that he perfected the English style for Rehatsek's linguistic work, as Professor Arberry has suggested to me. One might suppose that at least the introduction, which in the 1928 printing bears his initials, was the work of Burton; but there is a bit of evidence that tends to deny even that. In 1887, a year before the Kama Shastra *Gulistan* made its appearance, F. F. Arbuthnot published a book called *Persian Portraits*. In the preface to this book Arbuthnot generously credited Rehatsek with much of what the book contained on matters literary. In a passage on the poet Sadi are found these words¹ :—

“ His imagination is more sober than the erotic flights of Hafiz, or the mysticisms of Jalal-uddin Rumi, while many good, useful, and noble sentiments are to be found in all his works.”

Now these very words appear in the introduction to the Kama Shastra *Gulistan*, and therefore also in the Allan edition. The reasonable deduction from this would be that either Arbuthnot or Rehatsek was the author of them in both cases, but hardly Burton. In view of Arbuthnot's confessed reliance upon Rehatsek for the literary matter in his book the stronger likelihood is that the words are the latter's. If, then, the introduction to *The Gulistan* was written by Rehatsek, how much more likely that the actual work of translation was also his! Burton is thus left as hardly more than an editor of the whole publication.

How, it might then be asked, did it come about that the firm of Philip Allan published the Kama Shastra translation, with minor changes, as the work of Burton? The answer probably lies in the manner in which Burton's papers were handled after his death in 1890. It will be recalled that his devoutly Roman Catholic wife was a rigidly Victorian lady who took strong exception to the interest which her husband had in erotic literature. The fanatical dispatch with which she consigned to the fire his manuscript journals as well as his newly completed translation of *The Perfumed Garden* attests

friend John Payne, and he points out that *The Perfumed Garden* was rendered from a French version and not from the Arabic. To be sure, at the time of his death Burton had completed a new translation of this work from the Arabic, and it may be that his borrowings from Payne indicate temperamental laziness rather than linguistic inability.

¹ *Persian Portraits, a Sketch of Persian History, Literature, and Politics* (London, 1887), p. 56.

this. Others of his papers she bowdlerized carefully, witness her expurgated version of *The Arabian Nights*. Among these, no doubt, were manuscripts not in his hand and even, possibly, a transcript in his hand of Rehatsek's translation of *The Gulistan*, which the editor of the Allan edition later took for Burton's own work. The text used for this Allan edition had apparently been pruned by Lady Burton or one of her assistants, for it differs from the Kama Shastra text chiefly in the omission of risqué tales and in a minor substitution in the introduction, altering the earlier work's claim to literalness and completeness.¹

Since the various Kama Shastra manuscripts might very well have been in various hands, it is doubtful whether even a study of Burton's library² will solve the problem of the authorship of the *Gulistan* translation. It may be, as Professor Arberry has suggested to me, that the only final authentication can come from a comparative study of the styles of the several authors. For this reason I have thought it best to submit this article to a journal whose readers have the linguistic competency to make such a study.

¹ The 1928 edition reads: "The present work has been ably and faithfully translated" for the Kama Shastra's claim that earlier translations had "never been faithfully literal or entirely complete. Both these qualifications are offered in the present edition".

² Sir Arnold T. Wilson in the Burton Memorial Lecture at the Royal Asiatic Society in 1937 reported that Burton's library and manuscripts were now at the Central Library in High Street, Kensington, and at the Camberwell Public Library in Peckham Road.