CHAPTER ONE

THE BAWDY TALES IN THE MATHNAWĪ IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSIAN MYSTICAL POETRY

Introduction

Why would Rūmī use profane imagery and coarse language in the midst of the Mathnawī, a mystical epic that has been considered the Qur’an in Persian?1 These tales contain explicit sexual imagery and vulgar words that make their crude form of expression contrast with the sublimity of the Mathnawī. These themes of sexuality and bawdy (hazl) seem to have posed a problem for some commentators and interpreters alike. How are we to understand the Mathnawī's vulgarity with its explicit references to sexual acts and organs, homosexuality, bestiality, and rape? Are we to reduce subjects like pederasty and fornication in the Mathnawī to a literary device, as is the approach of Annemarie Schimmel, who views these tales as a literary device exploited by a master storyteller to create “a very fascinating way of getting the audience’s interest.”2 Or should we be content with Reynold Nicholson’s explanation that attributes these tales to “the failing power” of an aging mystic?3 In his monumental English translation of the Mathnawī, Nicholson translated the sexual references into Latin. The historical reason for Nicholson’s decision is perhaps found in the Victorian prudishness of his time. However, translating them into Latin in effect renders these tales obscure to modern English readers. In Nicholson’s judgement, Rūmī is “the greatest mystical poet of any age.”4 Yet he views Rūmī’s Mathnawī with all its “wealth of satire, humour and pathos” as somewhat inferior to the supreme mystical quality of the Dīvān. He writes that in the Dīvān Rūmī “soars higher; yet we must read the Mathnawī in order to appreciate all the range and

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3 Nicholson, Mathnawī, 6:vii—Rūmī was around seventy years of age when most of these tales in Book V were composed.
4 Nicholson, Mathnawī, 6:ix.
variety of his genius.” Are we then to perceive the sexual imagery in the *Mathnawī* as an encrypted enigma at best, hence tacitly conceding skepticism as to its mystical purport? Are we to view the *Mathnawī* as less mystical than the *Divān*, yet more creative in thematic variance?

Annemarie Schimmel notes that *hazl* poems (bawdy, facetiae) with their coarse satire and vulgar language have been “a source of great chagrin” to historians of Persian literature. The contemporary and medieval commentators of the *Mathnawī* have generally dismissed the significance of its explicit sexual imagery. Most commentators of the *Mathnawī* simply overlook the bawdy tales. For example, in his abridged anthology of the *Mathnawī* entitled *Lubb-i Lubāb-i Mathnawī*, the fifteenth century Persian preacher and polymath, Ḥusayn wa’īz-i Kāshīfī (d. 1504–05) does not include the bawdy tales and sexual imagery in the *Mathnawī*. The same is true in the case of the Arabic and Turkish commentaries consulted.

Muhammad Isti’lami, a contemporary scholar of medieval Persian literature, comments that the tale of the slave girl and her donkey (V:1333–1429), for example, is “the most facetious tale” (*hazl-āmiztarīn qīssā*) in the *Mathnawī*, which has not been mentioned in any Persian or Arabic sources before. With a brief note that this tale is a platform for deeper discussions on greed and sexual urges and noting the meanings of a few words of the tale, Isti’lami moves on to the discussion of the didactic lessons of the more “refined” parts of the text. Isti’lami repeats the same approach of a cursory mention of the vulgarity of the tale and focusing on the deeper meanings of non-pornographic pas-

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8 For example, Yusif Ibn Ahmed, *Al-Qawi li-Ţullāb al-Sharif al-Mathnawi*, 6 vols. (Egypt: Al-Wahibiyya, 1289/1868); and Isma’il Ankaravi, *Sharḥ-i Kabīr-i Ankaravi bar Mathnawi-i Mawlāvi*, 2 vols., trans. (from Turkish into Persian) Akbar Bihruz (Tabriz: Khurshid, 1348/1969). It should be noted that grouping *Mathnawī* commentaries by language may be misleading. As Franklin Lewis has pointed out: “It should be remembered that Turkish and Urdu authors would often have had recourse to the Persian commentaries, so that the commentary traditions should not necessarily be considered as separate and distinct.” See his *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: One World, 2000), 475.