

## 5 Būrān-dukht Back to Persia, and Her Association with Riddles and Enigmatic Expressions

**Summary** 1 Non-Verbal Riddles Though Objects: Nizāmī’s Tuesday Tale and the Pearls as Symbols. – 2 Nizāmī ‘Arūzī’s Anecdote on Ma’mūn and Būrān in the Čahār Maqāla. – 3 Ma’mūn and Būrān in ‘Awfi’s Collection of Anecdotes.

### 1 Non-Verbal Riddles Though Objects: Nizāmī’s Tuesday Tale and the Pearls as Symbols

The two lines pronounced by Ma’mūn in the first anecdote, as well as the Koranic verse recited by Būrān in the other, are not true riddles, as they do not involve any explicit challenge to guess their meaning. Their genetic affinity with riddles, however, is evident: as riddles and enigmas, they are based on the substitution of plain and ordinary language with figurative or indirect expressions, in order to say something without revealing it openly.<sup>90</sup> Both for Ma’mūn in the first anecdote, and for Būrān in the second one, they are a witty way of alluding to an unpleasant personal situation which is an object of taboo from a cultural point of view.<sup>91</sup> In the first anecdote, the factual data (the frustrated sexual act and Būrān’s menstruation) are talked about in an indirect way, through metaphors: the fiery horse, the horse’s rod and the darkness; while the image of “blood preventing from shedding blood” is

<sup>90</sup> See *The Poetics of Aristotle*, 83: “The essence of a riddle is to express true facts under impossible combinations. Now this cannot be done by any arrangement of ordinary words, but by the use of metaphor it can” (XXII: 1).

<sup>91</sup> See Naaman, “Women Who Cough and Men Who Hunt”.

constructed according to a technique typical of riddles and enigmas, consisting of expressing “true facts under impossible combinations”.<sup>92</sup> In the second anecdote, Būrān utters a Koranic verse in order to let Ma’mūn understand – without saying it openly – the embarrassing situation in which she has come to find herself. It is her usage of the Koranic verse in that particular situation, not the verse in itself, that renders it an allusive and enigmatic expression.

In Nizāmī’s Tuesday tale the riddles consist of the exhibition of certain objects that the princess, sitting in front of the prince, sends him via a handmaiden. In order to respond, the young prince must understand the meaning of each object. After the first object, however, the princess too must understand the meaning of the objects the prince sends her in reply. In this language, the objects exhibited, and the actions accompanying their exhibition, have a symbolic value: they are the signifier of something signified, which has to be guessed. They are true riddles, though presented by means of non-verbal language.<sup>93</sup>

The princess takes two little pearls off her earlobes and hands them to the youth. He weighs the two pearls, adds three more pearls of the same value, and returns all of them to her. The princess carefully examines the five pearls, reduces them to powder, mixes the pearl dust with sugar, and passes the mixture to the young prince. In answer, he puts the mixture into a glass of milk and passes it back. The princess drinks the milk, collects the residue and weighs it: the weight is exactly that of the five pearls. She then gives him a ring. He puts it on his finger and gives the princess a splendid pearl. The princess unstrings an identical pearl from her necklace and gives both pearls back to the youth, who finds that the two pearls are identical. He then adds a little azure stone before passing back all three. She hangs the two white pearls on her ears, the blue stone on her finger, smiles and announces to her father that she intends to marry the young man: at last she has found a man who surpasses her in learning and wisdom.<sup>94</sup> She herself, then, explains to her father the meaning of the enigmatic exchange through objects she has had with the prince:<sup>95</sup> the two pearls in the first exchange mean the transience of life; the three other pearls added by the young man mean that whether three or even five days, life is still fleeting; the following question concerns voluptuousness (the

<sup>92</sup> See fn. 90 above.

<sup>93</sup> See the third group of riddles (the other two being the riddles of didactic intent, and the ones just for entertainment) in Khaleghi-Motlagh, “Afsāna-yi bānū-yi ḥiṣārī va pishina-yi qālib-i adabī-yi ān”, 172.

<sup>94</sup> Nizāmī, *Haft paykar*, ch. 35, 232-60.

<sup>95</sup> Nizāmī, *Haft paykar*, ch. 35, 268-85.

sugar), inextricably linked to life (the pearls): how to distinguish the one from the other? The young man gives the answer by adding the pearl dust to milk; by drinking it the princess subordinates herself to him, at the same time showing that the weight of the pearls is unchanged. By giving him the ring, she in turn accepts to marry him, to which he responds with a very precious pearl, signifying that she would never find another husband of equal worth. To this she adds a pearl of identical value, thereby declaring herself his companion and equal; he simply adds the azure stone as protection against the evil eye.

The wisdom interpretation given in the poem is not the only possible one. The mute exchange between the princess and her suitor represents an example of successful non-verbal communication, and has a strong erotic charge. A sexual interpretation of it has also been posited.<sup>96</sup>

Examples of such communication by means of objects (and actions) are well-known from ancient sources.<sup>97</sup> Albert Wesselski has rightly suggested that one of the sources, or probably the main source, for the non-verbal riddles in Nizāmī's Tuesday tale is the exchange of objects between Alexander and the wise Indian, recounted in its fullest version by Mas'ūdī.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, examples of this kind of non-verbal communication are rather numerous in Persian literature, both in the context of a riddle, and in a context where no riddle is openly asked. An example of the latter type is a passage from the *Shāhnāma* where – after his marriage to Shīrīn – Khusraw uses non-verbal language through objects to overcome the opposition of the nobles of his court to the wedding. For three days the nobles keep away from court, as a sign of protest and disapproval. Khusraw convokes them. He has a splendid vase brought in to the presence of the nobles and has it filled with impure blood, a disgusting sight for all of them to see. He then orders it to be washed clean, and once again shows it to them. Khusraw himself explains the meaning of the vase and its cleaning: Shīrīn – he says – is like that vase. If at first she was not worthy of marrying the king, she has now been purified by their union.<sup>99</sup> In the just seen example, the gestural language based on the exhibition of an object, though enigmatic in itself, functions as a comparison or a parable.

<sup>96</sup> See for example Meier, "Turandot in Persien", 417.

<sup>97</sup> On gestural riddles see the bibliography given by Rossi, "La leggenda di Turandot", 461 fn. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Wesselski, "Quellen und Nachwirkungen der Haft Paikar", 114-16; Mas'udi, *Murūğ al-dahab*, 2: 265-74. This story is also recounted, with some differences and in a more succinct way, in Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 6: 28-31 (*Iskandar*, ll. 353-96).

<sup>99</sup> Firdawsī, *Shāhnāma*, 8: 267-9 (*Khusraw Parvīz*, ll. 3482-509).

The objects involved in non-verbal communication – the pearls exchanged by the two young people in Niẓāmī’s tale, or the vase in the *Shāhnāma* – have a symbolic value. If Niẓāmī’s riddle in the Tuesday tale pertains to the well-known category of non-verbal riddles, the choice of the pearls as symbolic objects represents the link connecting Niẓāmī’s tale with the story of Ma’mūn’s marriage with Būrān: a possible sign of a relation, or even of the derivation, of the princess in the Tuesday tale from Būrān-dukht.

## 2 Niẓāmī ‘Arūzī’s Anecdote on Ma’mūn and Būrān in the Čahār Maqāla

In the first ‘discourse’, or chapter, devoted to the profession of secretary, in Niẓāmī ‘Arūzī’s *Čahār maqāla* (‘Four discourses’, probably composed in 551/1156), an anecdote concerning Ma’mūn’s marriage with Būrān is narrated. It is connected to the theme of the chapter by glorifying the great statesmen who flourished under the Abbasid dynasty, among whom were Ḥasan b. Sahl and his brother Fażl.<sup>100</sup> Niẓāmī ‘Arūzī freely reworks his sources, offering a narrative endowed with a quality which is not to be found in previous texts: beauty.

In the final part of the anecdote, after the description of the sumptuous preparations for the wedding – including an interesting account of Ma’mūn’s decision to wear black clothing for the ceremony,<sup>101</sup> and the traditional report concerning the gifts for the guests – the focus of the narrative moves on to the couple and their feelings: Būrān’s kind and submissive attitude, and Ma’mūn’s increasing passion for her. Būrān’s grandmother, as well as the other noble ladies who – according to the sources – were present at the ceremony, disappear from the narrative, and the couple act in a refined setting, in absolute solitude.

Ma’mūn, on entering the bride’s house, is struck by the beauty of the mansion. On a sumptuous carpet of gold thread embroidered with pearls, rubies and turquoises he sees six precious cushions and, seated in the place of honour, he sees Būrān. The author gives a description of her beauty, as it appears to Ma’mūn’s astonished eyes. Būrān then acts (I quote the passage in the beautiful English translation by Edward G. Browne):<sup>102</sup> “She, rising to her feet like a cypress, and walking gracefully, advanced towards Ma’mūn, and, with

**100** Niẓāmī ‘Arūzī Samarqandī, *Čahār maqāla*, 19-21. The author confuses the two dignitaries, as he says that Būrān was the daughter of Fażl.

**101** In reference to Ma’mūn’s political change, in 204/819, reflected in his abandoning the green clothing characteristic of the ‘Alids and coming back to the black of the ‘Abbāsids. See Rekaya, s.v. “al-Ma’mūn b. Hārūn al Rašhīd”. See also fn. 109 below.

**102** Niẓāmī ‘Arūzī Samarqandī, *Čahār Maqāla*, 21-3.

a profound obeisance and earnest apologies, took his hand, brought him forward, seated him in the chief seat, and stood before him in service. Ma'mūn bade her to be seated, whereupon she seated herself on her knees hanging her head, and looking down at the carpet. Ma'mūn was overcome with love: he had already lost his heart, and now he would have added thereunto his very soul".

The recounting of the thousand pearls poured over Ma'mūn by Būrān's grand-mother and then counted and given (as if they were a settlement by notary act) to Būrān by Ma'mūn as his wedding gift, is here completely changed: "He stretched out his hand and drew forth from the opening of his coat *eighteen pearls* [my emphasis], each one as large as a sparrow's egg, brighter than the stars of heaven, more lustrous than the teeth of the fair, rounder, nay more luminous, than Saturn or Jupiter, and poured them out on the surface of the carpet, where, by reason of its smoothness and their roundness, they continued in motion, there being no cause for their quiescence. But the girl paid no heed to the pearls, nor so much as raised her head".

The narration of Ma'mūn's attempt to embrace Būrān and the beginning of her menstruation ("that state peculiar to women" in Nizāmī 'Arūzī's words) is retold with a focus on Ma'mūn's and Būrān's feelings, in a clear though preciously allusive way: "Thereat was Ma'mūn's passion further increased, and he extended his hand to open the door of amorous dalliance and to take her in his embraces. But the emotion of shame overwhelmed her, and the delicate damsel was so affected that she was overtaken by that state peculiar to women. Thereat the marks of shame and abashed modesty appeared in her cheeks and countenance, and she immediately exclaimed: - 'O Prince of Believers! The command of God cometh, seek not then to hasten it!'"

In this beautiful narrative, there is no need to explain further what has happened. Ma'mūn gets the point and his love increases: "Thereat Ma'mūn withdrew his hand, and was near swooning on account of the extreme appositeness of this verse, and her graceful application of it on this occasion. Yet still he could not take his eyes off her, and for *eighteen days* [my emphasis] he came not forth from this house and concerned himself with naught but her"<sup>103</sup>

In Nizāmī 'Arūzī's retelling of the story, the pearls presented by Ma'mūn to Būrān become a symbol: there are eighteen of them, just as there are eighteen days of amorous dalliance between Ma'mūn and Būrān. They are a gift and a promise of love. The interpretation of the pearls as metaphorical objects is reinforced by the fact that in the Persian language 'pearl' has a vast array of metaphorical meanings, and appears in a number of figurative expressions. Metaphorically,

<sup>103</sup> Nizāmī 'Arūzī Samarqandī, *Chahār Maqāla*, 22-3.

‘pearl’ means ‘word’, especially the poetical word; but also means ‘tears’, and ‘rain’. Among the other metaphorical meanings, one is important here: ‘pearl’ can mean a virgin, a girl still untouched, or a girl of unique value. And ‘to bore the pearl’ (*dur[r] suftan*), besides meaning ‘to compose poetry’, also means ‘to deflower a girl’.<sup>104</sup>

One can suppose that the other Nizāmī, Nizāmī of Ganja, had this anecdote in mind when he conceived the tale of the princess of the castle, with the enigmatic exchange of pearls between the princess and her suitor (see §§ 1.3 and 5.1 above). But this is only a suggestion, and can certainly not be proved.

### 3 Ma’mūn and Būrān in ‘Awfī’s Collection of Anecdotes

The famous collection of anecdotes by Muḥammad ‘Awfī entitled *Javāmi’ al-ḥikāyāt va lāvāmi’ al-rivāyāt* (665/1228) which – as already stated (see above, ch. 1, § 2) – contains the first known attestation of the Turandot tale, also contains an anecdote having caliph Ma’mūn and Būrān as protagonists. It is an anecdote in chapter 22 of the third part of the work, entitled “On clever and wise women, and on the pleasantness of their sayings”.<sup>105</sup> Būrān (here Pūrān) is a representation of the clever and witty woman and embodies both characteristic features of ‘Turandot’: that of the misogynist woman, and that of the woman who asks and/or responds to riddles. The plot, however, is very different from that of both the Turandot tale, and the anecdotes on the wedding night of Ma’mūn and Būrān. The ban on sexual relations is here dictated by a medical prescription concerning Ma’mūn, and it is Ma’mūn who poses a riddle to Būrān concerning his own sexual life. As will be shown, this anecdote also testifies to the connection of Būrān (in this case, the second Būrān) with the legendary figure of Shirīn.

The story is as follows. Ma’mūn asks ten women of his harem, mothers of his sons,<sup>106</sup> the following question: “What do I need?” None of the women can answer. The caliph then asks Būrān, and she gives the right answer: the caliph – she says – needs sexual intercourse (*mubāšarat*) with women, but this has been denied him by his physician Bukhtīshū;<sup>107</sup> he can have free social intercourse (*mu’āšarat*) with them, but when he is assailed by desire he must be content with a male slave (*khādim*). The caliph is amazed at Būrān’s cleverness, how she is able to guess

<sup>104</sup> Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, s.vv. “Dur(r)” and “Dur(r) suftan”.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Awfī, *Javāmi’ al-ḥikāyāt va lāvāmi’ al-rivāyāt*, qism III, juzv II, 646-8.

<sup>106</sup> This means that they were simple concubines and not, like Būrān, his wives.

<sup>107</sup> This is the name borne by several physicians of a famous Christian family originally established at Jundīshābūr. The personage in this anecdote may be identified with Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ or with his son. See Sourdel, s.v. “Bukhtīshū’”.

the secret only known to the physician and himself. She retires to her room and sends the caliph some beautiful male slaves; but he desires Būrān. He tries to penetrate Būrān's room, but – no matter how much he insists and pleads – she does not let him in, not wanting to transgress the prescription of the physician Bokhtishu', for the sake of the caliph's health. She says to Ma'mūn: "The health of the Prince of Believers is what all his servants desire. Therefore, limit yourself to a friendly relationship (with your wives), so that your health be complete, and the servant's ease under (your) reign be perfect". In the end Būrān explains how she had managed to guess Ma'mūn's secret: if the caliph had free intercourse with such beautiful women without having sexual relations with them, she had deduced that this was because of a prohibition concerning sexual relations with women.

In this anecdote a feature recurs, already seen in the story of Shīrīn and her putative son Shahriyār referred to above (see ch. 2, § 4): it is the prohibition from sexual relations with women. Whereas in the anecdote of Shīrīn and Shahriyār the ban (for Shahriyār) on sexual intercourse was motivated by the need to avert the birth of an ill-omened child, in the anecdote of Ma'mūn and Būrān narrated by 'Awfī it is motivated by a medical prohibition; but the reason for this is not clear. One might recall that, in classical moral literature, over-frequent relations with women were considered a danger to the health of a man, and especially for a ruler's well-being;<sup>108</sup> or, rather, the prohibition concerning sexual intercourse with women (not sexual intercourse tout court) may be considered as a literary reflex of Ma'mūn's political choices in relation to the question of his succession.<sup>109</sup> But such explanations are unconvincing. The only acceptable interpretation for the ban on sexual intercourse in this anecdote has to be searched for within the literary world. Indeed, it intertextually responds to and retells the anecdote of Shīrīn and Shahriyār, giving it a happy ending: Būrān – unlike Shīrīn – is a wise woman and resists the pleas of Ma'mūn for the sake of her husband's health and – above all – for the welfare of the country. The character of Būrān, which accords with some of Shīrīn's characteristic features, evolved until it became Shīrīn's opposite: no longer, as with Shīrīn, the main character responsible for the fall of the kingdom of Persia, but a model of virtue and cleverness, deeply interested in the welfare of the kingdom and its subjects. Perhaps a remote memory of the Sasanid queen Būrān can also be detected behind 'Awfī's Būrān.

**108** For advice on health problems connected with over-frequent contact with women cf. Fouchécour, *Moralia*, 389.

**109** At the beginning of his reign, Ma'mūn had attempted to impose 'Alī al-Riḍā, son of the martyr Mūsā al-Kāzīm, as his successor, therefore renouncing a direct line of succession. On that occasion he abandoned the black color of the 'Abbāsids in favor of the green color of the 'Alids. See Rekaya, s.v. "al-Ma'mūn b. Hārūn al-Rashid".

