

THE SEVEN STORIES OF THE SEVEN PRINCESSES

NIZAMI

PREFACE

The German translator of the edition I worked from describes these tales as a perfect blend of the sensual and spiritual, which gets to the essence of these distillations of the story-teller's art.

Ever since I was handed a copy as a teenager by the man who translated my father's book into German, and having read the Seven Stories enthralled in one short sitting (it is only a hundred pages long) it became the chief consolation and inspiration in my life.

It is emphatically not a religious book and scrupulously avoids being the type of popular morality fairy tale common across the Arab world for centuries. It takes the basic structure of these tales and elevates them to a peak of elegance and profundity that one can find only rarely, perhaps for me in the music of mature Mozart. The words are simple, the stories are as lean as Olympic long distance runners, nothing can be subtracted from them, but the meaning could not be more far-reaching and embraces the essential questions of human existence: good and evil, relationships, our place on this earth, reason and the life of the spirit, and above all, sex and love.

Nothing is fudged or made complicated. Nizami writes clearly and directly about all these subjects. He avoids any misunderstanding, however ambiguous the conclusions to his stories. For instance in the story about good and evil, he is blunt about the nature of evil, and despite the peremptory resolution of that particular story, he makes it clear that evil is something that we can not expect to overcome, it is part of human

nature, but he indicates a way in which we can deal with it, survive it and even live with it.

The best example of how Nizami does not fudge the truth is when he deals with sex. The book starts with a story about desire, and ends with a story about desire, which he acknowledges is the fundamental driving force of human nature, the source of our joy as well as our tragedy (and art, literature and music have always and will forever be concerned with this fact of life). The first story is tragic, it concerns the illusion of desire, that part of us which strives for the ideal and forever falls short. It is perhaps the story most widely re-told, most famously by Hans Christian Andersen in *The Garden of Paradise*. Andersen describes the tragedy with an intensity that matches Nizami, but alters the basic meaning of the original and in so doing he misses the point entirely. For Andersen, with his 19th century predominantly Christian background, the story becomes a morality tale about sex being sinful. Not just sex... a kiss is all it takes for the man to be cast out of paradise. Nizami makes it clear that sex is not the issue. The princess offers the man all the sex he needs... just not with her! He can go with any number of women, and do whatever he wants. The story focuses on the impossibility of achieving a union of equals, because desire always knocks us off course, tragically. Unlike with Adam and Eve at the start of the Old Testament, this time it is the man on his own who is cast out of paradise, and Nizami's story is emphatically not about sin, but about human nature.

Nizami eventually heals the wound of unfulfilled desire by turning the final story into an entertaining comic adventure on the same theme, with a happy ending.

For me as an artist the book entranced with its concern with the significance of colour. Each story is told under the aegis of a different planet and its particular colour. The effect is like those medieval miniatures where stories are framed by astrological signs, birds, flowers and beasts, real and imagined, all of which give the narrative a

variety of perspective and interpretation. Nizami's purpose was to distil the universe into a microcosm, 'a grain of sand', a painted ceramic sunflower seed, or in this case: a few carefully crafted sentences.

Nizami who lived in the 13th century, a Kurd from what is now North Western Iran, was a famous poet in his time, particularly for his main and longest poem: *Layla and Majnun*, a Romeo and Juliet love story. It became popular across the Arab world, a classic text. *The Stories of the Seven Princesses* he wrote as an old man, his final work, and it seems to have been intended as a summary of his life's experience, poetic craft and wisdom. He thought about these stories for years before writing them, describing himself as a snake which having devoured life whole, digests it slowly.

For some reason Germany is the only country in Europe which acknowledges this book's greatness, publishing it alongside Shakespeare and Goethe. I have tried in vain to get an English publisher interested. They consider it a poor version of *A Thousand and One Nights*, when in fact the stories are quite different, less discursive, equally imaginative but refined and perfected and with deceptive sophistication – 'the art that conceals art'.

So I translated them from the German, and hope to get a Persian-speaking friend to help finish the editing, so they reflect the original more than the second-hand version.

The over all structure and style of narration are part of the book's sophistication, as perfectly crafted and complex within its simple form as the last movement of Mozart's Jupiter symphony. Nizami leads us from dark to light, black to white, night to day, and in between plays variations. So the most tragic story comes first, the one with the bad ending, and leads through various trials, going deeper until a climax is reached in the longest, the fifth story which is the heart of the book, weaving all the themes expertly together. In the *Tale of Beautiful Mahan* Nizami reveals his Sufi beliefs, the sense of the divine being in each of us, and needing to be revealed and

acted on. The penultimate story is the grimmest, despite its positive, but ambiguous ending, because it looks human nature squarely in the face and accepts the inescapable presence of evil. This is the most Shakespearean of the stories in its dramatic power. Nizami implies that evil is something we have to contain, because we cannot excise it, and therefore acts of healing become important. It is a story about physical and psychic healing. The ambiguity of the ending is echoed in John Ford's film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. A good man, being good, cannot do something bad that goes against his nature, so he depends on someone else to do the dirty work, and this leads to a dubious solution, which makes the world better, but by its violence pollutes the positive result.

Another famous story, much retold, is the one about the *Riddles of Turandot*. The beauty of those riddles is that they baffle the reader as much as the characters not involved in the developing relationship! This story acknowledges the power of women who refuse to be less than equal with men, particularly when they feel themselves superior to them in every way. This story has nothing to do with being a shrew, or being psychologically damaged (as in Puccini's version). The wordless riddles indicate a relationship of equality, whereby two people convey their desires and thoughts without explanation: 'are on the same wave-length'. Again, Nizami makes this point clearly by describing the all important riddles in such a way that they could have any number of answers and meanings. In fact the answers are irrelevant. The riddles are a way of two equal souls and minds coming together. It is not just the way the man interprets them, it is the way the woman interprets his answers also!

In the third story there is a remarkably prescient dialogue which is exciting people now and most recently in a public conversation between the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and Richard Dawkins: God against Science, religion against reason. Nizami's dialogue is exemplary and lucid. The final argument

delivered by the main character is the best description of the mystery of the cosmos as I have ever come across, especially the notion that even when we have discovered the scientific reasons behind all things, there will always remain an ultimate mystery. In a book that is secular and at the same time carefully construes metaphors that deliberately mix all beliefs and traditions (reflected before the stories are told in the nationalities of the princesses, each coming from different regions of the world, North, South, East and West), this argument has particular power and resonance. There is also a warning at the heart of this dialogue, and it appears throughout the book, especially in its framing device: that we live on the same earth together which we must nurture and not exploit, in order to achieve harmony not only with the world and with each other, but also within ourselves. Ecology is a significant theme in this book.

So many details never cease to amaze me when I read Nizami, for instance the specific nature of the demons in the story about beautiful Mahan, the man who has everything, and loses everything: particularly the old couple with heavy loads on their backs, the notion of demons being burdened by their crimes. The stylistic trope of constructing stories within stories is not simply a traditional narrative device it reflects the nature of each specific theme. In the first story this process becomes a kind of ‘undressing’, peeling away layer after layer until we arrive at its essence, naked and vulnerable. This prepares for a particularly poignant tragic ‘denouement’.

Nizami’s last book needs no preface at all. Everything in it is as clear as the purest water, and as refreshing, especially so in the delightful final story where the themes emerging from the whole book dance light-heartedly full of optimism and hope. In fact if the reader does not laugh out loud at the various ‘afflictions’, then my translation is at fault!

This is my desert island book.