REVIEW ARTICLE

The Persian Literary Riddle: Marginal Notes and Critical Remarks on a Recent Study

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The content of the book

In a recent study, Courtly Riddles. Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry,1 the author, A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, deals with a subject little studied until now in Persian literature, the logaz ‘riddle’, and tackles it from an interesting perspective, not only considering the logaz in itself, but studying it in connection with other ‘genres’, or thematic genres, of Persian lyric poetry, in particular, vASF ‘laudatory description’. This study, although supplying rich material for research, remains unsatisfactory because it does not establish a critical background to the history of Persian lyrical poetry or a sound theoretical framework.

The book is composed of five chapters and a brief conclusion (all references are to the first edition). Chapter I (pp. 7–16), presents the thesis of the work, namely that ‘the extended literary riddle in Persian poetry sprang out of the genre of vASF’ and that—in its turn—‘riddles enrich the poetic language by providing a context and motive of figurative language as a means of not naming an object’ (pp. 8–9).

In Chapter II (‘Inimitable Simplicity’, pp. 17–74), the theoretical basis of the work is laid. It begins with a short sketch on the development of the three styles of Persian poetry (pp. 17–20), with emphasis on what is supposed to be the role of riddle poetry in it: ‘the end of the sabk-i Khurâsâni, characterised by a strong inclination towards the use of figurative language and extended metaphor, coincides with an increase in the incorporation of riddles in qasidas and the use of descriptive poetry (vASF). My hypothesis is that the popularity of vASF and riddles generated a change from the simple style of Khurâsân to the complex and intricate metaphors of the Irâqi style’ (p. 18). The author then analyses how logaz is defined in classical Persian rhetorical manuals (pp. 20–22) and presents in English translation some of the most ancient riddles attested in Persian literature (pp. 28–30).

In the section entitled ‘From Description to Riddling’ (pp. 31–68), the author seeks to show ‘how the plain literary style of the early Ghaznavid poets, which was meant to

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1Amsterdam, Rozenberg Publishers & West Lafayette [IN], Purdue University Press, 2008, 256 pp., ISBN 987-90-5170-858-5. New edition, with different pagination but no changes in the text (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010, 228 pp. ISBN 978-908-72-8087-1). This second edition makes no mention of any first one.
depict objects as vividly and concretely as possible, turned into an abstract and puzzling style, forming riddles rather than visual descriptions’ (p. 31). He analyses some descriptive passages from a poem by Farroxi, compared with one by Moxtāri, on a palace; from a poem by Moxtāri, on the pen; from Anvari, on a picture; and some descriptions of fruits by Manucehri. He aims to show that ‘the language became abstract, to such an extent that the poems can better be categorised as riddles rather than “descriptions”’ (p. 38).

In the last section of this chapter (pp. 68–74), the author analyses ‘the interactions between riddles and metaphors’ (p. 8), repeating once more the book’s thesis—which remains unproved—about the role of riddles in the development of Persian poetry: ‘Persian literature underwent a change in style at two junctures: during the twelfth century and the sixteenth century [in connection with the rise respectively of the Iraqi and the Indian style]. In both periods, when riddles became popular, the language changed to a more figurative poetic style. Or vice versa: when the poetic language changed, riddles became popular’ (p. 69).

Chapter III (pp. 77–92) deals with riddles in romances. In Chapter IV (pp. 93–161), the author chooses some riddles constituting the first part (nasib) of qasīdes by different poets. Those chosen are Mas‘ud-e Sa‘d-e Salman, of whom three logaz are translated and commented on, and Amir Mo‘ezzi, of whom seven riddles are given in translation with a commentary. Chapter IV ends with an analysis of the first 29 couplets of Sanā‘i’s Seyr al-‘Ebād. The author gives the following explanation for this choice: ‘In addition to several metaphors and symbols in the body of the poem, which are sometimes hard to decipher and are puzzles on their own, the poem’s introduction is couched in the form of a riddle of twenty-nine couplets. Here the poet addresses the wind as a messenger, using figurative language’ (p. 150).

In the fifth and last chapter (pp. 163–226), the author presents the work by Moxtāri Gaznavi (ca. 1074–1120), and in particular analyses, not very clearly, the Honar-name, a short masnavi in which the poet inserts 10 riddles on the principal virtues of (seemingly) the dedicatee of the poem and the symbols of his power. I do not have the edition of Moxtāri’s divān at my disposal, and therefore will not deal specifically with this chapter.

**Definition of the subject of study**

The author deals with different literary phenomena, only limiting himself to asserting the existence of different types of riddles: ‘It appears that there were several types of riddles in classical Persian [sic], some of which, such as riddles in romances and in philosophical and mystical narratives, are never discussed by classical literary theorists’ (pp. 7–8). In Chapter II, having presented in a couple of pages the study of logaz as defined in the most ancient treatises on rhetorics (by Rāduyānī, Vaṭvāt and Šams-e Qeys), the author gives his personal classification of the different types of riddle in Persian poetry, introduced by this statement: ‘In Persian poetical manuals, the authors distinguish between the different poetic forms in which riddles are couched’ (p. 22). Such a statement is not to be found in the text of the classical Persian theoreticians, at least as summarized by the author, and it would be interesting to know his source for it. Anyway, the author distinguishes: (1) ‘riddles that occur in the nasib or the opening sections of a qaṣida’ (p. 23); (2) ‘A second type of riddle is used in epic poetry with the aim of testing the intelligence of a person within the narrative’ (p. 25); (3) ‘A third type of riddle with a fixed form occurs for the first
time in the twelfth century in ethico-philosophical epics, and was probably invented by ‘Uthmân Mukhtāri, in his Hunar-nāma’ (p. 26); and (4) ‘A fourth type of riddle is usually couched in the form of quatrains or qiṭ’a (‘a fragment of a qaṣida’)’ (p. 27).

The absence of a good grip on the subject continues as the argument progresses. ‘What were regarded as the essential aspects of the genre’ (p. 22), as the author sums them up, appear to be incomplete and arbitrary. For instance, he says that ‘they [the Persian theoreticians] mention that lughaz occurs in the nasīb section of panegyrics’. But in his presentation of lughaz as defined by the theoreticians nowhere can such a statement be found. He seems to base himself on the definition of lughaz given in the Mo’jam, but in fact the only thing one reads there is that: ‘[Mo’ezzi] dar šefat-e qalam taṣbib-e qaṣide-i sāxte-ast’ (‘[Mo’ezzi] has made the taṣbib of a qaṣide on the description of the pen’ followed by the quotation of the famous riddle on the pen by Mo’ezzi.²

Finally, the author gives an imprecise translation of the passage in which Šams-e Qeys mentions the fundamental fact, stressed also by Vatvāt, namely, that a lughaz must be in the form of a question. Šams-e Qeys says: ‘A lughaz is when a concept (ma’ni) is asked in the clothing of an expression difficult (moškel) and ambiguous (motaṣābeh), in the form of a question (be ṭariq-e so’al)’ (pp. 426–427 of Qazvini and Modarres-e Ražavi’s edition).

The author, however, misunderstanding the adjective motaṣābeh, which is coordinated with the almost synonymous moškel ‘difficult’, and here means ‘obscure, ambiguous’, translates ‘... a difficult expression which resembles a question’ (p. 22, my emphasis).

At this point, for the sake of clarity I would like to propose my classification of the different literary phenomena the author deals with under the term ‘riddle’:

(1) Individual images (metaphors, comparisons, ...) which constitute a lughaz, about which the author theorizes when he speaks of metaphors and riddles (pp. 68–74, and 229–230 in the ‘Conclusion’). However, he does not provide any systematic study of these images, based on examples from texts.

(2) The lughaz in a narrow sense (in Italian: indovinello), i.e. an autonomous composition in verse, as, for example, the three anonymous riddles on a scale, a pair of scissors and a jug cited by Šams-e Qeys. These riddles can refer to any object, not only to the poetical objects of Persian lyrical language; and therefore they are really difficult to solve.

(3) The lughaz as a literary composition, usually forming the first part of a qaṣide (but on p. 164 the author quotes a series of riddles inserted in the madhī, or laudatory section, of a qaṣide by Moxtāri) or a part of any other poetic non-narrative composition. Actually, the riddles in the Honar-nāme by Moxtāri analysed in Chapter V seem to refer to the same themes characteristic of panegyrical qaṣides, and are no different, as regards their objects, function and language, from riddles in a qaṣide. This kind of lughaz seems to involve a limited stock of objects (pen, sword, fire, mirror...) and concepts (generosity, good will, courage and warrior abilities...), which are normally treated in a highly conventional way (Šams-e Qeys says that Mo’ezzi’s riddle on the pen is saxt zāher ‘very clear’), so that they can be simply considered as laudatory descriptions (vasf) or eulogies (madhī) presented in the form of a riddle.

(4) Riddles as a part of a narrative. Here—as the author rightly points out—the addressee of the riddle is a character in the story (typically a princess’s suitor, who

²Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Qeys-e Rāzī, Al-Mu’jam fi ma’āyir al-‘ajam, ed. Qazvini and Modarres-e Ražavi, Tehran 1360/1981-1982 (3rd edn), p. 427.
must solve a riddle to show his sagacity and marry the princess). For its objects, function and purposes, this kind of riddle is different from riddles in the meanings above, and in a study on riddles in lyrical poetry could be omitted. In any case, on this topic the author does not quote an important study by Jalal Xâleqi Moţlaq, Afsâne-ye bânu-ye heşâri va pišîne-ye qâleb-e adabi-e ân [The tale of the lady in the castle and the history of its literary form], ed. ‘A. Dehbâsi, in Soxanhâ-ye dirine, Tehrân 1388 (3rd edn) (1st edn 1381/2002–2003), pp. 167–175.

**Riddle and metaphor**

In analysing the riddle in its first meaning, i.e. as individual images constituting a logaz ‘riddle composition’, the author’s reference to the passage of the Poetics where Aristotle speaks of the relation between metaphor and riddle (Gr. ainigma) is very important. Probably partly misled by his (indirect) sources, however, he does not develop this important clue for his study. Aristotle defines the enigma as ‘connecting impossible things (adymata) when referring to real facts’ (Poetics, 22.I); and this, he says, can only be done through metaphor, or metaphoric language. Actually, he does not say that every metaphor, if obscure enough, is an enigma. The author, however, seems to believe that the distinction between riddle and metaphor depends on their greater or lesser obscurity, and that metaphors are intended to be clear, in contrast to riddles: ‘Riddles then serve to deceive and mystify. . ., metaphors to undeceive and unveil a hidden meaning’ (p. 73, my emphasis); or, in the book’s conclusion: ‘There appears to be a chiasmic [sic] dynamic between riddles and metaphors: metaphors are to depict and elucidate, while riddles cover the object of description’ (pp. 229–230, my emphasis). Of course this position is untenable. Metaphor, as any other figura of rhetorics, is not meant to unveil or elucidate its object. The figurative language of poetry has always something mysterious, is polysemic, and finally is based on an alteration in the normal relationship between a signifier and a signified, between an expression (lafz) or an image and its meaning (ma’ni). In spite of this, figurative language is not necessarily a riddle.

The author’s conviction that the distinction between riddle and metaphor depends on their being established or not in common language is untenable too: ‘Riddles are usually metaphors, or a cluster of metaphors, which have not passed into common use’ (p. 70). But there is no evidence that metaphors which have not passed into common use, usually, or indeed at all, are to be considered as riddles. Common use, in everyday life, suggests otherwise. When a popular Italian rock singer who performed with Pavarotti, recalling the moment when Pavarotti began to sing beside him on the stage, says: ‘Pavarotti ha aperto il turbo (P. switched on the turbojet engine)’, he creates a metaphor, not a riddle, even if no Italian dictionary would give in the entry turbo the equivalent ‘Pavarotti’s voice’, ‘a tenor’s voice’ or even ‘a stentorian voice’. Poetic language can be different. Persian classical poetry, in particular, is highly conventional, and many metaphors are so established in the language that they are registered in dictionaries: narges ‘narcissus’ means ‘the beloved’s eyes’; yâqut ‘ruby’, ‘the beloved’s lips’, etc. But poets treat the old images in ever new ways, create new connections between words and concepts, between old and new images, which are not to be considered as riddles merely because they are new. Just as there are more or less conventional metaphors, comparisons, images, there are also more or less conventional (i.e. easy to solve) riddles.

Aristotle, then, does not say that an enigma is only an obscure metaphor, or a metaphor that has not been established in common language. Quite the contrary, he
distinguishes metaphorical from ordinary language. Actually he says that the connection between a real fact and something impossible, which is characteristic of enigmas, can only be made through metaphoric language, as opposed to the ordinary one made up of words employed in their dominant and established meaning.

Aristotle’s statement could have given the author a good clue to the analysis of some typical images of logaz, which are built on impossible facts or even absurdities: ‘water resembling fire’ (‘Onşorî on the sword); ‘steel resembling silk’ (‘Onşorî on the sword); ‘a cloud raining tulips’ (Mo’ezzi on the sword); ‘a fire which dwells in water [= a crystal goblet]’ (Mo’ezzi on wine); ‘your mother is a mother to your father’ (Mas’ud-e Sa’d on fire); ‘an inanimate being, rich in talents’ (Mas‘ud-e Sa’d on a musical instrument) and so on. The author briefly treats this important question when commenting on Mas‘ud-e Sa’d’s riddle about a musical instrument: ‘Mas‘ud-e Sa’d’s description of the musical instrument is chiefly built upon literary figures of contrast and paradox. The poet starts with the paradox of an object that is simultaneously animate and inanimate, mute and eloquent’ (pp. 115–116). But he does not go beyond stray observations to provide a coherent study of typical images in literary riddles.

**Definition of ‘riddle’: its descriptive technique**

The author is right to emphasize the functional and typological analogies between *vasf* and *logaz*; he is also right to assert that the literary *logaz* sprang from *vasf*. This thesis, however, had already been put forward by the Iranian scholar Z. Mo’taman. ³

In order to study the particular descriptive technique of riddles, the author could have profited from a definition various sources (Anandaraj, the *Kaşšaf-e estelâhât al-fonun* by Tahânavi) give of *logaz*, which is quoted under the entry *logaz* in Dehxoda’s dictionary: ‘Loğaz, with *geyn* pointed (*mo’jamé*), according to rhetoricians is a metrical discourse which refers to the essence (*zât*) of anything, through mentioning the characteristic features of that thing, on condition that those descriptions assembled together be specific (*maxṣus*) for that essence, and that all together cannot be found in anything else except in it—though each one of them could be present (*mowjud*) also in something else; in such a way that a person with right understanding can pass from that discourse to that essence’. Therefore, a well-established descriptive technique of the riddle consists in giving a series of descriptions matching different objects, so as to leave open various possible solutions. Only one object, however, can match all the given descriptions—the object which represents the solution to the riddle.

Anyway, what remains unproven is the author’s thesis that riddles, in their turn, influenced the development of Persian poetry. The proof would require that riddles (i.e. true riddles) provided Persian poetry with new ‘poetical objects’, as, for example, a pair of scissors, or a jug, or beer; or that literary riddle compositions influenced the poetical treatment of old images and old genres. This is possible, but it should have been investigated starting from a critical definition of *logaz* and tackling the matter within the framework of a sound knowledge of the history of Persian lyrical poetry.

Perhaps also in order to strengthen his thesis about an influence of riddles on the development of Persian poetry, the author seems to consider as riddles many poetical descriptions that were not intended to be so, and any difficult or learned passage which is

³Z. Mo’taman, *Še’r va adab-e fāris*, Tebrîz 1346/1967–1968 [1st edn 1322/1943–1944], pp. 333–337, in particular p. 334.
subjectively obscure for us today. This approach, however, weakens the leading idea from which the work started out. The existence of a connection and also an interaction between riddles and poetical language can be a working hypothesis, but is not to be taken too literally. I would like to adduce an example of what I mean. A few decades ago, an Italian scholar, Francesco Orlando, published a small but interesting book entitled *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura*. In his book, Orlando takes Freud’s book on the joke (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, 1905) as a model for literary analysis. He shows that many of the mechanisms (puns, double entendre, substitutions, . . .), which act to create a joke, are the same as can be detected in the construction of a literary work; moreover, on the model of the important group of tendentious jokes, many literary works can be seen as the place where what is repressed (by society, religion, education. . .) re-emerges. But nowhere in his book does Orlando render his thesis banal by saying that a certain literary work or a single passage of it or an image is a joke.

I would like to underline that, in order for a text to be considered as a riddle, a clear intention should exist on the part of its author to submit a riddle to somebody, or at least to produce a riddle, even without expecting it to be solved, especially as riddles in *qasides* are often very simple, and the presentation in the form of a riddle appears to be only a rhetorical device. This intention is normally disclosed by the formula *cist ān. . .* ‘what is that?’, although—as rightly noted by the author (and others)—this formula (or analogous ones) may also be missing. But there are other linguistic and textual clues, not investigated by the author, which in poems seem to manifest such an intention. For example, at least in Mo‘ezzi’s riddles the imperative *ben(e)gar* ‘look at. . .’ is used with this function, in order to press for the hearer’s attention. At the beginning of a riddle, its object is often termed *gox̌ar* ‘substance’ or *peykar* ‘form’, as a device not to name it; this seems to be another mark of the poet’s intention to propose a riddle. Such terms are initially followed by very general descriptions or attributes, as *ṇavar* and *ḅi-ru* ‘animate’, going on with more specific, though surprising descriptions. The apostrophe (*xeš̌ab*) too can be considered as a way to begin the *lǒgaz*; according to Mo‘taman it probably represents a first stage in the Persian *lǒgaz*.5

When the early theoreticians of Persian literature say that the *lǒgaz* must be ‘in the form of a question’ they probably mean to refer to such an intention. A riddle cannot be casual, or depend on a hearer’s or reader’s subjective difficulty in understanding a given text. For this reason, many of the author’s statements seem to me unconvincing, at least on a theoretical level, as, for example, when he writes that: ‘The distinction between the two genres [*vasf* and riddle] is sometimes blurred, and in several poets there is no distinction, because their *vasf* is riddling’ (p. 8); or that: ‘It is not uncommon in Persian poetry for a description (*vasf*) to be expanded so far beyond the requirements of a descriptive sketch that it turns into an enigma’ (p. 44); or when he speaks of ‘descriptive passages in which the poet did not, apparently, consciously choose to insert a riddle’ (p. 20). However, the author knows very well that his position is rather strained, as—without fear of contradicting himself—he writes in the end: ‘The Persian poet knew quite well that he could not risk falling into obscurity by composing incomprehensible compositions . . . Many of these riddles and *vasfs* constitute a linguistic code that was intelligible to an audience familiar with the normative poetic conventions’ (pp. 46–47).

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4Francesco Orlando, *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973).

5Se‘r va adab-e farsi, pp. 333–335.
The author is right that sometimes it is not easy to establish what is a riddle and what is not, partly given the often complex history of text transmission. Following a consolidated critical tradition, represented in the headings that introduce this poem in some manuscripts, the author analyses as a riddle the first part of the famous qašide by Manucehri which begins with a long description, in the form of xetāb ‘apostrophe’, of a candle. It is dedicated to the poet ‘Onšorī, whose favour Manucehri wanted to gain. The object described is addressed in the second person and is not named; only at the end of the description is its name revealed (at least in some manuscripts): ‘Ey sʔam’, O candle (v. 18), which both represents the solution to the riddle, and gives the poet the opportunity of passing to the gorizgah section (vv. 18–19), using this device: O candle, you are my only friend and my confidant, as I spend every night till dawn reading the divān of Abo ’l-QāsemHasan (‘Onšorī) in your light. Here, however, Manucehri did not intend to present the dedicatee with a true riddle, but—as generally happens with riddles in panegyrics—only to show his poetic skill in presenting a description as if it were a riddle, using all the images and devices characteristic of riddles, such as marked antithesis and absurd and unnatural descriptions. In view of this, and also of the fact that the solution to the riddle, at least in the edition used by the author, is given in v. 18, the following statement seems naïve: ‘If Manuĉehrī intended to write a real puzzle for ‘Unsurī, he has failed his task, because a poet of ‘Unsurī’s calibre would easily have divined the answer’ (p. 61). However it may be, the statement that follows is amazing: ‘If there is a riddle at all, it is that the poet laureate [i.e. ‘Onšorī] is here compared to a candle’ (p. 61). Manucehri compares himself, not ‘Onšorī, to the candle, saying (v. 9): to ma-ra mani o man-ham mar to-ra manam hami, which the author correctly translates: ‘You are like me and I resemble you’ (p. 57). How can he have forgotten his own translation a couple of pages further on?

Review of the book

The author’s critical language is imprecise. ‘Symbolic’, for example, is different from ‘enigmatic’ (cf. p. 179, about Sanā’ī’s Seyr al-’Ebād); and ‘abstract’, too, is different from ‘enigmatic’ (cf. p. 38). A ‘concrete’ description can be much more difficult to understand than an ‘abstract’, i.e. stylized and conventional one. In Chapter II the author wants ‘to show the development from concreteness to abstraction’ in Persian poetry, by comparing the descriptions of a palace in Farroxi (d. 1037) and in Moxtārī (d. ca. 1120). He translates the beginning of Farroxi’s description as follows:

There was a kingly palace in the middle of the garden
The top of the parapets was situated between two turrets (p. 39).

He comments: ‘Like Farrukhi’s other descriptions of objects, his style is quite concrete. The poet’s attention is more focused on the actual event painted or carved on the walls of the palace than on presenting an “ideal”, exaggerated or imaginative representation of the reality... The palace has two turrets, between which the parapets can be seen...’ (p. 39). The author, who has worked on this topic, has not recognized
here a well-known cliché in palace descriptions: palaces are normally praised for their height, which reaches to the firmament. The second mesrà of v. 20 in fact reads: sar-e kongere bar karàn-e Do Peykar, and means: ‘The top of (its) pinnacles (was) at the limit of Gemini (Do Peykar)’. So there is no concrete description of any parapet between two turrets. Apart from this, I would like to quote what A. Bausani writes on the purpose of Farroxi’s poetry: ‘[From the well-known anecdote by Nežâmi ‘Aruţi, we can infer that] il poeta, quando compose la qâšîdê, non aveva mai visto il «dâghgâh» del principe! . . . Una prova in piu per mostrare quanto errati siano i giudizi sul presunto realismo di quello stile antico [my emphasis]’ (… ‘the poet, when he composed the qâšîdê, had never seen the «dâghgâh» of the ruler! . . . An extra proof to show how wrong are the judgements on the supposed realism of this early style’).8 Actually, the rest of the passage by Farroxi examined here (vv. 21–24) also contains elements of strong stylization, as, for example, the comparison of the palace’s decorations and paintings with a dibâ-ye cini ‘Chinese brocade’ and with the Artang-e Mâni ‘Mani’s Artang’ (a not preserved volume of drawings and paintings attributed to Mani, famous in the Islamic tradition not so much as founder of a religion but as a master painter). The author’s statement ‘The other portico is filled with paintings in the style of Mani’ (p. 40) seems to suggest that, incorrectly, he interprets the latter image in a realistic way.

On the contrary, Manucehri’s descriptions, which the author takes as being full of riddles (p. 49), are judged by critics as more natural than those by other Persian poets.9 Manucehri’s descriptions are difficult and ‘riddling’ because they are more naturalistic, less conventional than those by other poets.

In Chapter III, devoted to riddles in romances, after a general view (pp. 77–82) of the subject, the author translates and analyses a series of riddles from the Sãhname, which are presented to Zâl by the Zoroastrian priests (mobeds) in order to test his knowledge. The priests present Zâl with six questions, at the end of all of which Zâl gives his answers.10 As J. Xâleqi Moţlaq in his valuable Notes on the Shahnameh warns, answers 5 and 6 do not correspond to questions 5 and 6: their order is inverted.11 The author translates the priests’ six questions inserting Zâl’s answer after each one (pp. 84–90). As a response to question 5: ‘There is an open plain, full of colour and fragrance . . . A man with a sharp sickle comes . . . [what is it?]’ (p. 87), the author wrongly quotes what in reality is the answer to question 6: ‘The palace built on the top of a mountain is the dwelling of peace and eternity’ (p. 88). He continues translating question 6: ‘. . . on the mountaintop, I found a firm palace . . . [what is it?]’ (p. 88). At this point he writes: ‘Zâl’s answer to the sixth riddle is not included in the text’ (p. 89). He then translates the final lines of the passage (Manucehr, vv. 1265–1275), claiming they represent ‘a general conclusion about the transient nature of life, the cruelty of time, and a picture of death’ (p. 89). But the ‘picture of death’ is actually the answer to question 5: ‘The man on the open plain with the

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8A. Bausani, La letteratura neopersiana, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2011 (reprint of A. Pagliaro and A. Bausani, Storia della letteratura persiana, Milano, Nuova Accademia, 1960), p. 323.

9For example C.-H. de Fouche´cour writes: ‘Manučehri non seulement voit mais écoute plus que ses prédécesseurs . . . Manučehri est ainsi plus attaché à la nature pour elle-même . . . Ses comparaisons tendent à plus de naturel, à moins de stylisation’ (La description de la nature dans la poésie lyrique persane du Xie siècle, Paris 1969, p. 21; cf. also what Bausani writes on Manucehri’s poetry, in particular on p. 331).

10Cf. J. Xâleqi Moţlaq (ed.), Sãhname, vol. 1, Tehran, Enteşârat-e Ruzbehân, 1368/1989–1990, pp. 247–253, Manucehr vv. 1219–1275.

11Dj. Khâleghi-Motlagh, Notes on the Shahnameh, vol. 1, part 1, Persian Heritage Foundation, New York, 2001, p. 299.
sharp sickle . . . is the harvester, Time . . . ’ (pp. 89–90). The author did not recognize the right sequence of questions and answers.

I must also dwell shortly upon the author’s translation of the few lines (Manucehr, vv. 1265–1269) containing Zâl’s considerations on life, before answering the question concerning the passing of time and death. This passage begins thus:

*conin raft az āgāz yeksar saxon/hamin bāsād o now nagardad kahon* (v. 1265)

The author’s translation of the first *mešrâ* is: ‘This has been the way of speech from the beginning’ (p. 89), with *saxon* translated as ‘way of speech’. In his commentary, he gives a long explanation about the logos and thus the fundamental architecture of the world, with reference to a Quranic passage from Sura XIX, 35, rather off the point here; while Xâleqi Moṭlaq in his *Notes* (which the author knows and quotes) explains that here *saxon/* *soxan* simply means ‘matter’ (*kār, amr*).12 We too say: ‘The story/the discourse has always been this . . .’. Then, leaving aside v. 1267, for which he proposes a different interpretation from Xâleqi Moṭlaq’s, his translation misunderstands the last two couplets:

> If our palace is raised as high as Saturn
> Our profit from it will be that tent
> Which they raise upon it and cover with clay . . . (p. 89).

The tent (*yeki cādar/cādor* ‘a tent’ in the text) ‘which they raise upon it [*= the palace?]’ is, of course, as also indicated in Xâleqi Moṭlaq’s *Notes*, a shroud, which is put on the face (*ke bar ruy pušand*) of the dead person. Considering that in his comment the author rightly says: ‘Zâl says that our final home in this world is the tent of a shroud, which will be covered with clay as we are buried’ (p. 91), one wonders where this translation comes from.

In Chapter IV the author translates and comments on a number of poems containing riddles. This, however, is a kind of commented anthology, and cannot be considered a systematic study of any *divān*. The author says: ‘At least twelve riddles or riddling descriptions of various objects can be found in Mas’ud Sa’d’s *Divān*’ (p. 94), without the exact bibliographic reference to them or their objects being given. Three of them are translated and commented on. As to Mo’ezzi, the author says that in his *divān* there are three riddles bearing the heading *logāz* in Hayyeri’s edition. To these, 11 other poems must be added which he detected by reading the *divān*, and for which he gives a precise reference to the page of Hayyeri’s edition, with identification of the riddle’s objects (note 43 on pp. 127–128). Seven of these fourteen riddles are translated and commented on in this chapter, and one more, on generosity according to the author (but see below), is translated and commented on in the following chapter (pp. 196–200), providing a comparison with one of Moxτārī’s riddles; no cross-reference, however, is given here, and on pp. 196–200 no reference to the page and edition of the *divān* is given. I must say that, while merely glancing through Mo’ezzi’s *divān* to find the original text of the translated poems, I chanced to find two more poems which begin with a riddle (on pp. 310 and 342 of Hayyeri’s edition).13

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12Ibidem.

13The poem on pp. 342–343 (*Divān-e kāmel-e Amir Mo’ezzi*, ed. N. Hayyeri, Tehrān 1362/1983–1984) is particularly interesting, because it is a *marjiye* for the death of the dedicatee’s son, and the object of the
In this chapter, the explanation of Mas'ud-e Sa'd’s riddle on fire is valuable (pp. 106–110). However, here again the author does not try to find out what is characteristic of riddles in general and what may be characteristic of the individual poets he discusses. About a number of images he says: this is (relatively) new/this is traditional, without providing convincing arguments. For example, what he says of Mo'ezzi’s riddling technique at the end of the last riddle (on the sword) from this poet’s divan (p. 149) could be said of many other poets, because here he notes some characteristic techniques of the construction of riddles in general. He says: ‘Every time that the poet [Mo'ezzi] states that ‘the sword is x’, he immediately introduces analogies or dissimilarities between the sword and the entity in question’ (p. 149). However, Mas’ud-e Sa’d’s riddle on the mirror (translated and commented on pp. 96–99), for example, is built entirely on this very pattern: ‘it (i.e. the object of riddle is/is not x), yet (a phrase follows, introducing dissimilarities/analogies with the entity x)’: ‘It is no astrolabe, yet like an astrolabe…’, ‘It is not a painter, but paints the likeness…’, ‘It is bright water, yet it turns dark…’ (p. 96). So, at least a reference to Mas’ud-e Sa’d’s poem would have been useful.

Translations are sometimes too mechanical or even incorrect. For example, what can a reader grasp from the following translation of one of Mo'ezzi’s riddles on the pen (the one quoted by Šams-e Qeys), if in a tajnis ‘pun’ on the word tir the author translates it always as ‘arrow’?:

What is that body that has received an arrow from the arrow of the sky?
It has the form of an arrow, it has set the empire straight as an arrow (p. 131).

In the translation of the first hemistich, it is clear that tir means qadr o marṭabe ‘rank’ and şowkat o ‘azamat ‘importance’ (Dehxodā) in its first occurrence; and that, in its second occurrence, the planet Mercury is meant (in Persian poetry a ‘patron’ of copyists and scholars), from whom the object of the riddle (the pen) has received its rank and importance.

Apart from inaccurate translations, sometimes texts are misunderstood (see also above). For example, the sixth riddle from Mo'ezzi’s divan (ed. Hayyeri, p. 329) constitutes the first part of a qaṣide in which three different riddles, on the horse, the sword and the arrow of the dedicatee, are presented in the context of a dream: the poet dreams of a huge tree and a young man sitting by it. In his dream, the poet questions the young man about the three objects, which symbolize the praised person’s virtues. The huge tree is an allegoric representation of religion (din), and the young man is the allegory of fortune/reign (dowlat), not, as wrongly stated by the author on the basis of a mistranslation, of the poet, an interpretation on which he elaborates with irrelevant comments on the role of poets at court (p. 140).
The author has again fallen into error in identifying the objects of a riddle by Mo'ezzi, translated and commented on on pp. 196–200. In fact, he says that the whole riddle is on jud, the praised person’s generosity. Instead, it is, first, on the generous hand of the dedicatee, who was a vazir, but then, in vv. 5–6 another riddle on his inkpot begins, marked in the text by the formula bengar aknum ‘see now...’ (v. 6); and afterwards (from v. 9) there is yet another riddle on his pen (ed. Hayyeri, p. 469). In his commentary, the author fancifully explains the images employed by the poet with reference to the ink-pot and the pen as if they referred to generosity; and this although in a riddle on the pen by Moxtäri, translated on p. 205, exactly the same images are to be found, including the reference to Alexander’s romance, the Land of Darkness and the fish. What is more, there the author comments: ‘Several of the metaphors and images employed here [in Moxtäri’s riddle] can be found in other riddles on the pen’ (p. 206).

To sum up: this work provides scholars with an anthology of poetic riddles in Persian literature up to the end of the 12th century, plus a commentary. The commentaries are not always relevant, and the texts are sometimes misunderstood. Ultimately, the analysis does not establish a coherent critical approach to the subject, and the result is an argument that is unconvincing.