ELEGIES AND OTHER POEMS ON DEATH BY IBN AL-RUMĪ

In 1981 the sixth and final volume of the Ibn al-Rūmī-edition compiled by Ḥusayn Naṣṣār was published, and as a result the works of this poet became far more accessible.¹ The elegies form a small part of the poet’s complete works. In this article we shall concentrate on a few of these elegies, in particular the elegy which is dedicated to the poet’s mother. Until now this elegy, a mīmiyyah, in tawīl, was not easily accessible because it was not included in the editions which were available before 1981:² this is, therefore, the reason why so little attention has been paid to it. It is improbable that Ibn al-Rūmī was commissioned to write this elegy. What is more likely is that he was prompted to write it out of a sense of piety towards his deceased mother, or alternatively because he wanted to demonstrate his poetic ability to his fellow writers or to the general public. His audience was that elite public who listened to, and understood, works that were recited or was capable of reading, and comprehending, the pointes made by the poet.

The elegy for his mother, the mīmiyyah, distinctly recalls the very early themes and motifs of the genre which we know from the pre-Islamic period and the transitional period leading up to the beginning of Islam. There are, for example, repeated references to that fate which dominates everything, the Dahr. In this poem well-known phrases reappear, phrases which belong to the early form of elegy written by poets who lived in the transitional period between the days of paganism and the emergence of Islam. We are, therefore, dealing with a time-honoured convention that was still being roughly adhered to in the third century of the Hijra, when Ibn al-Rūmī lived.

¹ Diwān Ibn al-Rūmī Abī l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-‘Abbās ibn Jurayj, ed. Husayn Naṣṣār, Cairo 1973-1981. There is another edition which, however, was not available to me: Diwān Ibn al-Rūmī, ed. ‘Abd al-Amīr ‘Alī Muḥannā, 6 vols., Beirut 1411/1991. Ibn al-Rūmī’s full name was Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-‘Abbās ibn Jurayj Ibn al-Rūmī and the requisite details of his life can be looked up in the Encyclopaedia of Islam and in Fuat Sezgin, Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums, II, 585-588. He lived from 221/836 to 283/896 and his father al-‘Abbās was reputed to have been a manumitted Byzantine slave. The father was a client of a certain ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn ‘Isā ibn Ja’far. ‘Isā ibn Ja’far, ‘Ubayd Allāh’s father, was related to Zubaydah, a highly placed woman who was wife to Harūn al-Rashid and a sister of ‘Isā. But in the lifetime of Ibn al-Rūmī the family no longer moved in court circles. Zubaydah had after all been the mother of the Caliph al-Armin, who had been deposed by al-Ma’mūn. See Said Boustany, Ibn ar-Rūmī sa vie et son œuvre (1. Ibn ar-Rūmī dans son milieu), Beirut 1967, p. 107.

² Among the earlier editions the following should be mentioned: Diwān Ibn al-Rūmī, ed. Muhammad Sharif Salim, 2 vols., Cairo 1922, poems only up to those rhyming on the letter kha‘. Then there is the unsatisfactory selection by Kāmil Kilānī, Diwān Ibn al-Rūmī, ikhtiyār wa-tasnīf, wa-bihi muqaddimah shā’iqah li l-ustādh ‘Abbās Mahmūd al-‘Aqqād, 3 vols., Cairo 1342/1294.
The general phenomena of the elegy have already been explained in other publications. In this context one thinks of Wagner, *Grundzüge der klassischen arabischen Dichtung* (1987). The earliest forms of the *marthiyah* have subsequently been discussed by Alan Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry, volume one: Marâthi and Şu‘lûk poems* (1992). In volume two of Wagner’s *Grundzüge* the later forms of the *marthiyah* no longer receive separate attention. This is probably quite fair as Wagner assumed that—as the themes on the whole remained the same—very few changes had been made. The *Dahr*, the Fate of Time, has remained the most important malefactor in the later elegies, even in the works of the *Muhdathun*. We shall see that in the elegy dedicated to his mother the *Dahr* can, in the eyes of Ibn al-Rûmî, appear as a person. In this respect there is some similarity to the personification of the *Dahr* in the poems of Abû Tammâm. In his *Muwâzânah*, the contemporary critic, al-Âmîdî, strongly objected to the personification of the *Dahr*.4

Indeed in the poems by Ibn al-Rûmî, the *Dahr* appears as someone who is involved in a sort of litigation process as an enemy of mankind. Furthermore, as the rest of this article will demonstrate, the poem, the *mimiyyah*, amply illustrates various figures of speech and makes reference to the Koran. Particularly notable is *tîbâq*, “antithesis.” Apart from this, the influence of the old poets is traceable: in particular one is reminded of the poetry of al-Khansa’, Labid, and the poets of the tribe of Hudhayl. Ibn al-Rûmî’s poetry does, however, have a style of its own: he emphatically repeats his descriptions, yet in each case he manages to introduce an attractive variation into the description; he is also never satisfied with one description, and thus he describes the downfall of the animals at the hand of the *Dahr* in two ways, which are, as it were, spread out over two strophes or stanzas.

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