

COMMENTARY ON NIZAMI'S SEVEN STORIES OF THE SEVEN PRINCESSES

The book starts with a powerful story about sexual desire. It must have made an impression on Hans Christian Andersen who wrote his own version, but without the sex. Andersen's *Garden of Paradise* is a fine story, with the tragedy at the heart of Nizami's original version kept intact, but it misses the point. What in Nizami is a beautiful and moving description of the human condition, in Andersen becomes an ultimately depressing morality tale, a rigid religious dimension replacing Nizami's humanity and openness. Also, by being unable to describe the sexual act for what it is, Andersen is not able to get to the heart of the matter, the way Nizami manages with his poetic descriptive skills. At no point does Nizami's story become coarse or pornographic, even when describing sex. Nizami's use of metaphor and simile transforms what might be embarrassing into a sublime experience, which is after all one of the main points of the story: a tale of unsatisfied desire. I am still struggling with the title. It translates more accurately as a *tale of unfulfilled love*, but the story is about sex. Love, which has so many meanings in human life, is here specifically sexual desire.

This becomes clear as the other stories get told, the final one being a lyrically funny version of the first, the dark tragedy becoming a light comedy.

I love the structure of the first story, the way it is revealed like the layers of an onion, each peeling away to its heart at the centre. This fits the theme, which is a kind of undressing, stripping gradually, seductively and irrevocably down to the naked truth. It takes almost half the story to arrive at its destination, the tale told by one person after the other, each taking us closer to the journey's end. That journey represents the story's substance as Nizami gently and with huge sympathy leads us to its tragic heart.

