

Unit 1

Rudaki

The first major poet of Islamic Iran was Rudaki (Abu Abdollah Jaffar Ebn Mohammad). Rudaki was a blind poet whose fame during his own lifetime rested not only on the merit of his poetry but also on his skill in reciting and in playing the lute. Mohammad Afi, a 12th century biographer-historiographer, describes Rudaki thus: "He was so sharp and intelligent that by the age of eight he knew all of the Koran by heart, and knew how to recite it properly, and began versifying and imparted delicate tropes; so that people favored him and his appeal grew. And unto him the Lofty Creator bestowed a pleasant voice and a heart-moving singing ability, and singing drew him to music; and from Abolbak-e Bakhtyar, who was a master of that art, he learned the lute and became skilled in playing it, so that his fame reached all the corners of the earth, and King Nasr Ebn Ahmad Samani gave him the honor of his own exalted presence and his [Rudaki's] fortune was on the rise." Rudaki wrote most of his panegyrics in honor of Nasr Ebn Ahmad, the famous Samani ruler (A.D. 913-942) and his vizier, Abolfazle Bal'ami. It is reported that he became so prosperous that at one time he owned two hundred slaves and that four hundred camels were needed to transport his belongings from Harat to Bukhara. However, it is also reported that the latter part of his life was spent in poverty. Whatever the cause of this poverty, it casts a redeeming light on the career of the blind poet whose extant poetry often talks of the fickleness of fortune and the futility of worrying about material things. Were we told that he died in affluence, his admonitory poems would have sounded hollow. As it is, the reports of his life and the remnants of his poetry combine to reveal a blind sage who gained everything and lost everything – everything but his mirth and his

almost Lucretian level-headedness. This is perhaps part of the reason why to his contemporaries as well as to the students of Persian Poetry in the succeeding ages, Rudaki's voice has had an aura greater than that justified by his extant poetry alone:

Rudaki hath picked his lute and plucked the strings

Pour us more wine and hark – the master sings!

Indeed, one of the best known legends in the annals of Persian literature (first recorded by Nezami Samarghandi in the **Chahar Maghalleh**) has to do with the persuasive power of Rudaki's songs. Nezami relates that it was the custom of Amir Nasr, the Samani ruler and patron of Rudaki, to spend the winter months in his capital of Bukhara and to travel to other parts of his large domain in the warm season. One year, infatuated with the charms of Harat, he over-extended his stay in that city. His commanders who were anxious to return to their families in Bukhara beseeched Rudaki to use his influence with the king in persuading him to return to Bukhara. Rudaki, we are told by Nezami (translation by E. G. Browne), "composed a **quasida**; and, when the Amir had taken morning cup, came and did obeisance, and sat down in his place; and, when the musicians ceased, he took up the harp, and, singing the qasida." When Rudaki finished his song, the king returned to Bukhara immediately.

Aryanpour (1973)

Part I. Comprehension Exercises

A. Put "T" for true and "F" for false statements. Justify your answers.

- 1. Rudaki wrote his first poem when he was a teenager.
- 2. One year, Amir Nasr over-extended his stay in Bukhara.
- 3. It is stated in Rudaki's poems that he was rich for some years.
- 4. One can realize from Rudaki's poems that he had two hundred slaves.
- 5. Rudaki was known as the best lute player all over the world.
- 6. Bal'ami was admired by Rudaki.