

IRAN

GUPPY, SHUSHA. *The Secret of Laughter: Magical Tales from Classical Persia*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2005. xix + 209 pages. List of Persian words, notes, glossary. Cloth €20.00; ISBN 1-85043-427-1.

Long ago, in a girls' dormitory at the University of Tehran in the middle of the 1970s, I happened to hear a fresh-sounding, sweet female voice emanating from a cassette player singing Iranian folksongs in a uniquely unaffected way that was so different to both the popular crooners of the day and the traditional style of the classical Iranian music. My roommate told me that the singer's name was "Shusha." After that, I always thought of her as the Joan Baez of Iran, and I eventually came across her original record (GUPPY 1973).

Shusha participated in making the music of a Oscar-nominated documentary on the migration of the Bakhtiari tribe in Iran (HOWARTH and KOFF 1976). Her two prose works, a childhood memoir (GUPPY 1988) and the present book under review, advocate the traditional culture and folkways of her old country in a characteristically nostalgic vein.

Shusha's latest book is a collection of eighteen popular tales and legends from the repertoire of her family storytellers. They are retold by the author in a florid, occasionally pious, and generally over-explanatory style with the intention of sharing with the reader the cherished stories of her childhood in an upper middle-class setting in Tehran during the 1940s.

As the subtitle indicates, they are mainly tales of magic: most of them are well-known Iranian folktales and belong to the common stock of Middle Eastern folk narratives with parallels in international folklore. Several of them are complex novella tales, such as the first one, "The Padishah and His Three Daughters" (1–22), which is a combination of Types 923 B (The Princess Who Was Responsible for her Own Fortune; a story similar to that of King Lear, but with a happy ending; also a popular tale in India) with Type 986 (Lazy Husband) and 910 B (The Servant's Good Counsels).

The second story, "The Thief and the Cunning Bride" (23–38), is another variation on the theme of the clever and virtuous wife, but with a touch of horror, as the heroine is a kind of Basil Maiden (Type 879) with a revengeful suitor (Motifs K 432 and K 525).

Other stories feature male protagonists. "The Talking Skull" (39–54) is a story of predestination (M 391, F 559.4.1), the miraculous birth (T 547), and the interpretation of the king's dream (D 1813 1.1, H 617) by a clairvoyant youth. This tale is documented from Caucasus, Turkey, and Egypt and is identified by Marzolph as Type 875 D1. It already appears in the fourteenth-century Indo-Persian collection, the *Tutiname* of Nakhsabi (MARZOLPH 1984, 157).

Other stories of fate are "The Man Whose Luck Had Gone to Sleep" (117–27) and "The Good Vizir and His Pride" (133–43). The first is a well-known tale (*Type 461) which, in contrast to other earlier versions, has a happy ending here. In these stories, Luck (*bakht* in Persian) appears in a personified form reflecting ancient Iranian belief.

The story that gives the book its title (73–84) contains such popular narrative motifs as H 341 (Suitor Test: Making Princess Laugh) and D 615.1. (Transformation Contest Between Magicians).

“The Good Young Man and the Heavenly Woman” (150–54) is the story of the supernatural wife (type 400, cf. Marzolph *832 A), which is also widely documented in Japan.

Among the stories are also pious legends (“The King and the Prophet Khizr,” 85–94; “The Laughing Scarecrow,” 144–49), love romances (“Haroon al-Rashid’s Favourite Concubine,” 66–72; “The Story of Bijan and Manijeh,” 186–202), as well as a few realistic stories with humorous touches about handling rather tricky family situations. Stories such as “The Cruel Mother-in-Law” (95–106, Type 903 C, Mot S51), “The Lazy Wife” (107–116, Motifs W 111.3 and H 1416), “I Know That Already” (128–32, Type 1374* about the young wife who does not how to cook), and “The Fortune-Teller’s Fortune” (171–85, type 1641, a popular story in Iran about the poor man who became a sham fortune-teller/Rammal/under pressure from his wife) belong to the latter category.

We are told in the Foreword (xiv) that the original narrators were mostly female relatives of the author, but Shusha is much indebted to her late nurse maid Zahra for her story-telling gifts. Zahra came to Tehran from Mazanderan, Northern Iran, and knew many unique stories that had not been heard elsewhere (x).

Two stories in the collection are admittedly prosaic retellings of famous episodes from classical Persian poetry. “Sultan Mahmud and the Band of Robbers” (164–70) is taken from the last (sixth) chapter of the *Masnavi* of Rumi, and “The Story of Bijan and Manijeh” is from the *Shahname* of Firdausi.

The texts include many explanations and embellishments for readers, but effort is shown to retain and interpret the original Persian expressions. I would like to point out here that the correct form of the Persian phrase “deadly poison” is *zahr-e halahel*, rather than *zahr-e halal*, which appears in the text (41) and the glossary (209).

Beside providing entertaining reading, the stories also aim at transmitting a sort of moral and “sentimental” education that both upholds traditional values and celebrates a romantic notion of “love conquers all” in a somewhat optimistic and heart-warming tone.

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Kinga MÁRKUS-TAKESHITA
Sagamihara City
Kanagawa, Japan