

The Rhetoric of Gifts, or when Objects Talk

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the significance of rhetoric in Arabic literature hardly needs to be emphasised: The power of the word and the importance of successful communication permeate almost all the sources. In literary texts it represents a way of achieving self realization or material benefits or, in the most dramatic cases, a means to save one's life. Notwithstanding its intimate connection with words, rhetoric is not limited to verbal communication solely and in fact there are many instances of the communicative value of inanimate objects. Objects are thus charged with meaning and could replace words. This is especially evident in the case of gifts: Offering a gift represents a particular example of communication and can sometimes be likened to a form of nonverbal, coded correspondence. This analogy was no doubt clearly perceived by men of letters: The aphorism "Three hint at their masters' intellect: the gift, the messenger and the letter",¹ placing side by side gifts, messengers and letters, emphasises the typical communication frame that provides for a sender, a receiver and a message.

The theme of the communicative value of objects in Arabic literature seems to have been underestimated. The function of the inanimate in *adab* and fictional narratives has been examined by Daniel Beaumont. Questioning the issue of the symbolic potential of objects, he argues that the representation of objects can bring forth rhetoric, both as argument and figurative language (as in al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-buḥalā'*) or be a part of a plot (as in *Alf layla wa-layla*).² In the same vein, Muhsin Musawi investigated the nonverbal narrative components of *Alf layla wa-layla*, underlining the great efficacy of nonverbal signs in dislodging, replacing or complementing loquacity.³ Apart from these two essays, little or no attention has been given to the function of gifts as nonverbal messages in Arabic literature.

¹ Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, in al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 236; the same saying in a slightly different version is ascribed to 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (al-Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, in al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 263).

² Beaumont, *Inanimate*.

³ Musawi, *Nonverbal Narratives*.

Anthropological research in general has repeatedly stressed the importance of the act of giving in establishing and maintaining social relationships.⁴ Exactly as verbal communication, giving and exchanging gifts is a social act and being both embedded in a logic of communal bonds they can have a similar functioning. Apart from confirming social bonds, resolving social conflict or reinforcing institutional relationships, gifts can also function as coded messages both in public (diplomatic relations)⁵ and in private life (relationships between individuals based on intimacy, friendship or love).⁶ In fact, giving is considered a way of keeping intimacy and friendliness alive (*lā yuḥṣalu dhālika [i.e. ḥusn al-mu'ānasa] illā bi-l-mulātāfa wa-l-muhādāt*)⁷ and exchanging rare and exquisite gifts is deemed a prerogative of refined lovers and infatuated men of letters (*ẓurafā' al-muḥibbīn wa-udabā' al-mutayyamīn*).⁸ Following this cue, the theme of communicative value of gifts seems to take place at the intersection of crucial themes in Arabic literature, namely those of refinement and love, both widely represented in *adab* works. In what follows, the focus of attention will be on the communicative value of gifts in the context of love relationships, investigating the way a message is encoded and the subsequent processes that drive its decoding.

DISCUSSION OF THE SOURCES

“*Wa-kataba l-nās fī l-hadāyā fa-aktharū min al-kalām al-manthūr wa-l-manzūm*”: As the author of *al-Maḥāsin wa-l-aḍḍād* says, the theme of gift is widely represented in the history of Arabic literature, both in encyclopaedic works and in monographic works.⁹ The list of titles compiled by Sāmī al-Dahhān in his excellent edition of al-Khālidiyyān’s anthology *al-Tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā* comes to eleven.¹⁰ Unfortunately, a large part of them have not survived and we know of their existence only by means of later quotations. The only notable exceptions are the *Kitāb al-tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā* of al-Khālidiyyān and *al-Tuḥaf wa-l-ṭuraf* (see below). Another useful source we can add to these titles is *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa* of al-Shayzarī (sixth/twelfth century); it has unfortunately not been preserved, but we can nevertheless read extensive quotations from it in contemporary and later sources.

Al-Tuḥaf wa-l-ṭuraf, recently translated into English by Ghāda al-Ḥijjāwī al-Qaddūmī under the title *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, was compiled by an unknown author who lived in the fifth/eleventh century in Egypt.¹¹ It is a sort of inventory of precious gifts presented to sovereigns and contains a number of passages similar or nearly identical to some passages

⁴ See e.g. Mauss, *Gift*; Caillé, *Anthropologie*; Godbout, *Esprit and Langage*.

⁵ For the communicative value of gifts in the frame of diplomatic relations in the Islamic world see Bauden, Parole.

⁶ For examples in Arabic literature, see e.g. Sharlet, Tokens.

⁷ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 193.

⁸ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 193.

⁹ Ps. al-Jāḥiẓ, *Maḥāsin*, 365.

¹⁰ Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, introduction, 15–18.

¹¹ The translator of the book put forward the hypothesis that the author was a Fatimid official who was in Cairo between 444/1052 and 463/1070 (al-Qaddūmī, *Rarities*, 12–3).

of al-Khālidiyyān's *Kitāb al-tuḥaf*, which could reasonably be considered as one of its sources.¹² In *al-Tuḥaf wa-l-ṭraf* individual situations and private relationships are seldom represented, and the act of offering gifts takes place in an institutional and public context. In consequence the emphasis is put more on the magnificence of objects, which are considered as a display of power and parade of wealth than on their informative and communicative value. Furthermore, acts of speech always accompany the materiality of presents, so that the messages conveyed do not need any decoding. In consideration of all this, the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* is not an interesting source for the purpose of this study.

The second title, the *Kitāb al-tuḥaf wa-l-ḥadāyā* of al-Khālidiyyān, is much more relevant in this respect, in consideration of the relevance for the theme of both al-Khālidiyyān's work in itself and the additional contents that the editor attached to it.¹³ The composition of the *Kitāb al-tuḥaf* is ascribed to the two brothers Abū 'Uthmān Sa'īd (d. 350/961) and Abū Bakr Muḥammad (d. 380/990), both poets of Sayf al-Dawla's entourage who were famous for their exceptional memory. In fact, the work was probably composed only by the younger of them. We do not know the date of composition and the identity of the client, perhaps it was Sayf al-Dawla in person or the vizier al-Muhallabī. The book is a selection of anecdotes on gifts and presents that the two Khālidi had selected as among the best they had heard or read; these are accompanied by a wide choice of poems ranging from the beginning of the 'Abbāsīd era to their time

Al-Tuḥaf wa-l-ḥadāyā is a valuable and original source in many respects. The most remarkable aspect is perhaps the originality of the material: The bulk of the anecdotes and poems do not feature in other and better known books. Another peculiarity is the absence of any hint at the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions connected with gifts and the etiquette of giving, which is not the case for other works.¹⁴ The materials are arranged in chapters; some of them are centred on the relationship between gift and verbal messages and explicitly refer to this connection in their titles: "Gifts accompanied by poetry" or "gifts pleaded for by means of poetry" and so on.

The third title mentioned above is *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa* written by 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī (fourth quarter of the sixth/twelfth century), who is reported to have written it for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī.¹⁵ The book does not seem to be extant; the entire range of topics covered in it and the wealth of material reported therein is unfortunately unavailable to us. However, we do have an idea of its contents through the quotations the author himself makes in one of his other works. In *Rawḍat al-qulūb*, his book on love and lovers,¹⁶ al-Shayzarī twice quotes the title of *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa*, suggesting to the reader to have

¹² The following parallels were found: *Tuḥaf*, 109 *Rarities* ~ §32; *Tuḥaf*, 50 ~ *Rarities* §19; *Tuḥaf*, 110–111 ~ *Rarities* §33; *Tuḥaf*, 159–165 ~ *Rarities* § 29–30; *Tuḥaf*, 165–168 ~ *Rarities* §69.

¹³ Cf. Pellat, Khālidiyyāni. Notwithstanding their poetical activity, they became famous for being Sayf al-Dawla's librarians and for being accused of plagiarism. Their excellent memory allowed them to memorise the contents of one thousand books. Apart from the book in question, they also wrote another anthology entitled *Ḥamāsāt shi'r al-muḥdathīn* (or *al-Ashbāh wa-l-naẓā'ir*).

¹⁴ See e.g. the chapters on gifts in Ps. al-Jāḥiẓ, *Maḥāsīn*, 365–383 or Ibshīhī, *Mustaṭraf*, in al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, (appendix), 259–260.

¹⁵ On the life of this somewhat neglected author see Semah, *Rawdat al-Qulub*.

¹⁶ On the genre see Giffen, *Profane love*.

recourse to it for further information.¹⁷ These quotations occur in chapter six (on the exchange of gifts between passionate lovers) and seven (focussed on inauspicious gifts that must be avoided).¹⁸ The brief summary of *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa* provided in chapter six informs us that the *Tuḥfa* was dedicated to “stories of kings, caliphs and other excellent and refined people, and to precious and splendid gifts they exchange, and also to the most suitable presents to be exchanged between lovers”.¹⁹

In what follows, the coding and decoding of messages that are hidden in objects of gift will be investigated, essentially based on the *Kitāb al-tuḥaf wa-l-hadāyā* of al-Khālidiyyān and on the selected sources that its editor, Samī al-Dahhān, attached to his edition of the text. To these I will add some passages of al-Shayzarī’s *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa* taken from his *Rawḍat al-qulūb*, as well as a few other sources not anthologised by al-Dahhān.

HOW OBJECTS TALK

The connection between gifts and words can take different forms. Sometimes the gift consists solely of an act of speech: The case of poems given in the framework of a ritual of gift exchange is quite common, particularly in the framework of the client-patron relationship.²⁰ As is said in *al-Mahāsīn wa-l-aḍḍād* (“*kāna al-ḥukamā’ yuhdūna al-ḥikma wa-l-shu‘arā’ al-shi‘r*”),²¹ immaterial gifts in the form of words were a widespread custom, especially for people who were cultivated, but not wealthy.

An act of speech may be connected with giving as well, in which case gifts are accompanied by elaborate specimens of rhetoric, such as notes or short messages explaining the meaning of the present, hinting at its symbolic value, stressing its value or justifying its scantiness. This phenomenon is well represented in literature.²² A telling example is the anecdote that features the poet Abū Bakr al-Ṣanawbarī (d. 334/945), famous for his nature poetry, who presents to one of his friends some candles. To justify his poor gift he accompanies it with some verses praising the superior merits of something “making the night into day” and comparing them to “trees carrying fire”.²³ In many cases gifts are accompanied by pieces of poetry that aim to emphasise the refinement and abilities of the giver. Sometimes the verbal message is even incorporated into the materiality of the gift and engraved on the

¹⁷ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 193, 205.

¹⁸ A sizeable portion of the material included in these chapters is found in Washshā’, *Ẓarf*, and was probably taken from it (Semah, *Rawḍat al-Qulub*, 193).

¹⁹ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 193.

²⁰ A typical case is that of “the mantle ode” (*burda*) that Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, investigates in the light of theories of rite of passage and gift exchange based essentially on the seminal work of Mauss, *Gift*.

²¹ Ps. al-Jāhīz, *Mahāsīn*, 368.

²² As in the case of the anecdotes related by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *‘Iqd*, in al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 207, 211, fine examples of ornate rhetoric accompanying poor gifts as salt and alcali (an analysis of the story in Sharlet, *Tokens*, 69) and an apple. An entire section of al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, is dedicated to notes of apology accompanying scanty presents; see also Iḥshānī, *Mustaṭraf* (in al-Khālidiyyānī, appendix, 259 ff.).

²³ Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, 30 (two versions).

object itself: the *Kitāb al-muwashshā* frequently testifies of this, reporting verses engraved on objects given to the beloved or friends.²⁴

There are also instances of a mixed way of combining verbal and nonverbal messages, as in the following example taken from the *Kitāb al-tuḥaf*: A girl sends to her lover an apple from which she had taken a bite. On it she has inscribed in gold a sort of caption that clarifies the message encoded in the nonverbal sign: “this bite is not a defect, it is only the messenger of kisses”.²⁵ Here, the materiality of the gift is charged twice with the communicative value: the nonverbal message is explained through a verbal message which is inscribed in the object itself. In other cases, gifts are literally speaking, as the slave girl whom Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī gave as a present to al-Amīn: she appears before the caliph declaiming some verses of poetry that serve as a substitute for the written note that usually accompanies the material gift.²⁶

All these are instances of gifts consisting of or embedded in fine rhetoric,²⁷ but they do not exhaust the range of possible situations. Sometimes the materiality of gifts fully replaces the materiality of words, both oral and written, and then the gift in itself corresponds to a message that must be decoded. It is not by chance that a master of Arabic rhetoric such as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239) defines the gift as “a messenger who speaks, without tongue, in the name of his sender”.²⁸

By means of their materiality, gifts can convey different kinds of messages: they can express good omen, or, on the contrary, be ominous; they can express or confirm intimacy, love, friendship, and their contrary; they can speak of attitudes such as promise, threat or submission; they can also contain factual information such as time and place for an encounter. A combination of varied objects can compose a riddle and thus assume the coherence of a message. Sometimes the riddle is decoded by a note accompanying the material gift, as in the following anecdote:

The day of *ḡayrūz* Abū Usāma the scribe gave to one of his friends a rose, an arrow, a *dīnār* and a *dirham*, and wrote: ‘You are still radiant as roses, penetrating as arrows, high-ranking as a *dīnār* and successful as a *dirham*’.²⁹

In other cases, however, no verbal message helps in solving the riddle. Some interesting instances of this kind of rebus are found in *Alf layla wa-layla*, where they are used as a means of extending narrative. These have been studied by Musawi, who sees the “imagistic system” of signs as a “women’s property”³⁰ counterbalancing the hegemonic discourse of

²⁴ Washshā, *Ẓarf*, 315–16, 347 for apples ; 341 for sandals; 346 for trays; 355 for lutes.

²⁵ Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, 34–5.

²⁶ Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, 19–20.

²⁷ Manifest instances of this are the anecdotes related by ‘Askarī, *Diwān*, in Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 219–224, where the messages accompanying the gift overflow the act of giving.

²⁸ Quoted by al-Wāṭwāt, *Ghurur al-khaṣā’i*, in al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 244 (ed. Beirut, 566).

²⁹ Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, 18–19; also Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Bahja*, v. 1, 286.

³⁰ Musawi, *Nonverbal Narratives*, 354. This has a counterpart in the ability of “speaking from a distance by means of a flower, or a ribbon, or the colour of a dress, or a scarf” in which “the Turkish lady is mistress,” as observed by Edmondo De Amicis during his journey to Istanbul in 1875. The following passage represents very vividly the Turkish women’s ability to let objects speak: “They

language. Nevertheless, the imagistic code is only one of the possibilities for inanimate entities to convey meaning:³¹ sometimes objects do not refer to images and to an iconic code, but are rather chosen to represent precise words and thus refer to a verbal code, and objects can be used to convey concrete information. A case in point is the anecdote mentioned by al-Shayzarī in *al-Tuḥfa wa-l-ṭurfa*, a story we know through the quotation made by a later author, ‘Alī b. Zāhir al-Azdī (d. 623/1226) in his *Badā’i‘ al-badā’ih*.³²

The story goes as follows: While strolling about, the vizier al-Mazdaqānī sees a woman in a palace. He falls in love at once and while he is gazing at her she makes a sign to him. Sensing that he will be accepted, he sends her a messenger to let her know his intense passion and his passionate love; she does not utter a single word, but gives the messenger an apple of amber containing a golden button and sends him back. The vizier is unable to interpret the cryptic message, and the company present is likewise puzzled. The only person who reacts is the vizier’s son Aḥmad, who exclaims: “I understand what she means!” and clarifies the message reciting a piece of poetry:

She gave you amber with a button of gold secretly fixed inside
The button in the amber means: visit [me] in this way, hidden by the night.³³

The noticeable element in this story is the fact that the text stresses the woman’s silence, no doubt to emphasise the point that objects were intended to replace words.

The same anecdote, with minor variants, is also found in *Ḥalbat al-kumayt* by Shams al-Dīn al-Nawājī, a Cairene man of letters (d. 859/1455)³⁴ who, although being a serious teacher of *ḥadīth* and a refined poet, dedicated one of his books to the praise of wine (which, in passing, provoked severe attacks on him). The version he gives in *Ḥalbat al-kumayt* features the love affair of a singer girl (*qayna*) with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s son; of course the lovers have to keep this liaison concealed lest the sovereign discovers them, which entails the need for a kind of coded communication. The girl sends her beloved a ball of amber (*kurat* ‘Anbar) containing a golden button (*zirr*), but unfortunately the young man cannot decipher the message and is compelled to ask somebody else. He turns to the famous counsellor and secretary to Salaḥ al-Dīn, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200), who is perhaps the least advisable person if we consider his closeness to the sovereign but no

have a thousand objects, among flowers, fruits, leaves, feathers, stones, each one of which possesses a specific meaning, being an epithet or a verb or even a complete sentence, so that they can make a letter out of a bunch of flowers or say a hundred things with a box or purse full of various small objects that seem to have been gathered together casually; a clove, a strip of paper, a section of a pear, a bit of soap, a match, a little gold thread and a small portion of cinnamon and pepper, express the following: — ‘I have loved you long — I burn, I languish, I die for love of you. Give me a little hope — do not repulse me — send me one word of reply.’ They can say many other things besides: reproof, advice, warning, information, all can be conveyed in this way” (De Amicis, Costantinople, 215–216).

³¹ Working through analogy or dialectics is something al-Musawi (Nonverbal Narratives, 356) considers a tendency of women’s texts.

³² See Weipert, *Classical*, 6, n. 36.1.

³³ In al-Khālidiyyān, *Tuḥaf*, appendix, 240.

³⁴ On the author see Kratschkowski, Nawādjī, with further bibliography.

doubt the fittest if we consider his literary skills.³⁵ Thanks to his linguistic and literary expertise he quickly explains the message: “the button (*zirr*) and the amber mean: visit me in this way, hidden in darkness”.

Al-Nawājī deems the above story much more refined (*azraf*) than another anecdote that runs as follows: A man sends to the girl he loves a fan (*mirwaḥa*), a bunch of narcissi (*bāqat narjis*), a sugar candy (*sukkar nabāt*), a tassel (*sharrāba*) and a lute (*ūd*). She understands what he means (*fahimat murādahu*) and sends back to him an Indian fig (*ṣubbāra*), three seeds of black cumin (*kammūnat sūd*) and a button (*zirr*). He also seizes the hidden meaning.³⁶ The story ends here, and we will never know what happens afterwards, but we are confident that both were present at the date they agreed upon.

The solution of the puzzle is offered by al-Nawājī who elucidates the meaning of the single gifts and the syntax of the nonverbal message, which actually was: “We shall go to the garden and pass the night listening to music”; the woman replying: “Be patient for three nights and I shall visit you”. In the man’s message *mirwaḥa* stands for *narūḥ*, the narcissus for *bustān*, *sukkar al-nabāt* for *nabītu*, the tassel and the lute for *nasma’ al-ghinā’*; in the woman’s answer *ṣubbāra* stands for *iṣbir*, the three seeds of black caraway stand for three nights and *zirr* stands for *azūruka*.

The anecdote clearly illustrates the high degree of ability required in encoding messages: In this case communication was successful since obviously both protagonists were cultivated and, as the text makes clear, refined. They also were emotionally in tune and this emotional intimacy made them share the same code of signs. This runs contrary to the preceding story of the high-ranking young man who was unable to decode his lover’s hidden message. That story clearly tells us that the lack of culture and refinement fatally frustrates the comprehension of the coded message. Only an experienced addressee can interpret hints and tokens correctly: if this is not the case, he will need the help of a decoder.³⁷ Obviously, being part of the military élite and as such not being the best experienced person in rhetoric and literary studies, the son of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn must ask a member of the intellectual élite to decode the message.

³⁵ C. Brockelmann [Cl. Cahen], *Ḳāḏī*. He has a quasi -legendary status in the history of Arabic writing. His artistic prose had a tremendous impact on the style of the chancellery’s clerks and professionals of writing. Called *al-Ṭarīqa al-Fāḏīliyya* this style was characterised by a massive use of rhetorical devices (*badī’*) and widely used for epistolography and *maqāmāt*. See also Ḍayf, *‘Aṣr al-Duwal*, 410–414.

³⁶ Nawājī, *Ḥalba*, 199–200 (french transl. 212–213). As far as I know there is no scholarly edition of this title: the old Cairo editions of 1881 and 1938 being unattainable to me, I based myself on the 2008 edition. This is not a scientific edition (actually a very bad one), and since in this specific case the Arabic text was faulty, I had to complete it with the help of the French translation which is based on mss BnF Arabe 3398 and 3394.

³⁷ A similar situation is also represented in *Alf layla wa-layla* (see Musawi, *Nonverbal Narratives*, 349 ff).

DECODING PROCESSES

Now, the interesting thing is to see how the decoding process works. Normally decoding rests on two different methods: etymology and representation. The first method is essentially linguistic while the latter is essentially iconic. The linguistic method implies a double phase of decoding. Al-Washshā' clearly exemplifies this in the following verse of poetry when he speaks of anemones (*shaqā'iq*):

those who love do not like anemones (*shāqā'iq*)
since half of their name sounds *shaqā'* ('distress') if you spell out [emphasis mine] (*idhā fuhta nāṭiqan*).³⁸

The gift must first be labelled with its linguistic sign (*shāqā'iq*). Then, starting from the linguistic sign that has been identified, the etymology (or the popular etymology) of the name must be investigated in search of other related linguistic signs (*shaqā'*): their meaning is then properly decoded within the frame of a relationship of love, intimacy and friendship. This double (or triple) process of decoding implies culture, refinement and familiarity with rhetoric, all qualities that obviously characterise *al-zurafā'* and *al-udabā'* so often quoted in the sources.³⁹

Another good example of the use of an object as a coded message would be the quince (*safarjal*) whose name contains the word *safar* 'travel', which announces departure and separation (*firāq*);⁴⁰ this is even emphasised by the possible interpretation of the first half as *safar* and the second part as *jalla* 'to move away'.⁴¹ By common consent, the most telling example is considered *sūsan* (lily of the valley)⁴² whose name incorporates the word *sū'* 'misfortune'. Once a girl gave her lover one lily (*sawsana*), and he immediately understood that he had to expect a misfortune during one whole year (*sū' sana*).⁴³ The same can be said of *yāsamin* 'jasmine', whose name recalls *ya's* 'desperation' and *mayn* 'lie, falsehood',⁴⁴ or of *khilāf* and *gharab* (two types of willow), and *bān* 'horse-radish tree' all names that can be etymologically connected to words referring to separation, departure and so on.⁴⁵

The relationships with the linguistic sign identifying the gift and the related linguistic signs which could in some cases recall negative or unpleasant notions is at the core of the prohibition of offering some specific gifts, considered of bad omen, that we find in al-Washshā''s work. The process of linguistic decoding is relatively simple in the case of single objects; but in the case of composite gifts, as the button in the ball of amber, the process of decoding requires a further step. This consists in combining the single meanings

³⁸ Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 263.

³⁹ On the language of the *zurafā'* see Ghazi, Groupe, 60. On *zarf* and *zurafā'* as a category see Giffen, *Ẓarf*; Montgomery, *Ẓarīf* and Szombathy, On with and elegance.

⁴⁰ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa* 206; Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 263. Ghazi (Groupe, 60) gives a different interpretation: *jāl* would stand for *jā* ('est arrivé'); this is not supported by the text in the edition used.

⁴¹ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa* 206; Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 263.

⁴² *Sūsan* is considered by grammarians an incorrect, popular form: the 'correct' form would be *sawsan* (al-Harīrī, *Durrat al-khawāṣṣ*, in *Tuhaf*, appendix, 239).

⁴³ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 207; cf. Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 263.

⁴⁴ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 208; cf. Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 264.

⁴⁵ Washshā', *Ẓarf*, 265; cf. Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 209.

conveyed by the name of each object to obtain a whole sentence or, in other words, in reconstructing the syntax of the message.

Another possible process involved in decoding the rhetoric of objects is the metaphoric interpretation of their inner qualities. Roses are considered inauspicious because they are of short duration; thus, giving roses hints at an ephemeral feeling, while the long lasting myrtle announces a durable love.⁴⁶ Qualities inherent in objects are thus metaphorically extended to the emotional sphere and interpreted as inherent properties of the relationship of love, intimacy or friendship. Even if this process is not linguistically or etymologically based, it can be likened to the functioning of language in that metaphor is the logical ground on which it pivots.

Sometimes the very same object can be charged with a positive and a negative message, depending on the process of decoding chosen. Myrtle (*ās*), we have seen, is normally interpreted on the basis of its inner qualities (long duration) as the announcement of an eternal love. Nevertheless, if decoding is based on etymology, it can also be seen as a bad omen since *ās* could be considered a derivative of *ya's*, 'desperation'. Incidentally, the sources specify that refined people deem this interpretation highly disputable on the basis that *ās* is rather linked to *uss/asās*, 'foundation' and *mu'āsāh*, 'consolation'.⁴⁷ The same ambiguity can also be found in the case of roses: They are considered ominous, if one takes into consideration their inner qualities (short duration); on the contrary, if the decoding is linguistically based, they certainly convey a positive message in that they promise access to the pleasures of love. The poet clearly explains that:

he gave him roses (*ward*) and thus let him know that he would be received (*min al-wāridīn*), while he had never been (*lam yakun warrād*);⁴⁸ he rejoiced over the delicious visit, and for him he passed over the rose of shame, more than once.⁴⁹

The second method, the iconic one, is much more intuitive and direct since it is based on representation which is rooted more in the sensory sphere than in reasoning.⁵⁰ This method, which is seemingly much less common, is based on what has been called the "rhetoric of the image".⁵¹ In it, representation is not only an agglutination of symbols, but can also be a system of signs, as language. This is clear when we notice that conveyed meanings can be shared, even if only by a small number of interpreters representing specific categories, such as *al-ẓurafā'* or passionate lovers.

In decoding messages, the process of analogy is what explains the power of objects in conveying meanings: In the analogical representation the relationship between the

⁴⁶ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 206.

⁴⁷ Shayzarī, *Rawḍa*, 206–7; Washshā', *Zarf*, 264.

⁴⁸ The word *warrād* refers to somebody going to the watering place, thus conveying the idea of drinking to quench one's thirst (of love).

⁴⁹ Washshā', *Zarf*, 267.

⁵⁰ Reboul, *Rhétorique*, ch. 3.2.

⁵¹ The seminal article of Barthes, *Rhétorique*, proposes a semiotic approach to images; even if the context is very different (his analysis was based on the iconic code of advertising) some suggestions could still be inspiring in connection with the communicative value of objects in Arabic literature.

intended meaning and the image conveying it is direct (i.e. not mediated by the ‘linguistic label’) and not arbitrary (as it is in language). This entails a quasi-tautological relationship between signified and signifier.⁵² In other words, iconic signs must not be drawn from an institutional repository inasmuch as they are not coded, and this is why the women’s “imagistic system” of communication, using al-Musawi’s words, is a good example of “counter-hegemonic discourse”.

A manifest instance of the iconic process is citron (*utrujji*) whose contrasting appearance refers to the stark contrast (*ikhtilāf*) of inside and outside. This contrast concerning colour, taste and scent (three senses are appealed to at the same time) is taken as a sign of a changing attitude in love (*talawwun ma‘A l-maḥabba*)⁵³ and this explains the desperation of lovers when they receive citrons. Analogy also explains why *shāhlūj* ‘plums’ are a welcome gift: Since they have kernels inside, they clearly hint at penetration, a notion reinforced by the assonance with the word *wulūj* ‘penetration, entering’, and are therefore used to convey a promise of pleasant meetings. Al-Washshā’ quotes the following, rather explicit, lines of poetry:

she then gave him plums,
intending that if he had joined her she would have let him enter
and boldly he went,
taking the gift as good omen,
and he entered and came out many and many times.⁵⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the above, we have investigated examples of the power of coded messages in love affairs, a kind of relationship in which the sensibility of individuals is amplified and they are thus driven to search the gifts looking for hidden meanings. The link between gifts and secret or coded communication appears to be especially significant when the emotional impact of the object offered is connected to the most intimate feelings of individuals. Treatises on love and lovers often contain shorter or longer sections on gifts; they also emphasise the need for secrecy, which entails the necessity of having recourse to coded messages. The famous *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma* of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) has a whole chapter featuring the risks implied in exchanging letters that could be intercepted, thus revealing the liaison. The point is easily summarised by a laconic sentence “*al-murāsala bi-l-kutub, wa-l-kutub āfāt*” (correspondence is made by means of letters, and letters are calamities). Letters are calamities since they can create a scandal (*faḍīḥa*), and must thus be avoided or destroyed. This is why some cut them apart, some dip them into the water to make the ink disappear, and some cancel any trace of them.⁵⁵ Verbal communication, particularly if in the form of

⁵² Barthes, *Rhétorique*, 2.

⁵³ While the evil omen is taken for granted by Washshā’ (*Ẓarf*, 262), Shayzarī (*Rawḍa*, 205–6) openly explains that the lover perceives the difference as an announcement of change in love (*talawwun fī l-maḥabba*) i.e. abandonment, as suggested by the verses quoted.

⁵⁴ Washshā’, *Ẓarf*, 266–7.

⁵⁵ Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭawq*, 94. Incidentally, it is worth noticing that the chapter on correspondence is

writing, must thus be carefully avoided. If furthermore we consider that nonverbal communication derives its power from codes normally not accessible to more than two, the encoder and the decoder, it is easy to understand why lovers so often have taken recourse to nonverbal messages and why a gift often represents a coded message.⁵⁶

Literary sources offer many representations of presents intended as actual messages and whose decoding rests on a linguistic or an iconic process. Silent objects can thus become 'speaking' and require an interpreter able to relate the materiality of the object to its meaning in the communicative context and the relationship between giver and receiver. Context, both factual and emotional, is essential in decoding the significance and in specifying the meaning of the gift. The social and emotional frame of the relationship, presuppositions and hidden knowledge shared by the participants to the communicative act, as well as culture and refinement, thus orient the decoding of the hidden message. If one of these elements is lacking, the disjunction between objects and words, gifts and messages, can lead to misunderstandings and, in the end, to unsuccessful communication.

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placed side by side with the one on messengers, and both are inserted between two chapters somehow connected to secrecy: the first one on nonverbal communication by glances (*al-ishāra bi-l-'Ayn*), and the second on keeping the secret (*tayy al-sirr*). The whole seems to be a coherent block combining verbal and nonverbal communication and the imperative of secrecy.

⁵⁶ See Musawi, *Nonverbal Narratives*, 348 ff.

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