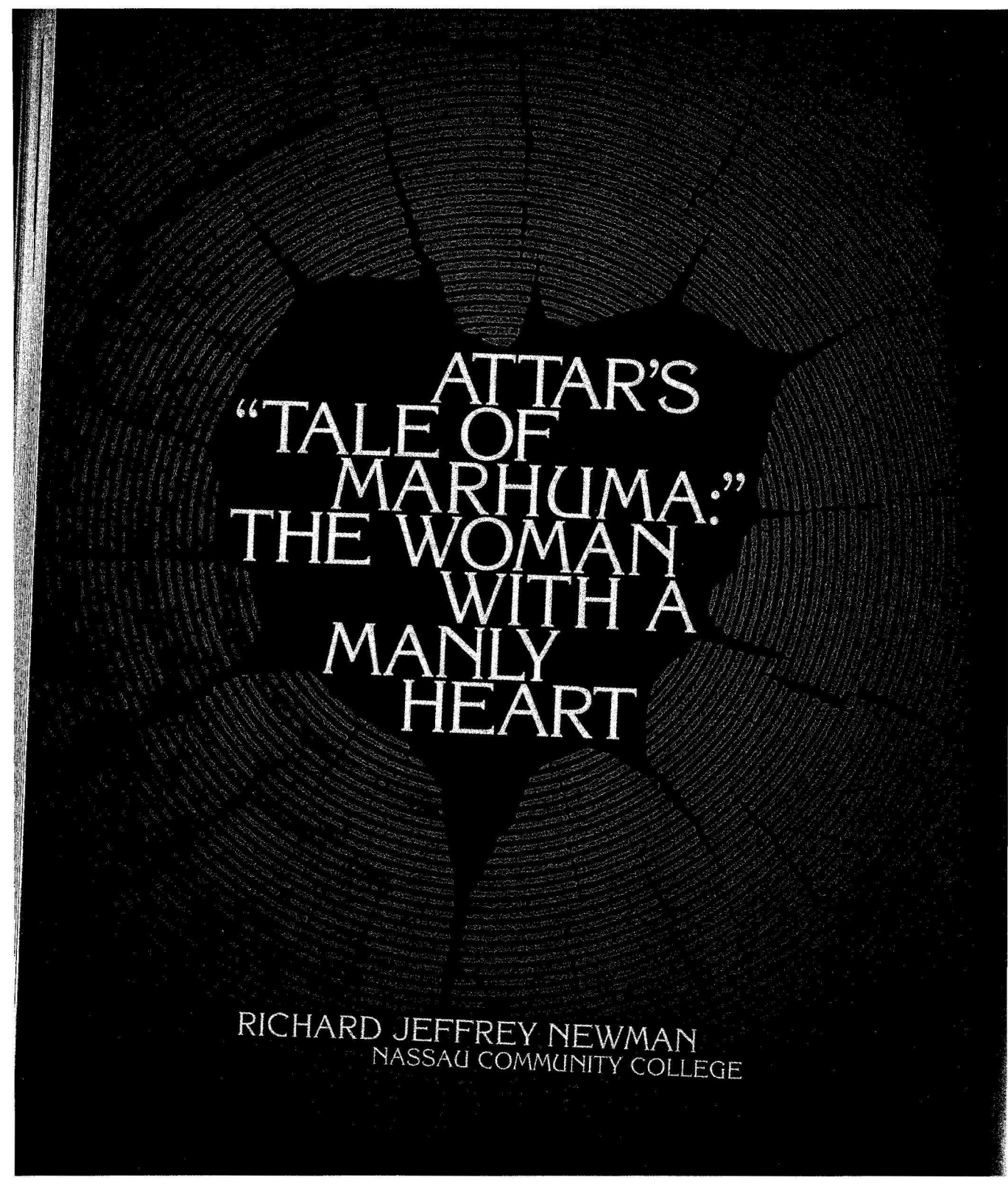


MODERN LANGUAGE STUDIES

VOLUME 46, NO. 2

WINTER 2017

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTHEAST MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



ATTAR'S
"TALE OF
MARHUMA:"
THE WOMAN
WITH A
MANLY
HEART

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FARID AL-DIN ATTAR, who was born in Nishapur, Iran, in the mid-twelfth century and died there some seventy years later, is considered one of Iran's most important poets. Known for his "proficiency in the art of narrative [and a] peculiar gift of economy in the use of rhetoric," Attar is also recognized as a seminal writer of Sufi practice and mystical thought, depicting in his work "the whole evolution of the Sufi movement" (Reinert). Indeed, as Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle write in their introduction to *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition* (2006), "throughout all of Attar's genuine collected works, there does not exist even one single verse without a mystical colouring. . . . Attar dedicated his entire literary existence to Sufism" (xix).

There was a time when Attar was believed to have written as many works as there are suras in the Quran, but scholars have winnowed that number down to six authentic works of poetry and one of prose, four of which have been, wholly or in part, translated into English.¹ The most recent are *Conference of the Birds*, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (Penguin 1984); *The Ilahi-Nama or Book of God of Farid al-Din Attar*, translated by John Andrew Boyle (Manchester University Press 1976); *Fifty Poems of Attar*, a selection from Attar's *Divan* or collected works, translated by Kenneth Avery and Ali Alizadeh (re.press 2007); and *Farid ad-Din Attar's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Saying of the Sufis*, translated by Paul Losensky (Paulist Press 2009). Of these translations, only *Fifty Poems of Attar* and *Conference of the Birds* are literary translations, intended explicitly to do artistic justice to both sides of Attar's reputation, that of the poet and that of the mystic.²

The best evidence that we have places Attar's birth in Nishapur in either 1145 or 1146, and scholars seem to agree that he died in 1221 at the hands of the Mongol invaders. We know nothing, however, or next to nothing about his family or his friends, his politics (except what might be inferred from his verse) or what he did—except for writing poetry—to pass the time when he wasn't working. We do know, because Attar tells us, that he was a pharmacist, and we know that he had a large clientele. We also know—about this, Attar brags—that his profession allowed him to eschew the eulogies and panegyrics that the court poets of his time had to produce to earn a living. As reticent as he may have been about his biography, however, Attar was not shy about proclaiming the value of his verse, though the hyperbole he employed in doing so was almost certainly a literary convention of the time. In the epilogue to *Book of God*, for example, he asserts that while "the sun will be dimmed on Judgment Day... [my] poetry shall shine forever/to be sung every

day in paradise to the tune of love by heart-delighting hours" (Attar, *The Ilahi-Nama* 334). In *The Book of Adversity*, one of his works that has not been translated into English, he calls himself the "seal of poets," and in both his *Collected Poems* and *The Conference of the Birds*, he calls his poetry "the seal of speech" (qtd. in Reinert).

Such hyperbole notwithstanding, Attar did not have much of a reputation during his lifetime. Only after he died, in the second half of the thirteenth century, did people outside Nishapur start to pay attention in earnest to anything he'd written. It was not until the early 1400s that his fame as a mystic, poet, and master of narrative truly began to spread.

One of the ways we know how profoundly people valued Attar's work is through the tall tales about him that have been handed down through the centuries. These stories, of course, do not tell us much about who Attar actually was, but they do tell us quite a lot about who people thought he was—or, perhaps more accurately, who they wanted him to have been, given how they felt about his work. In one such story, as retold by S.G. Ouseley in *Biographical Notes of Persian Poets* (1846), Attar confronts "a religious mendicant," a dervish, and asks him to leave his shop. "I have nothing to prevent me from leaving your door," the dervish replies, "or, indeed, from abandoning the world... since my sole possession is this worn-out garment; but O, Attar, I grieve for thee, for how canst thou ever bring thyself to think of death leaving all these worldly goods behind thee?" Attar responds that he "hope[s] and trust[s] he [will] die contentedly as a Dervish." When the dervish hears this, he says, "We shall see" and, putting his wooden bowl on the ground, "[lays] his head upon it, call[s] on the name of God, and immediately resign[s] his soul to his Creator." After witnessing this, the story concludes, Attar "gave up his shop without a pang, renounced all worldly concerns for ever, and commenced the study of Sufi philosophy" (237).

Ouseley also retells an apocryphal tale about the manner of Attar's death. According to this narrative, when Genghis Khan conquered Nishapur in 1221, one of his soldiers captured Attar and was about to kill him. Another soldier, however, took pity upon the aged poet and offered to redeem Attar's life for a thousand dirhems. Attar successfully persuaded his captor to hold out for a better price, but when a second soldier, referring to the poet's advanced age, offered only a bag of horse fodder, Attar smiled. "That is my full value," he said. "Sell me." The poet's captor killed him on the spot (239-240).

A third story retold by Ouseley takes place after Attar's death. Yehia bin Saad, the chief qazi, or judge, of Nishapur, was advised to bury his prematurely dead son at the foot of Attar's tomb, so that "the propinquity of such sanctified remains might ensure for him a happy future [in the afterlife]." Bin Saad, however, was a proud man. His son's body, he insisted, "would be disgraced by being placed at the feet of an old reciter of tales and composer of verses," so he buried his son somewhere else. On the night of the burial, Bin Saad saw Attar's tomb in a dream, "splendid with supernatural brightness, and surrounded by the souls of the pure and holy, holding thousands of torches to shew respect and honour to [the poet's] remains." Bin Saad's son also appeared in the dream, asking his father to move his remains to a spot at Attar's feet, since being so close to such holiness would surely guarantee him "a seat in Paradise." When the judge awoke, he immediately arranged to have his son's remains relocated and caused a monument to be erected over Attar's grave (240-241).

Another set of stories about Attar envisions an encounter between him and the young Jalaladdin Rumi, who is considered by many to be Iran's greatest poet. According to these tales, Rumi's family traveled to Nishapur when Rumi was still a young boy. Rumi's father, Bahauddin, was a scholar and a cleric, and

he took the family to meet Attar, who was by then quite old. Almost at once, Attar recognized the young Rumi's incipient greatness, saying as he watched the boy follow his father out the door, "Lo! There goes a sea chased by an ocean." In another of these tales, Attar offers to be Rumi's guide on the Sufi path and gives the boy a copy of his *Book of Mysteries*, saying to Rumi's father, "One day, your son will set fire to all forlorn hearts" (Moyné and Newman 28-29). Scholars have shown that this meeting could not have taken place, but Rumi did acknowledge his literary debt to Attar, using some of Attar's stories and parables in his own work and, in at least two places, writing verses like this:

Attar was the spirit,
Sanai [another poet] its two eyes;
I am their shadow.

Or like this:

Attar has toured the seven cities of love;
I am still at the turn of the first alley.
(Moyné and Newman 29)

Rumi's praise alone testifies to Attar's significance within the Persian literary canon. However, Attar's work, particularly *Conference of the Birds*—in which he argues that the key to enlightenment lies within us all, if only we give ourselves permission to see it—has also had a significant impact in the west, inspiring not just several translations, but also illustrated books, children's books, adaptations for the stage, and more.³ Central to the argument in *Conference of the Birds* is the idea that achieving enlightenment requires of those who seek it a willingness to "go crazy" with love, to surrender so fully to the desire to be one with God that the conventional boundaries of acceptable behavior become meaningless. According to this way of thinking, breaking these boundaries will eventually

bring you face-to-face with your essential self, the one that was given to you by God, not the one that society has constructed for you. This confrontation, fully realized, will be the moment you understand that the key to your own transcendence, the piece of you that came directly from, that in some sense is God, was always already inside you. The one caveat—and this is the tension *Conference of the Birds* explores—is that the process of this realization should take place under the watchful eye of a spiritual guide, someone who can make sure you do not become irrevocably lost along the way.

Attar's *Book of God*, from which "The Tale of Marhuma" is taken, illuminates a different aspect of the path to enlightenment, exploring the Sufi concept of *zuhd* (sometimes as abstinence and sometimes as asceticism), a disciplined stance of detachment and indifference towards desire, such that your own desires will never rule you. The narrative in *Book of God* takes the form of a frame story. A caliph asks his six sons what they want most in the world, explaining that he will use that information to help them along the path to their own spiritual fulfillment. As each son reveals what he wants, the father tells a series of stories to illustrate how that desire, properly understood and disciplined, can be turned to spiritual purposes. "The Tale of Marhuma" is the father's initial response to the first son, who explains that all he wants is to marry the princess of the peris (faeries), whose beauty is so profound that "to live my life beside her loveliness/would be to know the limit of perfection."⁴

It's not surprising that Attar chose to deal with the question of sexual desire first. Sufis define enlightenment in terms of love; they are lovers, and God is their Beloved. More to the point, though, the metaphors through which they understand this love are often explicitly sexual. So, for example, in *Conference of the Birds*, "The Story of Sheikh San'an" tells of how the sheikh so fully surrendered himself to his desire for a Christian woman that he was

willing to give up Islam and become a Christian in order to be with her (68-86). In another tale, "The Story of the Princess who Loved a Slave," the slave is drugged, then whisked away by the princess's attendants to spend the night with her. Afterwards, when the couple's passion has been spent and the slave is asleep, the attendants bring him back to his room. When he wakes, it appears to him that he never left his bed, and so he does not know if the ecstasy he experienced that night was real or just a dream, and this uncertainty torments him (212-216). The sheikh's desire, which remains unconsummated throughout his tale, and the slave's uncertainty about the nature of the sexual encounter he experienced—each represents a different stage in the lover's journey to be with the Beloved. What each has in common, though, is the torment of not being able to hold his Beloved in his arms.

The first son in *Book of God* is tormented as well. The peri princess, he says, is "all / I want, and if I have to live without her / the madness that remains will be my faith." Like Sheikh Sa'nān, the son lusts for a woman he believes will fulfill him. His father's response not only calls out this desire as a shallow, almost monetary transaction, but also puts the son's manhood on the line, suggesting that wanting what he wants, for the reasons he wants it, makes him more of a woman than a man:

"Beware of lust," the father said. "It turns men into drunken fools. The man who locks his heart pursuing sex will end by paying the last penny of his being. Imagine, though, a woman with a manly heart. Lust like yours will never haunt her. Listen! I'll tell of one who in God's court became, after her husband left her, a leader of men."

To have "a manly heart"—and Attar sounds this theme throughout *Book of God*—to be a "real" man, is to have the capacity to master yourself, something

the son, in his hunger for the peri princess, is clearly unable to do. The father hammers away at this point again and again throughout the first series of stories that he tells. So, for example, after "The Tale of Marhuma" is finished and the son demonstrates his inability to be like this "woman with a manly heart," the father tells him the story of another woman, saying at the end, "[L]earn from this woman what true love is; / and if you're less than a woman, cover your head. / You're not less than this next tale's catamite." Then, after the tale of the catamite, the father says, "If you cannot match this catamite in how / you love what you desire, surely your love / is not less than an ant's as it walks this road." There then follow several stories about ants, after which the father tells his son, "You are less than a dog, but if / you think that you are not, listen to this," and the father tells his son several stories to illustrate just how much more degraded than a dog he has allowed himself to become.

In each case, the story the father tells draws a distinction between the lust we feel of and for the body alone and what it means to commit yourself, body and soul, to love for its own sake, even (or perhaps especially) when that love is unattainable. In "The Tale of Marhuma," this unattainable love is represented by Marhuma's desire for her husband, who leaves her in his brother's care when he goes on pilgrimage to Mecca. Marhuma's brother-in-law is a selfish and unscrupulous man who, once he glimpses his sister-in-law's beauty—and she has this effect on all the men in the story—cannot help himself. He tries everything he can think of to have his way with her. When she refuses him, he threatens her with her own destruction, to which she replies, "I do not fear destruction. / This world in ruins is better for me / than the ruin you have planned for me." In response, he bribes four men to give false testimony against her, accusing her of adultery. The judge sentences her at once to be stoned, but, miraculously, she survives, and most of the ensuing

story is about how she falls into the hands of one man after another, each one determined to have her, and all but one of them guilty of mistreating her in the process.

At first glance, then, "The Tale of Marhuma" reads like a religious predecessor to the 1914 movie serial *The Perils of Pauline*, the title character of which has come to embody the idea of the damsel in distress. Yet it would be wrong to understand Marhuma in this way. Not only is she herself far from helpless, managing as she does to fend off one man after another, but, in the end, she transforms herself into a holy woman, one who is able to heal the sick with only her prayers. This transformation is what the father wants his son to pay attention to and learn from, though it's easy to lose sight of that fact, since so much else in the story makes it seem like a cautionary tale about the dangers of unbridled male lust. Indeed, all of the men who try to have their way with Marhuma are punished by God, some with death and some with a divinely inflicted paralysis, the cure for which they can, in the end, only get from her.

The son, of course, is supposed to see himself in those men, but his father barely mentions this, as if it is too obvious a point to bother with. Instead, the caliph frames the story in terms of the difference the son should recognize, and aspire to eliminate, between Marhuma and himself, suggesting that we as readers are supposed to see in her a struggle with love and desire not so different from the one the son is experiencing. To see that struggle for what it is, however, we need to remember what it would have meant to Marhuma's status as a woman and, more importantly, as a wife that she was tried and convicted of adultery. Facing almost certain divorce and abandonment when her husband returns from Mecca, she chooses to love him nonetheless, insisting on the value and integrity of her marriage, and remaining faithful to her husband, even when another man, a good man, offers the potentially clean slate

that marrying him and leaving her old life behind would provide.

Marhuma loves her husband, in other words, even though she knows she has almost certainly lost him, which means she has committed herself to that love for its own sake, for what it means to her and no one else. In this way, Attar presents Marhuma not simply as a sexual object onto which the men in the story project their desires—though those men certainly see her that way—but also as a sexual subject, a woman who makes her own choices, on her own terms, knowing full well what the consequences of those choices might be. Still, it would be a mistake to read into this portrayal of Marhuma some kind of protofeminist agenda on Attar's part. The value of Marhuma's suffering lies not in her self-realization as a spiritual woman, but rather in the true enlightenment she is able to achieve because of her "manly heart," which is what the caliph holds up as a model for his son.

Attar represents this transformation symbolically when he has Marhuma dress like a man in order finally to free herself from the depredations of male desire. Indeed, so convincing is Marhuma's performance as a man that when the king of the city where she finally settles is about to die, he tries to name her as his successor. More to the point, once her identity as a woman is revealed—which ought to have disqualified her from ruling—we learn that her biological sex no longer matters. The people who would have been her subjects when they thought she was a man tell her that they are just happy for her to rule them, even though she is a woman. The caliph's strategy in telling Marhuma's story, however, is less to offer his son a model for inspiration than it is to shame his son into proving himself manly enough in spirit to be seen as Marhuma's equal. Indeed, the stereotypical drill sergeant who calls his new recruits "ladies" to get them to prove they are otherwise is an apt analogy.

The son's response to "The Tale of Marhuma"

demonstrates that he has missed the point entirely. He at first accuses his father of wanting to eliminate sex, but over time, as the father piles story upon story, the son begins to ask the right questions, starts to look at his desire for the peri princess more critically, until, at last, he says, "If the princess of the peris can't be mine,

[I] cannot call my heart
my own, but since I know that she exists,
that she is lovely, tell me what she's like....
So deeply do I long for her, my soul
is at my lips."

Recognizing that his son is finally ready to hear the truth, the caliph gives this response:

You are in love—
but with yourself. Go home to yourself, then,
not out onto the plain, for in this love
true faith roots itself, as in your pure soul
the beloved is always waiting to be found.

Not to see this, the father says at the end of the last story he tells this son, to confuse desire for one's own soul with desire for another person is to "allow the bonds of time / to tie your feet," to make yourself "a thing of time," and to guarantee that, *in* time—as opposed to in eternal union with God—is where you will end. The stories have brought the son full circle. Once again, he is at the point where he can choose his desire for the peri princess or he can choose to follow the path of Marhuma. This time, however, it is clear that he will choose the latter.

This translation of "The Tale of Marhuma" resulted from a commission I received in 2003 from the now-defunct International Society for Iranian Culture (ISIC). The commission was to produce

literary versions of scholarly and/or out-of-date translations of classical Persian texts—to function, in other words, as a kind of co-translator for those original translators. ISIC's goal, conceived largely in response to George W. Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric and the policies it informed, was to sponsor the publication of books that would be accessible to a general readership and that would stand on their own as literary works in English. The organization's hope was to open a window on aspects of Iranian culture and history that most people in the United States have not had a chance to look through. Two volumes of a projected five-volume "Farsi Heritage Series" were published by Global Scholarly Publications (GSP) in 2004 and 2006 respectively, *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan* and *Selections from Saadi's Bustan*. GSP abandoned the project after publication of the *Bustan*, and so the third volume, *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* was published by Junction Press in 2011. Attar's *Ilahi Nameh* was supposed to be the fourth book in the series, but ISIC folded in 2013 and so the entire project was canceled.

The version of *Ilahi Nameh* that ISIC gave me to work from was John Andrew Boyle's line-by-line prose translation, *The Ilahi-Nama or Book of God of Farid al-Din Attar*, the only complete English translation that exists. While Boyle's version is widely recognized by scholars as accurate, it presents some obstacles for a general readership. First, Boyle chose a level of diction that makes Attar sound like the King James Bible, a style that is more likely than not to alienate non-specialist readers and that also misrepresents what Christopher Shackle calls Attar's "studiously clear" style (Shackle 187). Here, for example, is Boyle's rendering of the passage in which Marhuma berates her brother-in-law for trying to have his way with her:

She said to him: "Art thou not ashamed
before God? Dost thou thus show respect to

thy brother?

Is this thy religion and thy probity? Dost thou thus keep trust for thy brother?

Go, repent, return to God, and eschew this wicked thought."

That man said to the woman: "It is no use; thou must satisfy me at once,

Otherwise I will cease to concern myself about thee, I will expose thee to shame, I will slight thee.

Straightaway now I shall cast thee to destruction, I shall cast thee into a fearful plight."

(32)

Second, no doubt because his intention was to produce as literal a rendering of Attar's verse as possible, Boyle's translation often ends up being unintentionally comic and/or more difficult than necessary to comprehend. The first line of the final section of the "Exordium," in which Attar praises and meditates upon the greatness of God, is an example of such unintentional humor: "Come, musk of the soul, open thy musk-bladder, for thou art the deputy of the Vicar of God" (27). An example of a passage that Boyle makes more difficult to understand than might be necessary occurs in his version of the "The Tale of Marhuma" when Marhuma is about to be raped by the entire crew of a ship she is sailing on. As soon as she realizes what the men intend, she prays to God to save her. This is Boyle's rendering of that scene:

When the woman learned of these wicked men's feelings, she saw the whole sea as a liver from her heart's blood.

She opened her mouth [and said]: "O Knower of Secrets, preserve me from the evil of these wicked men." (38)

The phrase "the whole sea as a liver from her heart's blood" clearly relates to the idea in Iranian culture

that the liver, not the heart, is the seat of emotion, but the meaning of the phrase is far from clear. By way of comparison, here is my version:

Once she learned
what the men intended, she turned,
saw the sea surrounding her
fill with her heart's blood, a liver
holding all the terror she felt.
She opened her mouth as she knelt
to pray: "Protect me, Knower of Secrets!
Save me from this wickedness."

My version, it is true, "tames" the metaphor in a way that Boyle's does not—a move to which some translators and translation theorists object—but I made that choice in keeping with my original charge, which was to make the texts more accessible to a general readership. Another significant difference between my version and Boyle's is that mine has meter and a rhyme scheme, though I have retained only the loosest connection to Attar's prosody. Attar wrote *Book of God* in a form called *masnavi* (sometimes spelled *mathnavi*), the closest analogue to which in English is the heroic couplet. That form, however, felt in its own way no less outdated than the diction used by Boyle. The father in *Book of God* converses with his sons, argues with them, instructs them, persuades them. To my ear, the end-rhymes and mostly end-stopped lines of my first efforts in heroic couplets interfered with more than they illuminated the intellectual, philosophical, emotional, psychological, and theological content of this discourse. The greater flexibility of blank verse, the way it does not call as much attention to itself as a rhyming form does, seemed like a much better fit for a twenty-first century version of what this father and his sons have to say to each other.⁵

The second choice I made in moving away from an English-language analog to Attar's *masnavi* was to render the stories the father tells in a metrically

flexible and loosely rhymed iambic tetrameter. In other words, I have used two different poetic forms to render in English a poem that, in its original version, uses only one form throughout. At first, this choice was completely intuitive. As soon as I started to work on them, the father's stories fell naturally into rhyming, four-beat lines. The more I wrote in that form, though, the more sense it made to me as a conscious choice. The father's stories do not sound like he makes them up on the spot. Rather, they sound like teaching stories that have been used over and over again, and the father, when he tells them, seems to me to be code switching, speaking in a more performative voice than when he addresses his sons directly. I wanted a form that would indicate this switch, while at least echoing the rhyming form of the original. Iambic tetrameter couplets fit that bill.

Farid al-Din Attar is a poet to be reckoned with. Not only is he a central figure in the Persianate literary canon, and of Persian Sufism more specifically, but his work, especially *The Conference of the Birds*, has influenced the literary and cultural landscape of the West in ways that continue to reverberate. As recently as 2014, for example, an English translation of Peter Brook's and Jean-Claude Carrière's 1979 theatrical adaptation of Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, *La Conférence des oiseaux*, was performed at the B Street Theatre in California; in 2013, Penguin Books reprinted children's author Peter Sis's artistic treatment of *Conference of the Birds*. In 2006, the musical group Om recorded an album called *Conference of the Birds*, and the year before that, Jeffrey Lewis published *The Conference of the Birds: A Novel* (Other Press, 2005). Neither of these latter works refers

directly to Attar's poem, but the titles are clearly intended to evoke its spirit.

Reckoning with Attar's work is important for at least one other reason as well. As Franklin Lewis illustrates in his 2008 lecture, "Chaucer's Pious Queen and a Persian in a Pear Tree," the striking similarities between the suffering endured by Marhuma in Attar's *Book of God* and Custance in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" suggest that the two stories may share a common origin. Of interest not only to medievalists, folklorists, and other scholars for whom the provenance of such tales is an object of study, this commonality also points to a history of cultural interchange between the so-called "Muslim East" and "Christian West" that (at least according to Franklin) has not been adequately investigated until now.

The current political moment—the nuclear deal with Iran, the fight against ISIS and other in-the-name-of-Islam extremisms, and the disturbing increase in Islamophobic rhetoric and violence—does make palpable the need to understand this interchange and to integrate it into how we view the world around us. Yet deepening our understanding of how stories move through the world can also teach us a lot about ourselves. We are, after all, a species that defines itself through the tales we tell, and when the tales are as well-told as Attar's, the lessons they contain are usually worth learning. I hope this version of "The Tale of Marhuma" begins to make the case that the stories in Attar's *Book of God* deserve to take their place in English literary culture next to those from *The Conference of the Birds*.

The Tale of Marhuma⁶

*A man who'd seen the world and lost his friends
along the way, whose heart roiled, whose mind
found no rest,⁷ heard from someone who knew
the tale of the caliph and his six sons first hand.
These sons were lofty and ambitious men
who sometimes let pride fill their noble heads.
They'd mastered, without peer, all the knowledge
of their time; and since they were such masters
in this world—and each was an Adam in both worlds—
their father one day sat them down and said,
“You all know well what there is to know.
You are a caliph's sons, princes, each of you.
Tell me what you want this world to give you!
One wish or one hundred—it doesn't matter.
Once I know the way you think, I'll teach you—
each according to his desire—how
to realize what you wish for.”*

*The first son
revealed what he'd kept hidden until then,
“Wise and well-respected men relate
that the peris⁸ ruler has a virgin daughter
of whom the moon itself is a pale shadow.
They say her beauty is the mind's beauty,
that, like the soul, nothing on earth or in heaven
shines as brightly. Teach me to make her mine,
and I'll want nothing else till Judgment Day.
To live my life beside her loveliness
would be to know the limit of perfection.
To have the sun so near—why would I wish
for just a single beam of light? She's all
I want, and if I have to live without her,
the madness that remains will be my faith.”
“Beware of lust,” the father said. “It turns
men to drunken fools. The man who locks
his heart pursuing sex will end by paying
the last penny of his being. Imagine,
though, a woman with a manly heart.
Lust like yours will never haunt her. Listen!*

*I'll tell of one who in God's court became,
after her husband left her, a leader of men:
Her hair fell against her cheek
like night against the day; each lock
adorned her face with fifty curls.
People scattered their words like pearls
at her feet, calling her Marhuma.
Her eyebrows arched like nun; like sad,
her eyes were almond-shaped. God
had inscribed her loveliness with *nass*.⁹
Virtue joined in her with kindness,
with charm and sweetness. Modest, chaste,
a sign by which the world was graced
with goodness and nobility—
the waters of immortality
flowed from her carnelian lips.
No one could resist her. Perhaps
you'd see in her smile an open shell
revealing its pearl; perhaps you'd call
her lips rubies and her teeth
pearls set perfectly beneath.
Her chin was like a silver apple:
affliction came from that apple.
Heaven itself reeled like a lover,
its soul in turmoil at the sight of her.
The turning of the turning wheel¹⁰
endowed her with a man's mettle,
and if you met her you would say
her courage was a lion's.*

One day,

her husband left to go on hajj,¹¹
giving his younger brother charge
of his household and his property.
With a selfish heart, the brother accepted,
providing, most reluctantly,
whatever his sister-in-law might need.
Day and night he worked for her,
and then one day he glanced at her
and lost his heart, his head, his soul,
to what he saw behind her veil.
How shall I describe his fate.

when her beauty's snare pulled tight
around his heart? It was as if
a hundred lives were lost. His love
conquered reason. The more he struggled,
the stronger his feelings grew. He willed
himself at first to do nothing.

She was not his to have. Wanting
soon prevailed, however, and sense
abandoned him completely. With force,
and then with gold, and then with tears,
he tried to have his way, but she had hers,
driving him away heaped with scorn.

"How before God does your face not burn
with shame? Is this your religion? Are these
your morals? And your brother? Is this
the respect you have for him? Is this
how you repay his trust? Repent!
Find your way back to God;
let this evil desire fade!"

The man replied, "You have no choice!
Give me what I want at once
or I will stop protecting you.
I guarantee that shame will find you,
and you will be destroyed."

The woman
answered, "I do not fear destruction.
This world in ruins is better for me
than the ruin you have planned for me."
Fearing she would tell his brother
what he'd tried to do, that vulgar,
shameless man took his gold
and bought as quickly as he could
the testimony of four men,
who swore, the wretches, that they'd seen
the woman committing adultery.
The case came before the qadi,¹²
who at once sentenced her to stoning.
In open country, on a high road,
they gathered round her, throwing stones
at her head like hail, till the signs
that her soul had left her moved them to leave her

as a warning to others. She lay there,
luckless in the blood-soaked dust. Night
passed, day broke, the growing sunlight
warmed her, woke her, brought her no relief.
She moaned her weakness and her grief,
tears like blood-red-tulips falling
from her pale narcissus eyes, covering
the Judas-tree flowers blooming
on her cheeks.

§§§

A Bedouin riding
his camel beneath that rising sun
approached. Her cries pierced him. Her pain
forced him to stop. Dismounting, he asked,
"Who would leave you alone like this?
He must have thought you were dead."
"I am sick and grieving," the woman replied,
"and very badly hurt." He said,
"I will take care of you," lifted her
onto his camel and took her to where
his tents were pitched. He tended her
assiduously. Slowly, her health
returned and, with it, the wealth
she could do nothing to conceal.
Once more, her raven hair cascaded;
her lips ripened a pomegranate red.
From beneath the many stones of her stoning,
she emerged, a ruby, bright and shining,
and her splendor was more than the Bedouin
could bear. He loved, and desire's pain
turned the shirt he wore to a shroud.
"Marry me," he said. "I have died,
and lying with you is my resurrection."
"I have a husband," she replied.
"You know that one is all I'm allowed."
After a time, when his love had grown
beyond all limits, he tried again,
this time in private, but she said,
"You who have turned away from God,

are you not afraid? You brought me back
from the edge of death for His sake.
Give yourself to this demon's hand
and the good you've done will rot. Your hand
on me will split the Ka'ba¹³ of our bond.
I have refused this thing before,
and I was stoned for it. Once more
you would call me to it? Know this:
my faith is pure. Rip me to pieces!
Nothing will stain my unstained flesh!
So let me go. Fulfill this wish
and you buy with your soul a place in hell."
The woman's honesty compelled
the man. He took her as his sister,
repenting his evil intention.

A black
slave the Bedouin owned came back
just then from a trip. He saw the woman's
face and gave up his heart. The man's
soul was in flames, his body consumed.
In his heart, a single desire plumed.
"I am night," he said. "You are moon.
"Why refuse me?"

"Your master, moon-
faced beauty that he is, made me
this offer many times. If he
failed to persuade me, what makes you think
your black face and low rank
would fair any better?"

"Turn me away,"
the slave threatened, "and you will be
forced out into the cruel desert.
End my torment and you'll be spared."
"Do what you will," she said. "I'm not
afraid." Soon after, the slave snuck out.
Love had made him hunger. Hatred
made him do this: he went to the child
newly borne to his master's wife
and, while it slept, ended its life.
Unseen, he planted the bloody knife
beneath that other woman's pillows.

In the morning, when the mother rose
to nurse her baby, her anguished cries—
she'd been greeted by its severed head—
filled the world. She cut her braids,
pulling them tight around her waist
in grief and mourning. "Who dared shed,"
she wailed, "this helpless child's blood?"
They searched the camp and found the dagger
where the slave had left it. "Murderer!"
they cried, the slave and the child's mother,
and beat that woman without mercy.
"What evil do you see in me?"
the Bedouin asked her. "What harm
have I done to you that *this* harm—
spilling an innocent child's blood—
does not fill your limbs with dread?"
The woman said, "God gave you reason
for a reason. Use it, chaste one!
For Heaven, you made me your sister
and, like a brother, gave me shelter.
You nurtured me with kindness. Why
would I repay you in this way?
What possible honor would I gain?"
The Bedouin knew at once the woman
spoke the truth, but he also knew
he had no choice: she'd have to go.
"This thing has fallen hard on you,"
he said, "and made your presence here
impossible. My wife will know
no other's guilt but yours. She'll bear
through each unfolding moment the face
of the child she's lost, and she will chase
every opportunity
to cast aspersions and treat you badly.
If I disagree, she'll do much worse.
You have no choice but to leave this place."
Then, telling no one what he did,
he put in her hand three hundred
dirhems. "To buy whatever you need,"
he said, "wherever your road may lead."
Heartbroken, the woman accepted.

\$\$\$

A short distance down the road,
on the outskirts of a village, a crowd
had gathered to watch a young man
being prepared for the gallows.
“Who is this?” the woman asked. “What is
his crime?”

“This village,” an old man
answered her, “is owned by one
so unjust he knows no peer.
It’s always been the custom here
that those whose taxes are not paid
are sentenced at this roadside,
to die by hanging upside down.
This young man’s life will be ended soon.”
“How much is his debt?” the woman asked.
“Three hundred dirhems,” the old man said.
“Even though it is your life,”
she told herself, “redeem his life
with it. Just as you kept your life
despite those stones, use your life
so he can keep his own.” She called
out, “If I pay, will he be sold
to me?”

“Of course,” they said. She paid,
waited till the man was freed,
and then resumed her journey. Filled
with gratitude, that young man flew
to thank her, fast as an arrow,
but then he glimpsed the shape of her face
and knew at once the scope of his loss.
His soul rose to sit on his lips¹⁴
and his cries reached heaven’s steps.
“Why did she give me back my life?
If only I had lost my life,
I would not now be forced to bear
this all-encompassing despair,
my soul-consuming love for her.”
Pressing his case, he followed her,
but it gained him nothing. No flame

burned in her for him to fan;
and his begging only brought her shame.
“Is this the way you treat a woman?”
the woman asked. “Is this how you
reward the good I did for you?”
“My heart, my soul,” the young man said,
“You’ve stolen them! To turn my head,
to gaze for even a single moment
on anything else—I just can’t!”
“If you don’t turn your head from me,
you won’t have anything from me,”
the woman responded.

After many
miles of such talk, they came to the sea.
On the shore, a ship making ready,
filling with merchandise and merchants.
Because he knew he had no chance
with her, he called up to this vessel,
hoping someone would hear, “My slave-girl
shines like the moon! Except for her pride—
and no slave ever has been as rude
or disobedient—to own her
is to own perfection. I can’t,
however, endure her any longer.
I’ll sell her to you if you want.”
That righteous, helpless woman warned,
“I’m not for sale! I have a husband,
and I am free! By my own hand
this man escaped an unjust death.”
One merchant ignored her, set her worth
at a hundred dirhems. The young man
sold her without negotiation.
That merchant heeded the young man’s words,
forced the woman to endure
cruelty upon cruelty.
He wanted to break her spirit.
As soon as he put her on the boat,
the crew put out to sea, and what
he learned when he at last beheld
the face and figure she kept veiled
was that her beauty cost his soul.

His lust, a ravenous crocodile,
thrashed about; his heart, storm-tossed
like driftwood on the waves, was lost.
As he stepped towards her, she fell to her knees,
crying out to the crew, "Please,
good people, I need your help! You
are Muslim and I am Muslim! You
believe and I believe! As God
is my witness, I am free, and married.
Don't you have mothers and sisters
who wear the veil? Don't you have daughters?
Would you permit a man like this
to ruin them? Then why let this
man ruin me? Stop this devil!
Can't you see I'm a stranger in trouble,
a helpless woman, weak and vile.
Don't offend the Consumer of Souls
more than you already have! Your souls,
it is certain, will face tomorrow's dawn."

Her words compelled the crew's compassion,
and, as friends, seeing her desperation,
they protected her; but each one
who saw her face—and each one did—
sold in that moment a hundred
hearts for love of her. The whole ship
went mad with desire. At first, they kept
their hunger to themselves, but then,
slowly—each one only with one
other man—they shared the longing
piercing them all with this single need:
they had to have her. Once she learned
what the men intended, she turned,
saw the sea surrounding her
fill with her heart's blood, a liver
holding all the terror she felt.
She opened her mouth as she knelt
to pray: "Protect me, Knower of Secrets!
Save me from this wickedness.
In both worlds, I am alone
except for You. Cleanse these men

of this desire or grant me death,
for who, in my place, would not choose death?
By Your will, each step I've taken
has been steeped in blood. How much longer
is it Your will that I should suffer?"

When she was done, she fell unconscious,
but her prayers were answered. All at once
aflame, the water rose in angry
rings around the ship. The sea
burned with all the fires of hell,
and, helpless against it, the men fell,
all of them, into the blaze,
burning to ash. Their merchandise,
though, remained unscathed. A wind
filled the ship's sails until it found
a port. Alone at last, the woman
put on men's clothing. As a man,
she reasoned, she would no longer suffer
the depredations men had forced on her.

§§§

The road running past the harbor
brought people from a nearby town,
and when they saw *him* sitting there,
a young man handsome as the moon,
alone on the deck with a world's worth
of goods, they asked, "Where on this earth
do these goods come from? And did you sail
this ship all by yourself?"

"Until
I stand before your king," *he* said,
"I will not tell my tale." They told
their king, "A sun-cheeked youth, alone
on a vessel laden with goods, put in
today at our harbor. His story, he says,
is for no one else's ears but yours."
Intrigued, the king went to question
this "moon of the age" for himself. The woman,
in the guise of a man, gave this answer.
"We were many. We traveled far,

sailing day and night without stop.
In their idleness, some on the ship
let the sight of me inflame their lust
and chose, in its grip, to pursue me. I pressed
God with my prayers and, by His mercy,
the sea rose up in flames to save me
and illuminate my soul. See!
That mound of charcoal was once a man.
Not even the crew's bones remain.
I understand this as a warning.
The world and its things are not for me.
All the merchandise you see
is yours. I ask a simple thing
in return. Build me on this shore
a shrine where I can worship. Declare
that no one—neither clean nor unclean—
should ever approach. Since fortune
has ended my journey on this spot,
I'll pray to God here day and night.”
Her words so awed the king and his army,
it never occurred to them to stray
from what she asked. They built for her
a shrine so hallowed you would swear
it was the Ka'ba itself; and there
she devoted herself to her Creator,
and lived in peace year after year.
When the king fell into death's snare,
he called his army and his court.
“I will soon leave this life,” he said,
“and I think that hermit youth should lead
when I am gone. His rule will bring
contentment. You are witnessing
my last will and testament!
Be sure that everything I want
is carried out as I've instructed.”
When he finished speaking, his soul ascended,
immaculate, and the earth opened
its dusty mouth and swallowed him.
As soon as they had buried him,
his ministers summoned all who called him
sovereign, and they went as one

to tell that holiest of women
their ruler's final wish. "This realm
belongs to you. Your smallest whim,"
they said, "is our command." But how
can a hermit become a monarch? "Now,"
they urged her when she tried to refuse,
"is your time, holy one. Choose
to rule us. You have no excuse!"
"If I can't say no," the woman responded,
"if I must become your king, I need
a wife whose beauty lights the world
like a piece of moon fallen from heaven.
I am finally tired of being alone;
and a king requires a lawful spouse."
The noblemen answered, "Our daughters, of course,
are yours to choose from."

"No," she said.

"As soon as possible, send instead
a hundred young women, each one
with her mother. She will chaperone
as I evaluate her daughter.
My bride must be beyond compare."
Eager, hopeful, those noble men
rushed to gather a hundred women,
found them within the hour, and sent them,
overwhelmed and shy—each escorted
by her mother—to where the woman waited.
"How can it ever be," she pleaded,
revealing to them the truth of her body,
"that the crown of this realm should pass to me?"
"Trust your eyes," she told them. "Tell
your husbands the truth. Relieve my soul
of this burden I cannot carry."

Shocked,

bewildered, the women brought this fact
to their men, and all who heard it, great
and small, marveled at her secret.
They sent a woman back to her.
"As our monarch's chosen heir,
it falls to you to designate
our next sovereign. If you won't, put

the crown on your own fair head
and rule us like a man." She selected
someone they could all accept
and returned to the prayerful life she'd built.
*That woman could have ruled. Instead, my son,
she turned the crown away and chose for them
a suitable successor to their king.
You, for a measly piece of bread, would trade
the top of the world for its bottom. She refused
a throne. What man on this earth would do the same?*

§§§

Her fame spread throughout the world,
and soon everyone had heard
that, in such-and-such a place, a woman
who knew no equal among men,
whose prayers God answered, lived.
With just her breath she healed the legs
of many who were paralyzed,
and when they walked away from her
they carried word of her healing power
far and wide. Still, none of them knew
the true limit of what she could do.
During those days, her husband returned
from Mecca. Finding her gone, he burned
as one caught in the fires of hell.
Then, a second grief seared his soul.
His brother was blind and paralyzed.
As these two great torments blazed
within him, his grieving an endless cycle
of back and forth between them, he asked
about his wife. "Her betrayal,"
his brother told him, "was witnessed
by men who swore to it in court.
The man was a soldier. It broke my heart,
but the qadi's sentence was death by stoning.
Justice was served. End your mourning
and live your life. She is gone."
The knowledge of what his wife had done
plunged him so deeply into grieving

that he beat himself and crawled weeping
into a corner, where he stayed
for days without speaking. He worried
for his brother, though. Nothing
moved on *him* except his tongue.
When seeing that poor soul suffer
was finally more than the husband could bear,
he said, "You who can neither move
nor see, a woman whose prayers give
sight back to the blind, whose words
always bring the grace of God's
mercy to those deserving souls
whose sick and broken selves she heals—
they say that one like you will walk
if she prays over you. I'll take
you to her if you want. Maybe,
for her sake, God will make you healthy."
At these words, his brother's heart
swelled with hope and joy. "Let's start
as soon as we can. You know that you
are the only one I can turn to."
As soon as his brother had finished speaking,
the husband called for his mule, securing
his brother on the beast's back.
They rode for days until, as luck
would have it, at dusk, they arrived
at the place where that Bedouin lived.
Generous as ever, he welcomed them.
"Please," he said, "make my home
yours for the night." Once they were settled,
he asked, "How far have you traveled
and where are you going?"

"I've heard about
a woman," the husband replied, "a hermit
whose prayers cure the blind. We're searching
for her. My brother needs the healing
they say only she can give. Maybe
he will walk once more; maybe
he will regain his sight."

The Bedouin
said, "Once a very wise woman

lived with us, but then my slave
assaulted her, forcing her to leave.
As a result, like your brother,
he fell blind and paralyzed. No other
cure has worked. We will come with you.
Perhaps this woman will heal him too.”
The road those four men traveled
showed them places far and wide,
but then it led them to the spot
where that young man’s gallows had been built.
In that whole village, just one room
fit their needs. It belonged to him.
Strangely enough, he too was blind
and paralyzed. “We may have found
this place by chance, but look at him,”
the husband told the Bedouin.
“They’re the same: his grief, the ‘goods’ we carry;
we traffick in his currency.
It’s fitting we should spend the night.”
The young man’s mother inquired
about the brother and the slave.
They did not hesitate; they told her
everything, and what she heard
brought tears to flood her eyes. “My son,”
she said, “is sick like this as well.
What else can we do? We will go with you.”
Before they could answer yes or no,
she rose, called for a horse, and,
tying her son safely on its back,
joined them as they resumed their journey.
They reached the woman’s house at dawn,
just as that morning’s happiness breathed.
The woman walked outside and saw
her husband traveling towards her.
She fell to the ground in joyful prayer.
“What should I do? What words suffice?
How can I ever show my face
before my husband?” She looked more closely.
Through her tears she saw the three
who’d been her mortal enemies.
“My husband has brought witnesses,”

she said, "whose useless feet and hands
testify to their great sins.

Once I look into their eyes, what need
will I have to speak a word? God
is the only witness I require."

Wrapping her veil tightly around her,
she met them. "Tell me why you're here,"
she said, eying her husband.

"I've come,"

he answered, "to ask you to pray for him."

He pointed to his brother. "This man
is paralyzed and blind."

"This man,"

she said, "has filled himself with sin.

To free himself, he must confess.

If not, his eyes will remain in darkness;
his hands and feet will never move."

"Tell us what you did and save
yourself," that godly man urged.

"What sin could possibly be worth
such constant suffering?"

"I'd choose

to live a hundred years like this,"

his brother said, "than speak a word
of that event."

The brothers conferred
for many hours until, compelled
by shame, the guilty brother told
the tale from start to finish. "This deed
has maimed my body," he said. "My fate
is yours to decide. You have the right
to see me dead for what I've done,
or to forgive me if you can."
The husband went off by himself
to struggle with what he'd heard. "My wife,"
he thought, "is gone, but I can save
my brother—him I can forgive."
He forgave him. The woman prayed,
and in that single moment, freed
the brother from his hundred pains.
He could see, and walk, and close his hands.

The Bedouin spoke next, insisted
that his slave declare the sinful deed
that left him stricken. "But afterward,"
the slave responded, "you *will* kill me.
So how do I dare confess?"

"Tell me
the truth," the Bedouin said. "Your life
is yours. I forgive you. No more
excuses."

The slave spoke, "I murdered
your child, making sure the blame
fell on that innocent woman. I am
as I am because of that crime."
When the slave finished speaking, the woman
offered a prayer and, once again,
the sinner could see, and walk, and provide
for his own needs.

The mother chided
her son into speaking next. He said,
"A woman redeemed me from the gallows
and I am like this now because
I paid her back by selling her."
One more time, the woman's prayer
restored a sinner's limbs and eyes.
All were forgiven for their crimes,
so she sent them all back outside,
except for her husband. Him she faced,
lifting the veil from her face. Her face
caused him to cry out, and faint.
"What's wrong," she asked when he awoke.
"Your face, your speech, the way you walk—
Once, I had a wife, but now I'd say...
except I know her bones are dust—
grief stricken though I am, I'd insist
that you were her!"

"Your wife," she told him,
did not die and was guilty of no crime!
Many times God saved my life
and by His grace gave me *this* life,
where I have walked religion's path;
and now I offer with each breath

a hundred thanks for this reunion,
His gift to us." At this, the man
fell to the ground in prayer, "Pure One,
dear God, how will my tongue find words
to thank You for what is beyond all words?"
He went outside and told the tale
to all who'd traveled with him, and all
cried out to heaven in wonder,
the slave, the young man, and the brother
most of all. Shamed though they were,
they rejoiced at their good fortune,
for now that each had been forgiven,
the woman made them wealthy men.
Her husband she crowned king; she made
the Bedouin his new vizier,
and once she knew she could be sure
of the happy foundation she had laid,
she gave the rest of her life to God.

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to the four works mentioned in this essay, Attar is recognized as the author of *Mukhtar-nama* (*Book of Selections*), *Asrar-nama* (*Book of Mysteries*), and *Moshihat-nama* (*Book of Adversity*). Navid Kermani recently published a study of *The Book of Adversity*—he translates the title as *Book of Suffering*—called *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* (Polity 2011).
- ² There is no single, agreed upon method of transliterating Persian into English, with the result that different scholars will often spell the same words or names differently. For the sake of consistency, I have, except when quoting directly from other texts or using their titles, used the transliterations found in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, an authority that all scholars accept. However, to simplify the text for readers who are not familiar with Persian and/or the International Phonetic Alphabet, I have removed all diacritical marks.
- ³ In addition to the Darbandi-Davis translation already mentioned, a partial list includes Peter Sis's 2011 illustrated version, *The Conference of the Birds* (Penguin Press); an Australian version of the epic, *An Australian Conference Of The Birds* (Black Pepper, 1995) by Anne Fairbairn; Peter Brook's 1982 stage adaptation; Jeffrey Lewis' novel, *The Conference of the Birds: A Novel* (Other Press 2005); and a 2006 album by the group Om called *Conference of the Birds*.
- ⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Attar's *Book of God* are my translation.
- ⁵ Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi made precisely the opposite choice in their translation of *Conference of the Birds*. Their explanation in that text's introduction, particularly the discussion of the tension between Attar's subjects, which are "largely connected with the breaking of convention" and the "formal paradigm" of the heroic couplet (23-24), is worth reading.
- ⁶ "Marhuma" means, literally, the pitied woman. It is an honorific used to refer to the dead to signify that God has forgiven their sins.
- ⁷ The image connotes a Sufi who is traveling the path of enlightenment and is in the throes of his desire for God.

- ⁸ The *peris* are the forerunners of the mythical creatures we know as faeries.
- ⁹ The word play here is untranslatable. The letters *nun* and *sad* form the word *nass*, which means a true and legally binding divine revelation. The letter *nun*, however, appears by itself at the beginning of some of the Suras in the Quran, where its meaning is uncertain. The sense of these lines, then, is that the woman's beauty, represented in her eyes and eyebrows, is as real and indisputable as *nass*, not mysterious and uncertain like the letter *nun* when it appears by itself.
- ¹⁰ Fate or fortune.
- ¹¹ *Hajj* is the term for the pilgrimage to Mecca that all devout Muslims are supposed to make at least once in their lives.
- ¹² A *qaḍī* is a judge who reviews civil, judicial, and religious matters according to Islamic law.
- ¹³ Located in Mecca, the Ka'ba is the most sacred site in all of Islam.
- ¹⁴ This is a metaphor for being near death.

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