

# 1 The Turandot Tale

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## 1 Introduction: the Misogamist Woman and Her Riddles

The present study aims to trace the historical-legendary origins and early development of a female character, that of Būrān-dukht, that is supposed to have lent her name and some of her features to the character of Turandot. Turandot is the heroine of the tale – well-known in Europe from Puccini’s opera (1926) – of the beautiful, learned and cruel princess who sets riddles to her suitors to be answered, on pain of death, as a necessary condition for her consent to marry: she will only marry the man who proves to be superior to her in intelligence and learning by answering her questions or riddles and who, in his turn, is able to set questions that she cannot answer.<sup>1</sup> In Europe, the tale of Turandot, as well as the name ‘Turandot’ for the female protagonist, are attested for the first time in François Pétis de la Croix’s tale collection *Les Mille et un Jour(s)* (Paris, 1710-12, 5 vols.; see below, ch. 6, § 1).

Two historical personages, both called Būrān or Būrān-dukht, did lend some of their, mostly legendary, features and their name to the character here studied: they are Būrān(-dukht), daughter of Khusraw II Parvīz and queen of Iran for a brief period (630-631 CE; see ch. 3) and, more prominently, Būrān(-dukht), the daughter of Ḥasan b. Sahl, wife of Caliph al-Ma’mūn (813-833 CE), as her historical figure and the account of her wedding to the caliph are re-elaborated in later sources (ch. 4). Other historical and legendary characters (in particular Shīrīn; ch. 2) have also been considered relevant in this research. What

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<sup>1</sup> These are tale-types AT 851 (“The Princess who Cannot Solve the Riddle”) and 851A (“Turandot”) in the Aarne and Thompson catalogue (*The Types of the Folktale*, 286). See also Goldberg, “Rätzelprinzessin”.

is common to the two Būrāns is their name, and a narrative motif that springs from their – mostly legendary – biography: the motif of the learned, clever, or warrior woman, who delays the wedding or the union even, in the case of the first Būrān, by fighting or killing her suitor. Only for the second Būrān is also the narrative element of the riddles or enigmatic expressions, as a means of avoiding or delaying the union with the caliph, also attested. This makes the wife of caliph al-Ma'mūn the most suitable candidate to be the prototype of the Turandot of European tales.

In this study, dedicated to the development of a character, and not to a tale-type, the typological differences between the analyzed stories, taken from texts pertaining to different genres (historical chronicles, narrative poems, works of *adab*), are considered irrelevant, as is considered irrelevant the type of riddles, or tests (of cleverness, courage, etc.), or simple questions, asked; the person who poses the riddles, the heroine (a princess or a handmaiden), the hero (mostly a prince), or both;<sup>2</sup> and the ability of the hero or heroine to answer them. Likewise, the issue of possible influences of riddle tales from literature in other languages on the development of the tale of the princess and the riddles for consenting to a marriage will not be dealt with.

## 2 The Eastern Prose Turandot Tales

In the literature of the Islamic world some prose texts in Persian and Turkish exist, that represent the source of the Turandot tale of European literature. These texts have been the object of research starting from the publication of the groundbreaking article by Fritz Meier in 1941.<sup>3</sup> Though in the Eastern variants of the tale known so far the princess has no name, being indifferently referred to as “the daughter of the Qayṣar of Rūm [the King of Rūm, i.e. Greece, Byzantium]” or as “the daughter of the Faghfūr [Emperor] of China”, the label ‘Turandot tale’ is generally also used in reference to pre-European attestations of the tale.<sup>4</sup> As Ettore Rossi explains, “... the tale of the princess and her questions, and then of Prince Khalaf and the

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**2** Other personages too – most typically the bride’s father – may pose riddles or submit the suitor to different tests of skill, courage and cleverness before giving consent to a marriage. See for example the story of Sarv, king of Yemen, and the three sons of Firīdūn in Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 8: 98-103 (*Firīdūn*, ll. 143-220).

**3** On pre-European attestations of the tale see Meier, “Turandot in Persien”; Rossi, “La leggenda di Turandot”; Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot. Die persische Märchenerzählung*, especially 17-34.

**4** In German the term ‘Rätzelprinzessin’ is often used in reference to this character and the type of tale in question.

Princess of China, became the tale of Turandot. The tale came to be conventionally named thus, even for earlier stages of it”.<sup>5</sup> Following this tradition, we will continue to speak of ‘Turandot tale’ also for pre-European attestations of it.

At present, the first known instance of the Turandot tale in Islamic literatures is the one in Muḥammad ‘Awfī’s Persian collection of anecdotes entitled *Javāmi’ al-ḥikāyāt va lāvāmi’ al-rivāyāt* (dedicated in 665/1228).<sup>6</sup> Despite being shorter than the later variants, ‘Awfī’s tale is considered as the prototype of the later redactions of the story: it contains all the characteristic features of the Turandot tale as they are attested in later texts.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, an apparently unique Persian manuscript has been drawn to the attention of researchers in connection with the study of Persian folk-literature and the Turandot tale: it is MS Or. 9317 of the British Library, containing a work entitled *Mu’nis-nāma* by an otherwise unknown author named Abū Bakr Ibn Khusraw al-Ustād.<sup>8</sup> The work is dedicated to the Atabek of Azerbaijan Nuṣrat al-Dīn Abū Bakr Ibn Muḥammad of the Ildegozid dynasty; therefore – though the manuscript bearing it is later – the *Mu’nis-nāma* must have been composed between 591/1194 and 607/1210.<sup>9</sup> The manuscript contains, apart from other works by Ibn Khusraw, a collection of tales (ff. 61r-365r) which includes an early Persian redaction of the Turandot tale. This shows that attestations of the tale earlier than the one given in ‘Awfī’s collection did certainly exist.<sup>10</sup> Unluckily, the text of this very tale has been lost due to a gap in the manuscript; but its inclusion in the collection is attested by the manuscript’s table of contents, where the tale is entitled “Prince Khalaf and the daughter of the Faghfūr of China”; a title which would seemingly provide an early attestation of the name of the hero, though giving no name for the princess. Therefore, at present ‘Awfī’s tale remains the most ancient preserved version of the Turandot tale. Incidentally, it is inter-

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**5** “la fiaba che fino allora era stata quella della principessa e dei suoi quesiti, poi del Principe Khalaf e della Principessa della Cina, diventa la fiaba di Turandot e con tal nome viene designata convenzionalmente anche per il periodo anteriore” (Rossi, “La leggenda di Turandot”, 471).

**6** See below, ft. 13.

**7** Cf. Meier, “Turandot in Persien”, 7; Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 19-21. In both studies ‘Awfī’s tale is termed the ‘Ur-Roman’.

**8** See Marzolph, *Relief After Hardship*, 47-8, who refers to the article by Meredith-Owens, “An Early Persian Miscellany”.

**9** Meretith-Owens, “An Early Persian Miscellany”, 435. On the Ildegozid dynasty see Luther, s.v. “Atābakān-e Ādarbāyjān”, who gives as the dates of Nuṣrat al-Dīn Abū Bakr’s rule 587/1191 to 607/1210.

**10** For an appraisal of the tale collection contained in the *Mu’nis-nāma* for the studies on the ‘Turandot tale’ see Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 128-9.

esting to note that the dedicatee of Ibn Khusraw's collection of tales is the son of one of the dedicatees of Nizāmī's poems, Muḥammad Jahān-pahlavān;<sup>11</sup> and that the collection of tales in the *Mu'nis-nāma* is more or less coeval with the composition of Nizāmī's *Haft paykar* (593/1197; see below § 3).

A comprehensive review, analysis and edition of the Eastern prose redactions of the Turandot tale is still lacking.<sup>12</sup> Recently Youssef Mogtader and Gregor Schoeler have published, with a German translation, not only 'Awfī's Turandot tale,<sup>13</sup> but also a longer Persian prose redaction of the tale from MS Ouseley 58 in the Bodleyan Library, Oxford.<sup>14</sup> This is the text that Meier had already summarized from the Bodleian manuscript, also supposing that, despite the fact that the manuscript is quite recent, it represents an earlier stage, or even the source, of Pétis de la Croix's tale.<sup>15</sup> (For a summary of the Turandot tale in 'Awfī and in the longer Persian prose redaction of the tale, see Appendix below).

**11** On the dedicatees of Nizāmī's poems and the poems' chronology see François de Blois, *Persian Literature*, V, pt. 2, 439-46; and V, pt. 3, 585-91.

**12** Some of the Persian and Turkish manuscript redactions of the tale have been cited and - some of them - summarized in the studies quoted in fn. 3 above. Manuscript copies of the Persian 'long tale' are pointed out by Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 124. Ulrich Marzolph gives detailed summaries, bibliographical references and a thorough commentary of the 42 tales of a Turkish tale collection known by the title of *Ferec ba'd eṣ-ṣidde*; the Turandot tale is no. 25, referred to as "Khalaf" (see Marzolph, *Relief After Hardship*, 87-9). Marzolph also gives a review of some Persian manuscript tale collections (*Relief After Hardship*, 19-23); for manuscripts bearing the Turandot tale see in particular table 2, no. 25.

**13** Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 7-20 (Persian text), 55-67 (translation). 'Awfī's tale is no. 25 in part I, ch. 25, "On the Anecdotes of Sagacious and Acute Persons", of his *Javāmi*. Actually 'Awfī's tale was not still unpublished as supposed by the authors. I have an indirect notice of at least one edition: 'Awfī, *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmi' al-rivāyāt*, qism I, juzv II, ed. Amīr-Bānū Muṣaffā 'Karīmī' (Tehran, 1378/1999), where the anecdote of the daughter of the king of Rūm and her ten questions to her suitors is on pp. 379-90. However, Mogtader and Schoeler's edition of 'Awfī's tale is highly welcome, as the edition just referred to, and other possible editions of this section of 'Awfī's *Javāmi*' are extremely difficult find outside Iran (I was unable to find any of them, and wish to thank Amīr-Bānū Karīmī for having provided me with the reference to the edition published by her). On 'Awfī and his collection of tales see now Pellò, "Introduction to Saḍīd al-Dīn Muḥammad 'Awfī", in particular LVI-LIX on the editions of the *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt*.

**14** See Sachau, Ethé, *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindūstāni, and Pushtū Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, 1: cols. 447-8, no. 488 (ff. 1v-30v of the MS). This text has been edited by Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 21-57 (Persian text), 69-118 (translation).

**15** Meier, "Turandot in Persien", 9-10.

### 3 Nizāmī's Tuesday Tale

In past studies Nizāmī's Tuesday tale in the poem *Haft paykar* ('Seven Beauties/Idols', or 'Seven Portraits', or 'The Seven Celestial Bodies/Skies', composed in 593/1197) has often been considered as the first instance of the Turandot tale in Persian literature. Fritz Meier indeed writes: "Die früheste persische Turandotgeschichte findet sich bei Nizāmī".<sup>16</sup> In actual fact, Nizāmī's Tuesday tale may represent an early instance, in Persian literature, of the tale based on the motif of the princess and her riddles to her suitors; but it shows a number of differences with the Turandot tale proper.

The Tuesday tale is recounted to the hero of the poem, king Bahrām Gūr, by the princess of Slavonia (*Siqlab*, the country of the Slavs), in the red domed pavilion. The story is as follows.<sup>17</sup> A beautiful and learned princess (no name is given; she is the daughter of a king in Russia) loves studying and knowledge and is not inclined towards marriage. She leaves her father's castle and locks herself in an impregnable fortress guarded by talismans. She then paints her portrait and orders it be hung at the city gate, challenging those who would win her hand to overcome all the tests she has set: her suitor must be noble and valorous, must break the spell of the castle talismans, must be able to find the invisible door into the castle, and has to solve the riddles she sets him. Many young men make the attempt but are killed by the power of the talismans. Their heads are hung at the city gates as a warning not to attempt the trial lightly. In the end a young prince, following the advice of a wise man, manages to neutralize the talismans, find the invisible door and enter the castle. The final test consists of answering some non-verbal riddles the princess poses. A mute, fascinating exchange begins, at the end of which the princess announces to her father that she intends to marry the young man (for an analysis of the riddles in this tale see below, ch. 5, § 1).

Recent studies have highlighted the differences between Nizāmī's tale and the Turandot tale properly said, as it is attested in the known Persian and Turkish prose texts and its European re-elaborations. Albert Wesselski, writing as far back as 1934, had already emphasized some differences, mainly lying in the different kind of enigmas posed by the princess: verbal riddles in Pétis de la Croix's tale, non-verbal in Nizāmī's.<sup>18</sup> In more recent times, Christine Goldberg – following a different methodological approach – has stressed the dissimilarity between Nizāmī's Tuesday tale and both types AT 851 ("The

<sup>16</sup> Meier, "Turandot in Persien", 2.

<sup>17</sup> Nizāmī, *Haft paykar*, ch. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Wesselski, "Quellen und Nachwirkungen der Haft Paikar", 114-15. See also Mogtader, Schoeler, *Turandot*, 18.

Princess who Cannot Solve the Riddle”) and 851A (“Turandot”) in the Aarne and Thompson catalogue.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in the Turandot tale, as it is attested for the first time in ‘Awfī’s collection, the princess must, in her turn, answer the questions the suitor asks her. Moreover, the question-and-answer disputation (termed *munāzara* in the Persian texts) between the youth and the princess includes the episode of the nocturnal visit of the princess to the young man, accompanied by one or two of her handmaidens,<sup>20</sup> and is preceded by the young man’s long series of adventures: all episodes lacking from Niẓāmī’s tale. Therefore, despite a long-standing tradition, it is preferable to keep Niẓāmī’s tale – the creation of a poet – distinct from the Turandot tale proper. However, the existence of the tale entitled “Prince Khalaf and the daughter of the Faghfūr of China” in Ibn Khusraw’s collection (see § 2 above) suggests that Niẓāmī may have been acquainted with an early variant of the Turandot tale, which may have been one of the sources for his own tale.

If Niẓāmī’s Tuesday tale and the type of tale first attested in ‘Awfī’s *Javāmi’ al-ḥikāyāt* show many points of divergence, they share the presence of one and the same female character. Two main features seem to be relevant for the identification of this character both in Niẓāmī’s tale and in the Turandot tale proper: that of being a ‘misogamist woman’ – as this character is called by Ettore Rossi<sup>21</sup> – i.e. a woman who flees from, or delays, her wedding; and, secondly, the fact of subjecting her suitor(s) to tests of courage, skill and wit before being willing to consent to marry. It is the origin of this character that concerns us here. From the different tales and plots analyzed it will be possible to follow the development of this character up to the anonymous princess in Niẓāmī’s Tuesday tale in the poem *Haft paykar*, and to ‘Awfī’s tale collection. Niẓāmī’s Tuesday tale, which in past studies has been the starting point of researches focusing on the story of Turandot, is instead the end point of the present research, which also aims to discover a possible source for Nizami’s.

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**19** See Goldberg, “Rätzelprinzessin”, col. 286; and *Turandot’s sisters*, in particular 27, with further bibliography on the question.

**20** In Pétis de la Croix’s tale it is only Adelmulc, a slave princess in the service of Turandot (Liù in Puccini’s opera), who visits the prince by night.

**21** Rossi, “La leggenda di Turandot”, 457. Bürgel (“Turandot – Von Niẓāmī bis Puccini”) speaks of “Misandry” (*Männerfeindschaft*) as opposed to “Misogyny”.