

Variation, Stability and the Constitution of Meaning in the Narratives of a Persian Storyteller

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THE DEVELOPMENT FOLK NARRATIVE RESEARCH has made since the late 1950s has led to an increased occupation with and concentration on circumstantial aspects of story-telling. It involved a shift from documentation to analysis, from text to context, and from explanation to interpretation. Most of all, it has added to the traditional predominance of content-studies a growing awareness of the holistic appreciation of the narrative performance. The results of this expanded approach in turn have led to a detailed appreciation of the various messages and meanings oral narratives might possess or gain for narrator and audience alike. References to the following discussion are minimized. General reading on the topics concerned should include collective volumes such as Calame-Griaule & Görög-Karady 1984 [1989]; Görög-Karady 1990. Useful bibliographical surveys are contained in the relevant entries of the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, such as Holbek 1993; Ben-Amos 1996; Merkel 1996.

It goes without saying that any serious contextual analysis requires a certain amount of reliable data collected in the field. The collection of these data, on the other hand, implies a number of obstacles comprising funding and organisation, as well as solving problems of an individual or political nature. While these obstacles are comparatively easy to overcome in the West, Western researchers often encounter severe obstacles when aiming to do research in African or Asian countries. Differences in the underlying cultural codes of researcher, researched, and institutions controlling access to the researched may imply, besides other aspects, an essentially incongruous formulation of intentions and goals, their evaluation in terms of usefulness and meaning, as

well as the subsequent availability and publication of the collected data. The impact of these obstacles is most intensely felt in regions that have consciously distanced their own cultural self-apprehension from the dominant attitudes of the “West”. Leaving aside for the time being the problematics of any general labelling such as stereotype “West” and “East”, it is important to visualise the various aspects, reasons, and, above all, results of such an attitude for folk narrative research. Probably most significant of all, researchers are constantly made aware that folk narrative research is not an “innocent” field dealing with “old women’s tales”. Rather on the contrary, folk narrative research deals with a highly sensitive matter, touching on moral and ethical essentials and definitions of the self that – while being researched – might easily give rise to conflicting interpretations (see Marzolph 1998).

The cultural area I am concerned with in the following is Iran. In world consciousness, Iran has been associated primarily with the revolution of 1979, resulting in the collapse of a short-lived imperial dynasty cherished above all by Western yellow press. It left its deepest mark in Western consciousness when fanatics took a large number of hostages in the American embassy in Teheran. Its political image has been stamped by labels such as “Islamisation” or “theocracy”, and its popular apprehension has been mirrored by the reaction in literary production, such as Betty Mahmoody’s 1987 personal experience novel *Not Without My Daughter* or Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*. (See Pipes 1990; Sardar & Davies 1990.) The Iranian revolution has left a strong impact on all fields of research. As for folk narrative research, it has resulted in the area being inaccessible to foreign fieldwork, since the Islamic Republic of Iran until recently has discouraged research into what is unofficially conceived as *khorāfāt* or “superstition”, this attitude being documented by the deplorable state of the folktale archives in the “Organization of Cultural Heritage” in Teheran (Marzolph 1994; 1995).

Folk narrative research before 1979 was dominated by two major currents, one of a more private, the other of a more official nature. The former current consisted in the activities of the recently deceased Seyyed Abolqasem Enjavi Shirazi, who worked in the state broadcasting institution and managed to assemble a huge archive of written texts on all aspects of Iranian folklore, including several hundred thousand narratives. The latter current, represented mainly by the official activities of the “National Centre for Ethnology and Folklore” founded in 1958, resulted in a number of collecting and publishing activities reaching their peak in the mid-1970s. Both currents were encouraged and sponsored by the Empress Farah, who also took a personal interest in celebrating a large international congress on Iranian folklore in 1977 – just a year and a half before the revolution – in Iran’s imperial jewel city of Esfahan.

Traditional folk narrative itself before the revolution was thriving, especially in rural areas of Iran, though Iranian folklorists estimated it to be severely pressured by modern media of communication.

With the event of the revolution, it appears as a matter of course that all previous activities were at first interrupted and then reevaluated. What exactly happened is an extremely delicate affair to judge, since foreign research in the humanities at present is not encouraged in Iran, and official guidelines for legitimate activities in the field of folklore are not available. To begin with, after a short period of virtually uncontrolled freedom of the press, monograph publication in folk-narrative after the revolution almost totally ceased. Not even a dozen folk tale collections appear to be published after 1979. On the other hand, accessibility of basic Western analytical literature in folk narrative research, virtually non-existent before the revolution, has considerably increased since about 1985 with a series of translations of works by Marguerite Loeffler-Delachaux, Mircea Eliade, and Vladimir Propp (see also Marzolph forthcoming).

As for institutional activities in the field of folk narrative research, the former "National Centre for Ethnology and Folklore" has ceased to exist. Its archives and library now are incorporated within the "Organization of Cultural Heritage", a heavily centralised institution responsible for all kinds of cultural activities. According to its own definition, it is concerned with scholarly research in the fields of archaeology, ethnology, and traditional arts as well as fulfilling the tasks of identifying, restoring, reconstructing, and reviving cultural and historical artefacts. The "Organization of Cultural Heritage", formerly attached to the Ministry of Culture and Education, has since been delegated to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a powerful body supervising just about every cultural activity and statement within Iran in its relevance for and correspondence with the given system of Islamic values. Within the "Organization of Cultural Heritage", folk narrative research forms one out of several responsibilities in the department of ethnology. Besides the education of future folklorists, the first relevant enterprise after the revolution appears to have been a general field survey of folk narrative in the country, performed by trained graduate students from all provinces and major cities in the year 1373/1994–95.

The only other major institution concerned with folk narrative research is the archive originally founded as the "Folklore Museum", then and still now aligned to the research department of the national broadcasting institution. Its outward activities after the revolution for a number of years had come to a complete standstill, though inward activities of sorting and organising its materials have resulted in a high degree of perfection. The "Folklore Museum"

has moved to new locations at several times and at present it is scheduled to receive its own large premises where it will be given room to house its various archives, library, and permanent exhibition. Over the past few years, it has appeared doubtful whether further unrestricted scientific research and extensive documentation concerning its archived texts would ever be encouraged again. It remains to be seen whether conditions after the 1998 presidential elections will eventually result in changed circumstances.

Since the collection of new narrative data by the observation of performance through fieldwork has not been possible in Iran since the revolution, research has to rely on the considerable amount of narrative materials available in print originating from contemporary Persian tradition. Since the pioneer studies of such people as the Russian Valentin Zhukovsky, the Dane Arthur Christensen or the Iranian Fazlollâh Şobhi – to name but a few – more than a thousand texts have been made accessible in print. With the notable exception of Margaret Mills' Afghan Persian texts (Mills 1990; 1991), almost all of the published material has been collected in writing. Besides often being heavily edited or at least polished for publication, the material's presentation neglects all details of verbal and dramatic performance, let alone the absolute or contextual relationship between the narrator and the narrative. Still, regardless of their dubious origin and authenticity, any research on Persian narratives and narrators of popular tales will largely have to rely primarily on those published materials. However, even though the situation appears quite distressing, it does not necessarily imply such a serious drawback for the study of contemporary Persian folk narrative as it may seem.

While written texts might miss most contextual data, they are not at all void of meaning. When talking about meaning here, I understand a meaning beyond the bare frame of any given narrative, beyond its structure, narrative plot, or wording. Meaning here denotes the specific meaning given narratives gain in specific situations for specific individuals. For instance, the language contains implicit information on the narrator's linguistic background, the wording reveals the narrator's command of creative imagination, and the use of imagery conveys the basic mental and societal conceptions the narrator is rooted in. The larger the documented repertoire of a single narrator is, the more it allows a detailed reconstruction of the various meanings comprised. It is predominantly in this sense that "thick" materials are available from the Iranian cultural area.

One of the most fascinating documents of contemporary Iranian oral narrative are the tales told by the old Teheran woman named Mashdi Galin Khânôm. They were originally collected in the mid-1940s by the late Edinburgh scholar of Iranian studies, Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton, and have been

published together with a concise commentary in various German and Iranian editions (Marzolph 1985; Marzolph & Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994; Marzolph *et al.* 1374/1995; 1376/1997; *Persische Märchen* 1990; *Wenn der Esel singt, tanzt das Kamel: Persische Märchen und Schwänke* 1994). The 117 tales of Mashdi Galin Khânom, besides constituting a sizable authentic body of material in the Teheran vernacular, document the largest published corpus of folk narratives collected from any single Iranian narrator.

The scarce information concerning Mashdi Galin Khânom's person and background is contained in a short essay by the collector, originally presented at the Bergen conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research in 1979 (Elwell-Sutton 1980; 1982). There Elwell-Sutton sketches the usual family context of story-telling as well as the devastating result of his attempt to transmit the charm of oral performance by having Mashdi Galin Khânom narrate in the sterile atmosphere of a Radio station. Only for the tale of the "Silence Wager" (AT 1351) – the tale in which wife and husband agree that whoever is going to talk first shall have to fetch water for the calf in the stable – does Elwell-Sutton mention a detail of contextual circumstances of performance: Mashdi Galin narrated this tale after becoming aware of his verbal shyness, apparently teasing him by alluding to the absurd results a refusal to talk might produce.

Besides this singular mention of contextual relevance, no external information is supplied as to the meaning the tales told had for the narrator. Should we then give up and discard Mashdi Galin Khânom's tales for lack of contextual data? Of course, this is a purely rhetorical question, since in the following I propose to discuss a focused reading of her tales that might help in revealing their implicit "meaning". To demonstrate this point I have chosen two approaches, the first of which is concerned with the varying expression of one particular tale narrated in three different versions, and the second one with dominant themes.

Out of the 117 tales collected from Mashdi Galin, eight have been narrated twice, and two tales are even preserved in three different versions each. While this fact might be taken as indicating a certain restriction in the narrator's repertoire, it can also be understood as implicitly demonstrating the narrator's preference for certain tales or topics. The tales narrated twice are:

– nos. 1, 2 = AT 314: *The Youth Transformed to a Horse* (Goldener): A prince at first is forced to leave his home because of the evil plots of his stepmother, but later with the help of his magic horse wins his beloved;

– nos. 6, 7 = AT 922: *The Shepherd Substituting for the Priest Answers the King's Questions*: The Wise Fool by way of enigmatic answers and actions saves the kingdom;

– nos. 8, 9 = AT 507 C: *The Serpent Maiden*: Through the aid of a magic helper the youth manages to win his beloved, whose former bridegrooms had died during the wedding night. In employing a ruse, the helper threatens to kill her and thus forces venomous snakes to leave her body.

– nos. 13, 14 = AT 934 B: *The Youth to Die on His Wedding Day*, a tale of fate.

– nos. 42, 43 = AT 1381 D: *The Wife Multiplies the Secret*: In order to test his wife's ability to keep a secret, her husband pretends that while he farted, a crow has come out of his rear. When he later returns to his house, he hears rumours that forty crows have come out of his rear. He leaves his wife.

– nos. 89, 117 = Persian oicotype proposed as AT 735 D*: *Schicksalsschläge*: luck abandons a successful merchant and only later returns;

– nos. 103, 104 = A story about the guiles of women in which a woman teaches her sister why they live in different states of wealth: The simple-minded honest sister is to prepare and eat a soup without her husband noticing. When she leaves a trace of the ingredients and is unable to justify its provenance, her clever sister has to save her with a ruse.

– nos. 113, 114 = AT 885 A: *The Seemingly Dead*: Through the love of a common man, the princess is saved from being buried alive.

The two tales narrated three times are:

– nos. 36, 37, 38 = AT 1741: *The Priest's Guest and the Eaten Chicken*, discussed subsequently;

– nos. 40, 41, 108 = Persian oicotype proposed as AT 735 F*: *Das Schicksal macht den Armen reich*: by a lucky turn of events, the common man manages to marry the princess.

Some of the above-quoted multiple versions are largely identical in content as well as wording. The three versions of AT 1741, on the contrary, may serve to demonstrate the creative ways in which a tale within the given frame of the structure defining its nature can be expressed. This tale has been narrated in an extremely short and rather rudimentary version, a short version and an extended version. These three versions demonstrate the skilful creativity practised by the narrator in the way she perceived and gave meaning to the tale by textualising it in contrasting ways, each of which supposedly conformed with a different mood and context. As far as the collector of the tales has let us know, the context of narrating was vaguely the same in the dozens of meetings over a period of several years. The collector recalls that he came to know the narrator, whose position as a storyteller he qualified "somewhere between that of a naive peasant narrator and that of the professional entertainer", shortly after his arrival in Teheran in 1943. He continued to record tales from

her until his departure from Iran in 1947. During that four-year period he visited the household regularly at weekends for the purpose of notating stories from Mashdi Galin Khânom's dictation, which he did by writing in his own hand. The collector's description of this procedure is in itself telling for the attitude of the journalist and amateur in folklore he was at that time, as at one point he expressly mentions that

Mashdi Khanom had difficulty in grasping the concept of dictation. Instead of speaking sentence by sentence or phrase by phrase, she tended to run on, and I found it easiest to work with the assistance of a member of the family, who could break the flow of words at convenient intervals. In this way, I was able to get down on paper a highly accurate transcript of the tales as told by the narrator.

Furthermore, he points out that an experiment of having the narrator tell some of her tales on Radio Tehran was not a great success, since "it was evident that Mashdi Galin Khanom needed an audience" and "evidently found the ambience of the broadcasting studio, the microphone, the invisible audience, altogether too intimidating, and she could only manage to rattle off the stories without expression or feeling."

Thus, we are made to understand that the situations in which the collector notated the tales in his own writing were induced, though within the familiar surrounding of family members he does not mention the narrator feeling uncomfortable (which he later made a point in the case of the studio situation). Moreover, the natural flow of the narrator's performance was broken at several points ("convenient intervals") in order to allow the collector to keep up with his transcription. In any case, the heavily diverging versions of the one tale considered here suggest that either the context of narrating or the mental disposition, the "mood" of the narrator, differed in any decisive way from the other situations. The following is an analytical summary of how the three versions turned out mentioning the number of words for each paragraph (analytically contrasted transcriptions of the three versions have been published in Marzolph & Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994, vol. 2: 57-62):

Mashdi Galin's three versions of
AT 1741: *The priest's guest and the eaten chicken*

	invocation of God (9)	
introduction of the main character (4)	(7)	(7)
[mentioned in next paragraph]	mention of the wife's lover (6)	(5)
First situation: The lover challenges the woman to eat a roast goose together with him without having the husband notice (78)	(36)	(46)
The woman pretends that the cat took the goose, and the husband is forced to eat a humble dinner (137)	(37)	[missing]
Second situation: After the woman has shared the goose with her lover, the husband brings a second one.	The woman pretends that the goose has flown away (36)	[missing]
The woman pretends that a vulture has taken it, only leaving the intestines. The husband is again forced to have a humble dinner. (243)		
Third situation: When the man has brought a third goose, the woman pretends never to have seen it (99)	[missing]	[missing]
Fourth situation: The woman accuses her husband of daydreaming (86)	(49)	[missing]
Fifth situation: The man brings the next goose accompanied by a band of musicians, so that everyone in the neighbourhood notices (34)	(32)	(33)
The woman prepares the goose and consults with her lover (25)	(20)	(32)

The woman advises her husband to bring the person to his right as a guest from the mosque (41)	(42)	(37)
The woman advises her lover to sit at her husband's right side (26)	[already mentioned]	[already mentioned]
Since the place at the husband's right side is already occupied, the lover has to sit somewhere else, and the husband invites a different person (71)	(46)	(46)
As they return home, the woman notices the mistake and sends her husband on an errand (21)	(26)	(21)
The woman makes the guest understand that her husband has the habit of introducing the pestle into the guest's anus. In horror, the guest runs away (118)	(68)	(53)
The woman makes the husband believe that the guest ran away carrying the goose, and the husband goes after him (70)	(64)	(77)
The husband returns unsuccessfully and bemoans his fate (30)	[missing]	(1) END
The woman and her lover eat the goose (9)	(17)END	
The next day, the man buys another goose, prepares it himself, and finally is permitted to enjoy it (95)		

Essentially, the story consists of three elements: (1) The woman's intention to eat the goose with her lover, including her arrangement to make her husband invite a particular person from the mosque; (2) The woman's ruse towards the guest, alluding to her husband's alleged habit; (3) The woman's ruse towards

her husband, making him believe that the fleeing guest stole the goose. Other elements implemented in the above quoted versions are not essential to the plot and are either mostly embellishing repetitions: In the shortest version, there is only one unsuccessful attempt, after which the tale's essential structure is followed. The second version contains three additional short episodes, while the longest version contains altogether five unsuccessful attempts. The tale's essential structural passages are executed in all three versions in passages of vaguely the same wording and length, while for the additional passages there are the two options of condensed or embellished presentation. For instance, in the second version the second unsuccessful attempt reads as follows:

When it became evening, [the husband] said: "Look here, my wife, this is a proper goose. You will prepare it tonight and give it to me." The woman took the goose and ate it with her lover. When the husband returned at night, he asked: "Where is the goose?" She answered: "The cat took it away!" He said: "Alright", and that night he ate [only] bread and cheese."

The lengthy version not only uses more words to express the situation, but by doing so supplies a vivid picture of the quarrel going on between husband and wife as well as the particular way arguments are constructed:

At night, the husband came home happily, and looking forward to having a soup of goose said to his wife: "My dear, let us eat dinner!" She said: "What should I bring to eat for dinner? Should I bring a snake's poison? Where is our food?" He said: "What happened? Did I not yesterday bring you a goose to prepare for today, so we could eat it?" She answered: "I have told you a thousand times to bring a piece of board to repair the kitchen door, but you never did! I cleaned the goose and put it in the kitchen. As I went out to get some firewood, the cat came, grabbed it and took it away!" He wondered: "Alright, so what should we eat for dinner now?" And she retorted: "I don't know: I will eat whatever you bring." So he said: "I have a sore tooth, so I can't eat bread and cheese or bread and yogurt. Get up and prepare some *māsh*." She said: "Get up and buy some oil and onions, so I can prepare it." The man went and bought oil and onions, she prepared the *māsh*, they had dinner together, and the next morning the man got up and went to work.

In this way, the elaborated version, though preserving the same structural elements, also constructs a different atmosphere and by employing lively wording supplies a more detailed, even if not necessarily different meaning. The focus is still on women's guiles – a traditional misogynist topic not only in Oriental literatures (for a recent brilliant commentary on this traditional topic see Merguerian *et al.* 1997). Yet in the elaborate version, one can almost smell the goose and visualise the cat sneaking through a crack in the kitchen door: the structural skeleton of the tale-type has been filled with life.

Most of Mashdi Galin's tales, besides being well structured and narrated in a pleasant mode, are explicitly inspired, fascinating, and funny, excelling above all in detailed portrayals of scenes. The following relies in part on the analysis as given in Marzolph & Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994, vol. 2: 38–43, as well as the author's unpublished presentation at the First Biennial Conference of Iranian Studies in Arlington, Va. (1993), entitled "Images of Power: A Portrayal of the Sovereign as Viewed by a Female Iranian Narrator". Page and line references are to the edition Marzolph/Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994, vol. 1.: The description of bargaining (35/18–24), the counting of nuts and simultaneous narrating of adventures (436) or the pranks of the Esfahani trickster (no. 116) are presented in a lively manner conveying the narrator's pleasure in performance. At times, the narrator almost communicates the inner feelings of her protagonists, such as when – in a version of AT 301: *The Three Stolen Princesses* – the girl convinces the demon to disclose to her the concealed place of his external soul (335). The narrator's dry humour shows when – in a version of AT 1381 D: *The Wife Multiplies the Secret* – the neighbour comments on the news that allegedly a crow has flown out of her neighbour's husband's anus: "So what, that's nothing – so it did come out ...!" (161/24).

Even repulsive acts of extreme brutality are verbalised in great detail: When the poor people attack the tyrant, she says: "... and before they could alert the guards, his body had been turned into a lump of flesh" (205/6). And when a man threatens to kill a child and subsequently does so, the narrator does not simply have him "kill" the child, instead saying that he "cut the child's head from one ear to the other" (283/24).

Mashdi Galin's tales are full of spirited expressions and ironical allusions, such as when she speaks of a dead sheep as "the mortal remains of Master sheep" (369/25). At times, her irony turns into sarcasm as she speaks of a boy who "was so blessed by fortune that his father died before he was even six years old" (257/4) or of a murderer who "with his own blessed hand took the boy and killed him" (339/11). And a certain ironical distance also becomes apparent in other places. On the one hand, the narrator tends to satirical exaggeration such as when she depicts the old and ugly donkey that is so

decrepit that “even his arsehole is sore” (34/27); on the other hand, her naive relationship to the exigencies of everyday life is seldom lost: Right in the middle of an exciting episode, the hero gets hungry and has to eat (189/23).

Topics of common knowledge are often articulated in a condensed manner. This might be understood as a sign of the narrator’s professional status, demonstrating her individual proficiency in the use of narrative formula. When a guest is entertained, “a separate room was prepared from him, (and they brought him) coffee and a water pipe, much politeness and an evening meal” (78/1) or “kind words and politeness, water pipe and tea” (181/4). When a servant is sent out to do the shopping, “he went, bought, and brought” (19/22) or “he immediately went, bought, and brought back” (327/18). On the other hand, even in the area of commonly acknowledged circumstances at times the narrator’s certain naivete shows: When the ruler entertains a guest, “whatever commonly served at that time was presented, whether it was tea or coffee” (33/9); “tea or coffee, whatever existed at that period” (468/25); or just “whatever was common at that time” (486/9). When a girl prepares an extensive meal, the narrator simply says: “as for the details – whatever I mention, it would not be enough” (325/17). In similar ways, Mashdi Galin avoids stating exact details in areas which are outside the horizon of her personal experience: When mention is made of the princess’ travel baggage, she simply states that “it is commonly known what it is” (295/27). On the other hand, her description of the floor being swept “the way they do in the houses of rich people” (295/27), rather than originating from a vague notion, might mirror her own personal experience as a servant.

In a number of statements Mashdi Galin displays her intimate knowledge of a woman’s world (417 sqq.) and discloses her own gendered perspective: The wife remains calm as her husband becomes enraged (437). The wife knows the better arguments and convinces the husband that her adopted son should marry (422/15 sqq.). The wife quarrelling with her husband about the sum of money necessary for a decent burial of her sister performs a grand monologue (259 sq.). Yet, when another one of her female characters is allegedly not even in a position to determine whether her infant has died, she has her justify her ignorance with the words: “We are just women, we do not understand this” (430/26). Generally, men are more intelligent (235/24). In consequence, women do not participate in collective decisions of the community: even though some of them attend the public assembly, they do not do so in order to participate, but just to watch (361/17). As for the advantages of matrimony, Mashdi Galin appears to be ambivalent: Though the wife does not lend things since they might be ruined (231/15) and in general “keeps the household together” (427/6), she also opines that “a spouse turns the man into a beggar” (427/7) and

advises a man never to let a woman take care of his material needs (419/23). In the last consequence, however, a woman has to understand, let go, and support her husband, such as when the wife addresses her husband: "I am not content with the situation; but if you have to go, then go!" (426/22).

Besides her representations of the female world view and humorous allusions to sexuality, the most prominent topic in Mashdi Galin's tales is the topic of dominance and power, which she recurs to in numerous places:

The ruler, the *shâh/pâdeshâh*, *solţân* or *khalife*, is the absolute sovereign, the "prayer direction of the world" (2/22, 154/22), whose orders everyone has to obey, even if they do not seem to make sense: "this is the ruler's order, and an individual subject may not oppose the ruler's order" (183/20); "the ruler never mentions things without a good reason; his orders just must be right" (436/18). His is the absolute command over his subjects' life and death, only he can grant pardon: "my head belongs to me, only the ruler can pardon" (228/4); "my head belongs to me, only the ruler can give justice" (228/19); "my head belongs to me, only the ruler is allowed to make things unhappened" (237/17); similarly the executioner says: "my job is to kill, only the rulers may grant pardon" (368/14).

The ruler's surrounding is dominated by formal language and formal behaviour. In greeting him the traditional etiquette (224/5) has to be performed, whose subtleties are only known to someone brought up at court: "because he himself was a ruler's son, he performed the etiquette very well" (486/2). The ruler's own formal language is mockingly imitated by the narrator when she has him say: "eat your meal, and afterwards I have a number of questions to ask you" (192/13). An encounter with the ruler is generally expected to be dominated by "perfected education" (425/24), referring to oneself at least as "slave-born" (425/25).

The ruler is addressed by his close friends as "father of his subjects~" (324/12), and the well-meaning *vazir* makes him understand his desired function in similar terms: "the ruler is a shepherd for his subjects, he is a father for his subjects, he is like God on earth for his subjects" (204/7-9). He is the one ordinary people put their hope in, arguing "our king is just" (433/21); "our highest king is very merciful" (465/14); "because of your justice nobody can do harm to anybody else" (465/20). After all, what should they do in case he deserts or betrays them: "if a subject tells a lie to the ruler, the ruler will have him killed; if the ruler tells a lie, what should the subjects do then?" (50/23).

On the other hand, even the ruler is nothing but a "slave of God" (459/23), at times appearing so helpless that he has to ask his subjects for advice: "how should I behave in order to give justice?" (469/7). He too is not free from erring, and once he even asks forgiveness for an unjust treatment (331/4),

another time similarly being confronted with the good advice "repentance is of no use" (386/7 sqq.), still another time generously offering compensation: "I want to grant to see this man completely satisfied with me" (488/8).

Yet, whenever his just anger is aroused, he rules out pardon without mercy, saying to the condemned: "so your existence in this world is no longer necessary" (457/8). Actually, his educational concept appears to comprise capital punishment in the first place, as when he has his forty unfaithful wives beheaded on the spot (266/8), or when he tries to talk a convict into admitting his crime: "if you say the truth, I am going to kill you; even if you lie, I am going to kill you" or when he threatens to kill his beloved court fool in a moment of rashness (60/20). Yet, the ruler wants to be loved by his subjects: "whoever loves the sultan's son is asked to welcome him" (487/14); "whoever loves the sultan's head is asked to welcome his son" (352/19). It is worth mentioning that this love is not entirely given out of free will, since a subject not sharing the ruler's happiness can easily risk having his belongings confiscated (490/4).

Every so often the ruler misuses his absolute command, doing whatever pleases him while tolerating a certain amount of injustice or at best not being aware of the full consequences: While for instance generously granting the request to build a bath-house, at the same time he overlooks the fact that other people's traditional living quarters will have to be demolished in order to make room for the new building (453). At a double marriage, he switches the bridegrooms without asking anybody's consent (154/22); another moment he adopts a young man without bothering to ask his opinion (176/26; 192/12). He draws pleasure from having people try to guess his secret, stating clearly that "I promised to crucify everyone who does not know" (385/7).

The ruler is dominated by stereotypes: He mingles with his subjects (272/10; 398/16); he indulges in vain pleasures (227/5; 439); he laughs exceedingly "until he falls on his back" (424/14). Many times the ruler's behaviour appears to be unpredictably dominated by momentary passion. While at one point he threatens to have a man killed, the very next moment he is so overjoyed as to give him his own daughter in marriage (457/5). At any rate, he is so convinced of his own power that he childishly threatens anyone opposing his will: "if you won't come, I am going to declare war upon you" (97/22); "if you don't agree, I will take her by force" (74/5; 75/4). His self-indulgence goes so far as to once promise anything asked for except for his power (and his wife) – a point at which even Mashdi Galin felt the need to voice a reproach: "nobody should give a written statement like that to anyone" (421/6).

As for the ruler's surroundings, the only direct relative mentioned frequently is his daughter: While anxiously guarding her and being careful not to admit

an unfitting suitor (188/14; 197/9), he threatens to take revenge if his proposal is rejected (198/11). At any rate, he obviously prefers sons to daughters, since he gives orders to kill the newborn baby if it is a daughter (345/4); and even later he carelessly threatens to kill his own daughter if she will not tell him the truth (80/12).

Only his mother is treated with respect (183/5), while all other women are reduced to objects of (not only his own) sexual desire: Without even so much as introducing himself, he pushes a beautiful girl down to the ground, being stopped short of violation and incest only by a sudden interference (346/7). The most precious gift he can imagine is his offer to marry: "is there any better than me offering to marry you?" (279/11). Yet, while he jealously guards his own women and concubines (190/21), he enjoys illicit relations with other married women (391). At the same time, he appears to be helpless to resist his women's demands: "if they ask me to do anything for them, I am forced to do so" (3/15). The normal way of expressing his discontent consists of suspending sexual relations: "he did not visit the inner rooms (of his house)" (no. 1; 7).

As for men in the ruler's immediate surroundings, there are three: First, there is the youthful favourite possessing a letter granting access to the ruler at all times (229/6). Of him it is said: "if he did not see him for five minutes, the Shah would go crazy" (196/8). Then there is the dervish, treated with respect and awe because of his intimate relationship with God and the resulting power to influence fate (44/2; 51/16; 52/8). And third there is the vazir, characterized as "the ruler's brain" (361/4; relevant passages: 19/24-20/6; 424/3 sq.), representing a kind of alter ego ever so often softening the immediate results of the ruler's rash behaviour (326/25) and receiving nothing but reproach and ungratefulness in return (33/24; 39/13-15; 386/17; 388/27).

Even though in a slightly enthusiastic passage it is said of the ruler "if the sultan asks in prayer for someone else, his needs will be granted" (98/4), it goes without saying that a request addressed to him only bears a chance of being considered when accompanied by a present (175/25). Anyhow, the ruler's commitment to religion is only superficial, as when the retiring ruler mentions his plans: "I am going to live in the service of God a little, at times also watching my successor's rule a little" (199/11).

Now, what does this list of statements originally scattered in a great number of different tales over a range of about 500 printed pages amount to? At best, one could sum up Mashdi Galin's imagery of power as ambiguous. She portrays the sovereign with only a few positive traits, a characteristic probably rather representing her own wishful thinking than being necessary in terms of plot development. On the other hand, she elaborates, both in terms of plot as

well as verbal articulation, those traits of character portraying the ruler as irrational, overindulging and succumbing to spontaneous fits of passion rather than doing his duty as the people's "shepherd" and "father". Of course, the quoted passages are by no means complete. Moreover, they are bound to be chosen somewhat randomly. Even though I have tried to pin down the relevant passages, I might have missed others equally important. Also, my own conception of the topic might have influenced my perception of how the topic is treated by Mashdi Galin. Even considering these restrictions, the narrator's general attitude towards the governing power still contains a definite skeptical touch.

One might wonder whether it is not perfectly natural for folk tales to portray the sovereign in the particular way Mashdi Galin does it in her tales. In some respect, it might well be that folk-tales of a certain genre or category coincide with Mashdi Galin's point of view. Other tales and other genres, notably popular romances, would on the contrary portray the sovereign in a different, probably more positive way. On the other hand, it is a well acknowledged fact that often certain narrators have a specific liking for tales of a certain nature, and – one might add – for presenting those tales in a specific wording. Hence the question: Why Mashdi Galin did choose the tales she actually narrated? What meaning did it possess for her to narrate those tales? How does the above analysis contribute to constituting a meaningful body within a random collection of tales? And more specifically: Why did she choose the particular verbal presentation in those passages related to portraying the sovereign's image?

Probably the closest answer to these questions is contained in the narrator's personal history. Mashdi Galin was about 70 years of age in the 1940s when the collector met her. Accordingly, she was born about 1870 in the days of Nâşeroddin Shâh, when the Qâjâr dynasty was still firmly rooted and the Shâh's glory must have outshone the approaching doom. Nâşeroddin's policy of granting ever more access to foreign powers opened the way to a development resulting much later in the invasion and occupation of the country by British and Russian troops in 1941. Without going into details of the various political developments, Mashdi Galin certainly lived through a period of great political turmoil. Not being a member of the privileged class, she apparently developed a thorough distrust of the ruling class together with a longing for social comfort and personal happiness, two aspects dominating her narratives.

Mashdi Galin's imagery of power is but one example of how to extract meaning out of a body of apparently dead material. While her personal background helps explain the choice of her repertoire, the actual circumstances of

narrating are also bound to have influenced her choice of tales as well as her wording. After all, the tales were narrated in times of war, and the British collector was in some way or other a member of the foreign power occupying Iran. A revealing way in which these contemporary circumstances have influenced Mashdi Galin's storytelling can be demonstrated by the adaptation of the closing formula which in two places has now been amended to read: "And the same way they [i. e., they characters of the previous story] attained the desired goal, our friends *and the allies* may reach their goal" (184/4; cf. 476/11).

The collection of Mashdi Galin's tales is an exceptionally large and well-preserved collection. Its analysis helps us understand ways in which stability in plot and structure as well as variation in wording may constitute meaning. To be certain, tales collected with the methods of contemporary fieldwork would allow a more detailed reconstruction of whatever meaning they might contain or have contained during the moment of their performance. Audio-visual documentation even many years later may bring the listener and spectator close to the actual event of the performance. Yet, Mashdi Galin's tales also constitute a challenge not to discard the legacy of the past in favour of modern or currently preferred methods of research. They remain a strong and beautiful document of the narrative talent of a gifted Persian storyteller. Besides, until circumstances change making fieldwork in Iran again possible, for this particular cultural area they remain the only chance existing to understand and apprehend the mechanisms involved in the specific textualisation of given structures and the related constitution of meaning.

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