

Zahīrī of Samarqand's 'Sindbādnāma' A Mirror for Princes

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Abstract It is now more than sixty years since Ben E. PERRY published his groundbreaking studies on the 'Sindbādnāma' in an essay entitled 'The Origin of the Book of Sindbad' (1960), in which he surveyed and discussed the vast literature about the genesis and dissemination of this book. Since then, the book's Oriental career, from its inception in pre-Islamic Iran to its amazing world journey in the form of mediaeval European translations, adaptation, transformations, or imitations, remains still at the stage where PERRY left it. The Persian and Arabic versions of the book have not received the kind of attention that a comparative study of an exemplary sample of world literature of this magnitude entails. Just to narrow the gap in the division between 'the West' and 'the Rest', I propose to look briefly at the contents of Zahīrī of Samarqand's Persian 'Sindbādnāma' (written c. 1161) not as a misogynistic text but, rather, as a 'mirror for princes'.

Keywords Sindbādnāma; Mirror for Princes; Translation Movement; Persian Political Thought

1 Introduction: Place of 'Sindbādnāma' in the Cycle of 'The Seven Wise Masters'

The cycle of stories or the narrative tradition to which the Persian 'Sindbādnāma' belongs is bifurcated into two distinct branches, the Eastern and

Western. The Eastern branch includes versions of the book in Syriac, Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic, as well as the early 'translations' from these languages into Greek, Latin, and Spanish. The relationship between these is evident in the titles assigned to the book (among other features) which are based on the name of Sindbād, the wise instructor in the novel: 'Sindbād-nāma' (Persian), 'Sindbān' (Syriac), 'Syntipas' (Greek), 'Sendebar' (Castilian), and 'Mishle Sendebār' (Hebrew). The Western branch includes all the versions produced in European vernacular languages: Old French (between 1155, 1190, and 1284 CE); Old English (13th and 14th century), etc., generally grouped in the tradition of 'The Seven Sages of Rome' or 'The Seven Wise Masters' ('SWM'). I need not dwell here upon the relations that exist between the recensions of this collection of tales, considering that this subject has been exhaustively treated by numerous scholars from the early 19th century onwards. The literature on it appears endless.¹

The Eastern branch has survived in nine recensions: (1) the Persian 'Sindbād-nāma' of Zahīrī of Samarqand² (c. 1161) (ZSN); (2) the versified Persian version of 'Aḍud Yazdī of 1375; (3) the eighth-night of Nakhshabī's Persian 'Ṭūṭīnāma' (c. 1330); (4) the colloquial Arabic story of 'The King, His Son, the Concubine, and the Seven Viziers' (undated, but late 15th century), inserted in the 'Thousand and One Nights';³ (5) another Arabic version inserted into the 'A Hundred and One Nights';⁴ this differs from the previous one; (6) the Syriac 'Sindbān' (10th century); (7) the Greek 'Syntipas' (c. 1090); (8) the Hebrew 'Mishle Sendebār' ('Parables of Sendebār', 13th century);⁵ and (9) the Castilian 'Sendebar' ('Libro de los engaños e los asayamientos de las mujeres', from the Arabic Sindbād al-Ḥakīm, dated to 1253).⁶

'The Book of Sindbād' assumed literary form as a book first, so far as is now known,⁷ in the Sasanian period. Its rendering into Arabic went along with the group of Middle Persian texts that were translated in Baghdad in the 8th century and after. One of the early translator-authors was Abān b. 'Abd al-Ḥamid al-Lāḥiqī

1 For a rendering of the complex web of filiations among Western recensions, see Torre Rodríguez 1989 and 1992.

2 The name of the author is correctly written on the title page of the book as الظهيري and not as الظاهري. (Explanation of the transcription of the name, which alternates here with that in the other contributions of this volume.)

3 In Alf laylah wa-laylah, III, pp. 138–177, where it is called 'The Craft and Malice of Women'.

4 Ott 2012, pp. 117–146; Fudge 2016, pp. 216–281.

5 On issues related to the dating of this text, see Schmidt in this volume.

6 To these might be added a Sephardic version in which two fragments containing the tales of 'Lavator' and 'Gladus' are found. For more on this, see Arbesú 2020.

7 For more on this point, consult Modi 1905; Horovitz 1911; Perry 1960, pp. 27–37, 84–94; Belcher 1987; Zakeri 2007, pp. 100–115; Toth 2014, p. 88.

(d. c. 815), who translated the ‘Book of Sindbād’, along with several other books of Persian culture, into Arabic verse.⁸

Not only is the original Middle Persian text lost but also its early translations into Arabic, Syriac I, and the 10th-century New Persian prose of Fanārūzī (used by Zahīrī). From Rūdakī’s (d. 941) versified version, only a handful of verses remain.⁹ The oldest available recensions are the Syriac II (‘Sindbān’), which is most likely based on the lost Syriac I,¹⁰ and a translation of the latter, the Greek ‘Syntipas’.

According to the prologue to the Greek ‘Syntipas’, Miguel Andreopoulos, who worked in the service of the Armenian Duke Gabriel de Melitene in the late 11th century, his translation depends on a Syriac version, and the story had been narrated originally by one ‘Persian Mūsā’.¹¹ Some scholars have suggested that this ‘Persian Mūsā’ might have been identical with the better-known translator Mūsā b. ‘Īsā al-Kasrawī of the 9th century (d. c. 870);¹² if so, al-Kasrawī would be the first known translator of the Middle Persian work into Arabic, out of which would then issue the Syriac, the Greek, and the Castilian.¹³ However, in addition to the already-mentioned earlier versified translation of Abān b. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Lāḥiqī, a contemporary translator, ‘Alī b. ‘Ubayda al-Rayḥānī al-Kātib (d. 834), has recently been suggested as yet another contributor to the distribution of this book in that early period.¹⁴ On the basis of the above evidence, we can be sure that ‘The Book of Sindbād’ was certainly available to the Arabic reading public in the 8th century. From there on, the book disseminated step by step into other languages, at each stage experiencing metamorphosis, taking different contents and ideological colouring.

There has been a tendency in Western scholarship to project research findings based on the study of the ‘SWM’ back onto the Oriental versions. One such generalisation is the misogynistic tone dominant in the majority of Western branches, reflected upon as due to the Oriental provenance of the book. MARZOLPH and LEEUWEN, for example, write:

| In terms of content, the embedded narratives are mostly moral exempla and humorous tales with a decidedly misogynistic tendency. Actually,

8 Ibn al-Nadim 1971, pp. 132, 186.

9 Dabīr Siyāqī 1955.

10 Perry 1960, p. 61.

11 Toth 2014, p. 92.

12 Perry 1960, p. 33.

13 Arbesú 2020, p. 62. Arbesú seems to suggest that the Castilian is based on the Greek rather than on the Arabic.

14 Zakeri 2007, pp. 100–115.

the 'Book of Sindbād' is the classic example of the misogynistic tradition in medieval culture and literature.¹⁵

This observation may be true of 'SWM' but certainly not of 'ZSN'. Moreover, Bea LUNDT, writing about the 'Seven Wise Masters', observes that "the work is significantly different from a mirror for princes".¹⁶ She does not explain why she thinks that the book is not a 'mirror for princes' (hereafter, *Mirror*). Furthermore, in a brief note on BOGDANOVIĆ's French translation of the 'Sindbādnāma', Françoise AUBIN outlines the intention of Zahīrī's stories in these words:

Leur but n'est, sans aucun doute, pas tant d'enseigner la justice aux grands de ce monde que d'apprendre à tout homme que son malheur est inscrit en lui s'il ne cesse de 'galoper sur la monture du désir'. Sous une apparence charmante, le message ultime est profondément misogyne, prêchant l'abstinence sexuelle et la méfiance envers la femme: si une vieille femme paraît occasionnellement faire preuve de sagesse, c'est tout simplement qu'un petit garçon lui soufflé sa leçon!¹⁷

To be sure, these elements, Sufi-mystic teaching and misogynistic preaching, are present, but they are only two among many other literary motifs that make up the book.

Modern studies on the 'Sindbādnāma' approach it often as an anti-feminine compilation, a misogynistic collection of tales subverting the female gender. I, however, propose that Zahīrī's work, despite containing a few tales which are prejudiced against women, is not predominantly misogynistic and that it is, above all, an example of a 'mirror for princes'.¹⁸ It can be read as a book of instruction in statecraft and proper conduct for the princes and sons of the nobles, and from there for everyone else. This aspect of the book has not been sufficiently taken into consideration so far.

¹⁵ Marzolph and Leeuwen 2005, p. 704.

¹⁶ Lundt 2003, p. 512.

¹⁷ Aubin 1987.

¹⁸ Even in the Spanish 'Sendebār', as Robey 2014, p. 40, proposes, it is the theme of good governance through the avoidance of *saña* (frenzy, senselessness) that emerges as the unifying topic rather than the theme of misogyny.

2 *Zahīrī's 'Sindbād-nāma': The Frame Story*

The framework narrative that prepares the platform for the other stories is this:¹⁹ late in life and after long, earnest praying and offerings, the 100-something-years-old legendary King of Kings, Kūrdīs (for which OP. Kūrush, i.e. Cyrus, has been suggested, as in the Syriac version), finally receives the child he had longed for all his life. The prince's mother dies after he is born. He is given to the care of nursemaids. At the unusual age of twelve, he is sent to school. For ten years, all efforts to teach him fail. Another royal tutor teaches him for an unspecified long period of time, but he fails too. Then the teacher realises that the prince's star of destiny (his particular stellar constellation) had been in decline all this time, causing his lack of aptitude for learning. So he requests that the king and the court grant him yet another six months to prove that the prince is indeed capable of learning all the arts and sciences that he needs for his political career in a short period of time (in other words, being a noble prince, he does have the *xvarenaḥ*, the fiery essence of kingship; see below). He succeeds in making the prince erudite in all sciences, but at the day of examination, once again the prince's star is in an inauspicious mansion, and he has to keep silent for seven days, otherwise his life would be in grave danger. The prince enters the court, and the teacher, fearing punishment for his unfulfilled promise, goes into hiding. The king's favourite wife or the queen takes her stepson into her private chambers, allegedly to try to convince him to talk. She announces her love for the prince and tries to seduce him, to no avail. Rebuffed and fearing retribution, the queen accuses him to the king of attempting to violate her. The prince, doomed to silence, is condemned to death. His life is saved daily by the seven wise men, the viziers and advisors who take turns with the king's wife in telling him stories in order to secure a stay of execution of the royal decree by entertaining the king through seven days with tales showing the harmfulness of hasty actions and the wickedness of women; the queen, meanwhile, recounts stories to offset those of the sages.²⁰ The motifs of rescue-by-narrating-stories as well as that of pushing-towards-death-by-narrating-stories are launched. On the eighth day, the ill-doomed period is past; the prince, who has remained silent up to that time,²¹ speaks in his own defence, and the queen is found guilty.

19 The frame story of the 'Sindbād-nāma' is present in 'Gesta Romanorum', a collection of tales from the 13th or 14th c.; cf. Gesta Romanorum.

20 Cf. Perry 1960, pp. 97 f.

21 Oddly enough, the prince does talk once with the queen and threatens her when she proclaims her love for him; however, this breaking of silence remains without consequence (Zahīrī 1948, pp. 69 f.).

Under this frame narrative, Zāhīrī's 'Sindbādnāma' includes thirty-four short embedded stories used as *exempla*. The stories are told by the seven viziers (a total of fifteen), by the queen (seven), by the sage Sindbād (six), and by the prince (six). The central characters in the stories are: humans (nineteen), human–animal interaction (seven), animals (five), and human–ghoul and fairy interaction (three). In this genre, animals and physical objects are ascribed with capabilities of human behaviour such as thinking, acting, and speaking. Not being human, they are then presented so that humans can face and look at them objectively and, by doing so, gain insight.²² Each allegorical story has a didactic and exhortatory function, the message often encapsulated at the end or at the beginning of the tale. For example, in the story of 'The Fox, the Fish, and the Monkey', the lesson is said to be not to become proud by the praise of people, for, as the proverb says: "The kings have no escape from bondage and imprisonment; and the subjects have no choice but to find a morsel to eat."²³ That is to say, from time to time, kings face serious problems, while the subjects have to have their sustenance one way or another.

Both antagonists, the queen who pushes the prince towards death and the sages who try to save him, use *exempla* in pursuing their goals. STEINMETZ and JAUNZEMS in their respective studies on 'SWM' have put the thesis forward that the narrator of the stories is contrasting the "unacceptable" examples of the queen with those of the sages, with the intention to show how the *exemplum* can be misused.²⁴ In this approach, the *exempla* are regarded as part of the main arguments of the conflicting parties, which are themselves examples. This interpretation does not apply to the Persian 'Sindbādnāma', for the queen's *exempla* are as effective as those of her counterparts in influencing the king.

The central theme of the tales that form the body of the book may have initially or at some point been to demonstrate the cunningness and disloyalty of women, but the present Persian collection has stories that do not fit that plan. The 9th-century historian al-Ya'qūbī (d. 897) knew 'The Book of Sindbād' as 'Makr al-nisā' ("The Craft and Malice of Women").²⁵ Contrary to the misogynistic expectation that the Arabic title 'Makr al-nisā' evokes, in Zāhīrī's book, seventeen out of the thirty-four embedded stories offer moral or practical advice that is unrelated to gender; only eight are on women's wickedness and craftiness, while four tell of their virtue and righteousness. In the remaining five stories, the positive or negative outcomes of mischievous behaviour on the part of the actors are equally shared by men and women, or, we may say, focus on 'double infidelity'. Despite

22 See Boor 1966, p. 4.

23 Zāhīrī 1948, p. 48.

24 Steinmetz 2000; Jaunzems 1984.

25 al-Ya'qūbī 1883, I, p. 105, says that the king Kūsh, a contemporary of Sindbād the Wise, compiled a book which he called 'Makr al-nisā'.

some occasional harsh comments on the female sex,²⁶ the general ambiance of Zāhīrī's work seems to be neutral rather than prejudiced against women. Interpolations and manipulation of the original tales in later recensions have changed the tone of the book over the course of time.

As we noted above, in Zāhīrī, each of the seven viziers relates two stories, one on the dangers of rash decisions and the other on the mendacity of women. The queen counters them by telling stories which reflect on the corruption and dishonesty of high officials. Now, if a copyist of the text decides to drop, for example, the first stories told by the viziers, then the overall emphasis of his copy would change, and it would become more unfavourable towards women. This is exactly what Nakhshabī (c. 1330) has done in his 'Ṭūṭīnāma', where, by shortening and selecting portions of the 'ZSN', he has created a strong anti-female version of the 'Sindbādnāma'. The fate of the queen is a case in point for such manipulations: in Zāhīrī and the Greek 'Syntipas', she is humiliated and let go; in the Syriac and in Nakhshabī's 'Ṭūṭīnāma', she is hanged; in the Spanish 'Sendebār', she is boiled in a caldron alive; and in Arabic and Hebrew, she is forgiven.

'Sindbādnāma' is written by men for men, from a male standpoint in a male-dominated society; nonetheless, women have an active and colourful presence in it. In fact, it becomes evident that, by narrating seven stories, the female antagonist (or protagonist?) is the single most prolific speaker. She is given as much space and time to defend herself as the others. She is resourceful and uses her powers of speech, tact, wit, and politics to achieve her goal. She is not afraid to talk about corruption among the king's officials and advisors. That she is forgiven at the end reduces the gravity of her mischief radically. Moreover, in a battle of narration that means life or death for the prince, and interestingly enough is compared to a game of chess²⁷ between the queen and the viziers,²⁸ she single-handedly and successfully counters the strategies of ten powerful and wise men from the beginning to the very end. She alone is the equipoise to them all. This shows her power and centrality to the plot. She loses the battle of sexes only due to supernatural intervention, not weakness of argument. Her stories impart the same efficacy as others in influencing the king's daily decisions. Furthermore, out of the thirty-four *exempla*, no more than eight – that is, less than one quarter – can be classified as misogynistic tales, and if we counter these with the four which the

26 Statements such as: the Devil is puzzled by women's cunningness, treachery and tricks (Zāhīrī 1948, pp. 99f.); women are deficient in intellect and religion (*ibid.*, p. 112); women are the authors of deceit and treachery; they are sly, their nature is the nest of cunningness, and their instinct is a mine of tricks (*ibid.*, p. 128).

27 Interesting from a gender point of view. In chess, the Queen is actually the strongest piece that protects a fairly immobile king. Coincidence?

28 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

book has in favour of women,²⁹ the weight of the negative ones becomes even less significant. So are we justified to extend the impact of a few unfavourable stories to the whole volume, and stamp it as misogynistic? Obviously not; for the book is, as will be shortly shown, a Mirror: a didactic text meant to instruct, through aphorisms and fables, how to rule justly and wisely.

The author Zahīrī of Samarqand was a court official in charge of the secretarial bureau (*ṣāhib dīwān rasā'il*) of the local king Qilij Ṭamghāj Khāqān Rukn al-Dīn Mas'ūd of Āl-e Afrāsiyāb, ruler of Samarqand in Transoxania from 1160 to 1178; his was a high-ranking position, and he could act as an advisor to the king. He dedicated both his 'Sindbādnāma' and his other important political tractate, 'Aghraḍ al-siyāsa fi a-rāḍ al-riyāsa' ('Goals of Governance in the Science of Leadership'),³⁰ to this king. Zahīrī's introduction to the 'Sindbādnāma', which is the longest chapter of the book, is an encomium on Qilij Ṭamghāj.

Zahīrī's 'Sindbādnāma' is best qualified as a Mirror. He considered his source, the 10th-century lost Persian version of Abū al-Fawāris Fanārūzī, to be too plain in style and void of artistic excellence. Hence, he decided to 'beautify' it by transforming it into formalistic and highly ornate rhymed prose. Following the current literary style of his time, he heavily interposed his plain Persian source with verses of the Qur'ān, prophetic *ḥadīth*, and Arabic and Persian poems and proverbs; thus, he truly amplified and transformed the character of the original and enlarged it. His style is diffuse and full of fanciful expressions and imagery. His authorial display of erudition, part of which is the excessive use of archaic and rarely used Arabic and Persian terms, is most prominent in the dedicatory words to his patron. This is presented in an ornamented style and flamboyant poetic images, where pink pearls and odalisques of celestial beauty alternate with descriptive or moralising Persian and Arabic verses and *sūras* of the Qur'ān.³¹ It is here in the introduction that Zahīrī outlines his purpose for composing the book. The long and pretentious nature of the introduction is perhaps one of the reasons why the author's primary intention has been overlooked, for some readers afford to easily bypass it and so miss the central project of the work.

29 In some stories, women are portrayed as trustworthy, resourceful, decent, and with foresight. In the famous tale 'Lion's Trace' (which also appears with different attributions several times in the 'Thousand and One Nights'), the married woman, whose love is solicited by a libertine king, uses a trick to dissuade him from his plan and so stays unsullied (*ibid.*, pp. 258–264). This parable is explained as teaching that not everything which enters the heart of man is true. Horowitz 1911, p. 287, considered this as a sign of the pre-Islamic existence of the book in Iran. The other positive tales are 'The Two Partridges' (Zahīrī 1948, pp. 119–128), 'The Three Thieves and the Old Woman' (*ibid.*, pp. 293–298), and 'The Sandal-wood Merchant and the Thieves' (*ibid.*, pp. 299–314).

30 Zahīrī 1970.

31 Aubin 1987.

Zahīrī introduces his book as a “treasury of wisdom”,³² but not as ‘Makr al-nisā’. He describes his pre-existing Persian model as a book on the principles of governing, justice and fairness in politics. “Thus I adopted”, he says,

this collection of magnificent words of wisdom and wonderful laws on which lay the foundations of sovereignty and firmness of principles of politics, as well as assurance for the interests of religion and government. I embellished it with proverbs, poems and entertaining accounts, so that anyone who reads it and contemplates its message takes away its learning in accordance to the level of his aptitude and care; the learned and the ignorant will derive benefit from it in accordance to their wits, for its manifold benefits are for all the people and its profitability is universal.³³

After hammering home the theoretical underpinning for his work, Zahīrī outlines a philosophical setting, which follows Ismā‘īlī doctrines,³⁴ and precedes to expound on the intrinsic ties between sovereignty and prophecy. He cites the famous Arabic saying *al-dīn wal-mulk taḥamān*, “religion and kingship are twins”, which he attributes to the Prophet Muḥammad.³⁵ This motto is much older and goes back to the first Sasanian king Ardashīr, who, in his famous ‘Ahdnāma’ or Political Testament, updated in the late 6th century, addresses his son Shāpūr:

O my son, know that religion and kingship are two brothers, and neither can dispense with the other. Religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship protects religion. For whatever lacks a foundation must perish, and whatever lacks a protector disappears.³⁶

We may recall that in the Zurvanite doctrine, Ohrmazd and Ahriman, the twin sons of Zurvan, represent spirituality and sovereignty in the world. Thus, it is not surprising that Zahīrī, after acknowledging this principle, immediately cites the mythic King Gushtāsp and completes the above motto by adding: “Religion is strengthened by kingship, and kingship endures with religion”.³⁷

32 Zahīrī 1948, p. 22.

33 Ibid., p. 24.

34 See on this Zakeri 2012.

35 Zahīrī 1948, p. 4.

36 al-Mas‘ūdi 1965, I, 289; Zaehner 1955, p. 36, n. 3.

37 Zahīrī 1948, p. 5; cf. ‘Ahd Ardashīr, p. 53. The Pahlavi original of this maxim is preserved in the ‘Dinkard’: *ērīh xwadāyīh mehenīdārīhā’ az dēn; ‘ohrmazd bandagīh’ <ud> ‘māzdēsnih*

Zahīrī follows the principle of *farzāna-khudāi* ("wise rule") in accordance with the conventional concept of an ideal king in pre-Islamic Persian sacral kingship. When addressing the king, both the viziers and the queen constantly resort to the king's justice.³⁸ Sindbād says:

Scholars have said that in a city where five things are not available, it is not a good place of residence for a wise man. The first of these is a just and capable king.³⁹

The Arabic *'adāla* ("justice") here is a substitute for the Persian *dād* ("law"), which is not in its original sense synonymous with it. The passage from one to the other goes through a long and arduous process. Anūshirwān, the *Dādwar*, is the Law-giver, who becomes the Just (*Dādgar*), an attribute transferred to him in his Islamic garb. The role assigned the ruler, whose first and foremost worth is justice, is that of the 'observer' over the primeval *paymān* ("treaty, accord") between the forces of good and evil in Iranian thought. He is a judge *dādwar*, who must be *dādgar*; otherwise, the entire social system would collapse upon itself. The ruler's *farr-e īzādī* (Av. *xvarenah*), "divine effulgence", is the glory and force assigned to him in order to enable him to fulfill his duty as a reliable and honest judge. The Iranians used the term *farr* for sovereignty; their iconography frequently showed their monarchs receiving a winged disc, representing *farr*, from God.⁴⁰ So, as the third vizier declares, the king is possessor of divine inspiration (*ilhām-e ilāhī*) and recipient of godly help and approval of kingship (*maqarr-e nuṣrat wa ta'īd pādshāhī*), that is, he has a divine mandate to rule.⁴¹ This is none other than *farr-e īzādī* or the divine glory of kingship, a qualification without which no good kingship is to be expected. The sovereignty of the ruler on earth mirrors that of the dominant deity in the universe. Thus, the king should not punish (*siyāsa*) impetuously or on suspicion, for this is far from justice. When the king suspects someone of wrongdoing, he shall jail him first and investigate, for "anything hastily done before the truth is known is not well done"; only after thorough investigation and fair trial will nobles and men of religion, the powerful and the weak, trust him and acknowledge his just and prudent rule. If the king be not lord in propriety,

dēn' az xwadāyih. Dinkard III, p. 58. For a slightly different transliteration and translation of the passage, see Molé 1963, pp. 51 f.

³⁸ Zahīrī 1948, pp. 77, 85 f., 134, etc.

³⁹ The other factors are: 2. flowing waters and prosperous fields; 3. learned men who act upon their learning without greed, with devoutness; 4. wise sympathetic physicians; and 5. generous and merciful people (*ibid.*, p. 64).

⁴⁰ Streusand 2011, p. 13.

⁴¹ Zahīrī 1948, p. 146.

he will be questioned for his acts in this and the next world, and regret over his unholy acts will be of no use to him.⁴²

Zahīri's project is to educate the prince along the line of this ancient tradition, combining two methods in presenting advice. The didacticism present in the book assumes two forms. The first is direct didacticism as in his 'Aghraḍ al-siyāsa', in which the practical instruction or moral lesson is presented directly via wisdom sentences, which, in addition to standards for the proper conduct of the sovereign, set forth normative principles, functions, and benefits of good governance. The second form is indirect didacticism: the narrative embedded presentation that illustrates the ways of thinking and acting of a wise ruler by exemplary situations in tales, fables, or historical anecdotes.

'Sindbādnāma' is saturated with diverse maxims on justice, charity, alms, equity, prudence, speech, friendship, love, and so forth. It uses *exempla*, fables, parables, proverbs, and proverbial phrases as vehicles for conveying instructive moral and political ideas. The short narratives that make up the body of the book are also dotted with words of wisdom, used to convey comportment and leadership values expected of future rulers. The book contains a large assortment of Persian and Arabic proverbs in prose and verses. One poet warns: "Injustice is fire! Do not demean its pettiness | Many a flame of fire has burned cities",⁴³ and the other reminds: "He who sows thistle does not reap the grapes".⁴⁴ The abundant application of concise sapiential statements, some of which can be traced back to much earlier times, has stamped the quality of a secular Mirror on Zahīri's book. When the vizier or sage tells a story, its object is to assist the narrator in setting the king right in some sentiment in which he has gone wrong. The rules of courtly conduct enclosed within apologues followed the same objective in educating leaders. For example, the sixth vizier declares:

I wonder how His Excellency can be so easily deceived in a clear and simple case such as this, and let the light of his bright intelligence be dimmed by the falsehoods of a liar defective in brains (i.e. the queen)! What would the king's enemies think about this! They would think of him as a simple minded and fickle person, and so gather their forces together and rebel against him. And the king would face what happened to the 'foolish ascetic, peri, and his wife' [there follows the story of 'Three Wasted Wishes'].⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., p. 147.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 153, 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 226 f.

The *exemplum* is clearly subordinated to the intended message and is there to enhance it.

Zahiri wraps his short stories with numerous aphorisms and sententious remarks, at times very long, such that these supplementary additions make up the greater volume of his work. As a result of this enthusiasm, which has given the book a unique characteristic, even if we read it without its enclosed *exempla* we can still take away a good portion of the author's political perception and worldview.

3 The King in the Frame Story

The narrative starts with the serious concerns of a king for the future of his kingdom. He is very old, and despite having had many wives, he has no son to follow on the throne after him. We witness the efforts of a departing king to secure the continuity of kingship in his line. When God finally gives him a son, he applies every resource at his disposal to make sure that his heir will receive the best education available in the empire to become as learned and qualified for the position of the king as possible. Upon entrusting the education of his son to Sindbād the philosopher, the king orders him:

You shall explain and teach him moral virtues, virtuous qualities, standards of politics, principles of sovereignty, etiquette of kingship, subtleties of religious laws, and the truth of mystic path, so that he becomes qualified and cultivated.⁴⁶

Sindbād promises the king:

I take it upon myself to teach the prince all that which constitutes the etiquette of kingship and the qualifications for the kings, such as praiseworthy morals, virtuous qualities, the finesse of sciences, admirable dispositions, the secrets of astrology, the knowledge of degrees (of the stars and the sign of Zodiac), the minutiae of the calendar, the best principles of medicine, the crux of the properties of spices, and other things.⁴⁷

Then, in order to make the learning easier for the prince, Sindbād builds a unique hexagonal house with flat and polished surfaces, on the sides of which he depicts

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 61 f.

the images and symbols of sciences to be taught in detail, including: 1. astronomy/astrology; 2. types of worldly transactions (economy); 3. medicine and properties of drugs; 4. music and tones; 5. geometry; and 6. politics and laws.⁴⁸ This is a partial list of the study programme for the sons of Persian nobility in the Sasanian period that we find in many other books.⁴⁹ Education is seen as the best means for forming the character of a wise person. Needless to say, in the ‘Sindbādnāma’, the wisdom of the sages remains secular in kind.

The king does not narrate any stories, but the stories are all addressed to him at his courtly assembly, and it is his daily verdict over the cases he hears that moves the narrative forward. Characters involved in the frame are all defined in relation to him: *his* son, *his* wife, *his* seven ministers, and *his* chosen philosopher. Being a model of rectitude, he listens carefully and neutrally to all sides, accusers and defendants, and is the final judge over the cases presented at the court. He does not hesitate to condemn even his beloved son and heir to the throne, not because he is impulsive or erratic but, rather, because the court decorum has been violated and he has to restore it to order. He may appear gullible at times, but he is neither imbecile nor capricious. After the precarious trial situation of his son is over and the tension is resolved, he is the one who puts the qualifications of the prince to test and, when fully satisfied with his maturity in wisdom and ripeness to rule, steps down from the throne and hands the kingship over to him. The king’s ultimate wish is fulfilled; he is the chief winner. ‘All’s well that ends well!’

After the examination session is over and the crown prince is exonerated and demonstrates his intellectual fitness and the wisdom he learned from Sindbād, the old king asks Sindbād what he wants as a reward. The wise instructor answers with the golden rule: “Do not do to others what you do not want others do to you.” It is after this that they make an alliance upon which the king should rule in accordance with the principle of ‘wise rule’. This simple principle⁵⁰ is seen as the foundation of wisdom and just rule, and as long as the king follows it, people submit to his rule.

48 Ibid., p. 65.

49 See for example Gutas 2006, p. 99.

50 In the ‘Syntipas’, this is one of the ten propositions which sum up wisdom (Perry 1960, p. 77). For the rather complicated literary history of the ‘golden rule’ and its context as found in several versions of the ‘Sindbādnāma’, see Lerner 2020; Gensler 2013.

4 Concluding Remarks

It is characteristic of classical Persian Mirrors that they almost always involve a king, his son, the queen, the vizier(s), or other members of the royal household. This is the case, in addition to the 'Sindbādnāma', also in the 'Kalilah and Dimnah', 'Bakhtyār-nāma', 'Bilawhar and Būdāsaf', 'Marzbān-nāma', and the 'Thousand and One Nights'. There is frequently a young and inexperienced prince who, at the end of the story, becomes wise and ripe, capable of succeeding his regal father. In the 'Thousand and One Nights,' for example, the tyrannical and unpredictable king becomes 'humane' by the power of story-telling and returns to his duty of ruling the country with justice. The second feature is that there is always a wise man (or men) next to the king and the prince who takes the charge of training and guiding the immature prince. When the life story of Buddha reached Iran, the divine prince was alone, but in the new environment it was required that he be accompanied by a wise teacher, so now we find next to him the wise Bilawhar.⁵¹ 'Sindbādnāma' reveals both these features. It has its *Sitz im Leben* at the royal court. The story unfolds at a king's palace and engages its residents: the king, the queen, the prince, the ministers, and the sage instructor Sindbād. Zahiri uses the figure of Sindbād next to this ensemble to articulate his ideas on monarchy.

Within Zahiri's frame-plot, each story constitutes a complete and rounded narrative of its own yet functions also as a means of delivering the narrator's intention. Women's sexual assault ignites the serial narration of the short stories; however, they are all subordinated to the main project of the book, the education of a prince. The composite work as a unit is more important than its individual components. The relation of every separate fable should be made subservient to the main purpose of the work. The narrated stories are entertaining but not for entertainment. They provide moral doctrine combined with shrewd practical wisdom. Their ultimate efficacy is shown in that a crude and callow child of the royal house grows wise by listening to them. The prince receives moral and practical political instruction by means of *exempla*, parables, and fables and matures into an intelligent and responsible adult. The challenges that he faces serve to test his patience and resilience, instruct him in administrative skills, and teach him sexual restraint and a proper attitude towards women. It is the testing punishment (seven days of pending death) that leads to his vindication, redemption, and eventual rise to power and prominence. The true initiation of the prince takes place via the

51 That is to say, the Persian version introduces a key new figure, Bilawhar (later Barlaam), as a teacher of the prince, in contrast to the Indian texts in which the prince discovers nirvana on his own. Here, he does not become a monk anymore but marries and procures a son. Furthermore, he is accompanied by a wise man who transmits parables and teachings. See Blois 2009, p. 14.

teaching conducted by Sindbād as well as the stories that teach him all he has to know to be able to continue his life as a royal heir.

The courtly teachings in the ‘Sindbādnāma’ mirrored the model of ancient Persian political wisdom for princes and magistrates. They were intended primarily to be used and understood as Mirrors, ethical edifiers to instruct young royals in proper and virtuous compartment in an entertaining manner. However, in the wake of demotisation of the king’s ethos, the paraenetic instructions could be understood as a teaching programme for all subjects, as Zahirī indicates. Thus, ‘Sindbādnāma’, like ‘Kalilah and Dimnah’, can take a place of honour along with the instructive and enjoyable stories that teach social and political competence to the princes and the sons of grandees, and other interested readers.

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