

# The Rhetoric and Performance of the Trickster Nasreddin<sup>1</sup>

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The legendary Nasreddin is the most popular folk character in the lore of the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, Southern Russia, and Transcaucasia. There are some regional variations on his name. The Turks, Greeks, Serbs, Croatians, and Albanians call him Nasreddin Hoçâ (pronounced “Hoja”). In Iran and the modern-day republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia, he is called Mullâ Nasreddin. Some of the puns attributed to Nasreddin originated in the Arab world, where the trickster is called Johâ (Djohâ). In Central Asia, Nasreddin is known as Ependi (Effendi).

<sup>1</sup>A special thanks to Warren Walker and Ulrich Marzolph who got us started on this project and sent us their publications. John R. Perry gave numerous suggestions; Edward Simon sent us information on Jewish and German tricksters. Thanks also to Chris Eklund for research assistance and Nicholas Murray for editorial assistance.

Janet Afary and Kamran Afary, “The Rhetoric and Performance of the Trickster Nasreddin,” *Iran Namag*, Volume 2, Number 1 (Spring 2017), II- XXVIII.

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Through Uighur adaptations the trickster reached modern China where he became Afanti.<sup>2</sup>

Nasreddin also has several homelands. Persian and some Arabic sources suggest he came from Kufa (present-day Iraq) and lived in the second half of the ninth century CE. Turkish sources insist he was a Turk and a contemporary of the Mongol ruler Timur (d. 1405 CE), who invaded Asia Minor, the Middle East, and India, and defeated the Ottomans in 1402 in the Battle of Ankara. There is a shrine in the city of Aq Shahr (Konya), in present-day Turkey, where Timur is supposed to have met Nasreddin. Modern Turkey adopted Nasreddin as a national symbol, and an annual festival celebrating his deeds has been held in Aq Shahr since 1959.<sup>3</sup>

Ulrich Marzolph, the foremost scholar of the wise fool in the Muslim world, argues that the narrative traditions of Nasreddin and Johâ developed apart from one another until modern times, when published sources combined them.<sup>4</sup> Stories attributed to Mullâ Nasreddin come from many sources. They include tales of the Turkish Nasreddin Hoçâ, the Arab trickster Johâ, and wise fools of classical Persian literature, some of which circulated in manuscript tradition for several centuries. Marzolph concludes that Mullâ Nasreddin is a composite figure that emerged in the late nineteenth century, though his “presence in the Persian tradition is much older, in fact dating from the beginning of the present millennium.”<sup>5</sup>

The first modern printed edition of Nasreddin Hoçâ stories appeared in Turkish in 1837. An Arabic edition, based partly on the 1837 one and partly on anecdotes from Arabic sources, was published in Cairo in 1864. This Arabic edition was translated into Persian in 1881. The anonymous Persian translator, who points out that many of the stories were long known to Persians, writes, “While reading [the Arabic edition] it became clear that the protagonist of the quoted accounts is the very Mullâ Nasreddin whose well-known name and cherished fame is renowned with all

<sup>2</sup>See Ulrich Marzolph, “Nasr Al-Din Khodia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al. (Leiden: Brill, [1993] 1996), 1018–19; Marzolph, “Persian Nasreddiniânâ: A Critical Review of Their History and Sources,” in *Milletlerarası Nasreddin Hoçâ Sempozyumu Bildirileri* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1990), 239–47; Inea Bushnaq, *Arab Folklore* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Marzolph, “Persian Nasreddiniânâ,” 239. See also Mohammad Ali Modarres, *Reyhanat al-Adab*. 9 vols. (Tabriz: Shafaq Press, 1970),

6:189; Charles Downing and William Papas, *Tales of the Hodja* (New York: Bowmar, 1965), 3; Hakki Gurkas, “Nasreddin Hodja and the Aksehir Festival: Invention of a Festive Tradition and Transfigurations of a Trickster, from Bukhara to Brussels” (PhD diss., Purdue University, Indiana, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Marzolph, “Nasr Al-Din Khodia,” 1019.

<sup>5</sup>Ulrich Marzolph, “Mullâ Nasr al-Din in Persia,” in *Iranian Studies* 28, nos. 3–4 (Summer/Fall 1995): 157–74.

people.”<sup>6</sup> This move, from oral and manuscript tradition to modern printed edition, involved an important change in the character of the folk tale. The sexually and religiously transgressive stories of Nasreddin were gradually shed, leaving behind a vast majority of the tales, and Nasreddin himself was made into an educator of children and, alternately, a “cunning philosopher.”<sup>7</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, hundreds of anecdotes, folk tales, and vignettes in Iran were attributed to Mullâ Nasreddin, a not-so-pious and low-level Muslim cleric whose foolish deeds and clever sayings turned him into the most popular Iranian folk character.<sup>8</sup>

As with most tricksters, the vague origins of Nasreddin contributed to his enormous popularity and increased the charm and mystery of the stories attributed to him.

The humor surrounding Nasreddin transcends ethnicity, religion, national boundary, age, and sometimes gender. Despite antagonisms fueled by modern national identities, Turks, Kurds, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Serbs, Albanians, Georgians, and many other nationalities find the stories of Nasreddin refreshingly funny, brutally honest, and universally relevant.

Parents have used these tales both as pedagogical tools and as a means of entertaining children and youth, who continue to adore these stories that took place long ago in dusty bazaars, crowded coffee houses, and busy caravansaries, where donkeys and horses mingled with people. The tales deal with ageless human dilemmas, with injustice, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, and fraud. They also address many social and cultural concerns, from unfulfilled bodily needs and desires to stifling rituals and taboos.

This article briefly explores the perspectives of Jung, Foucault, Bakhtin, and several other contemporary theorists on the trickster figure in Western folklore. We then turn to Mullâ Nasreddin as a distinct transgressive character and popular figure in Persian literature and the way in which it consistently violates customs, religious taboos, and gender norms, thereby forcing readers to momentarily question the boundaries of sacrosanct social norms.

<sup>6</sup>Marzolph, “Persian Nasreddiniânâ,” 243; see also Marzolph, “Nasr Al-Din Khodia,” 1018-19.

<sup>7</sup>Hakki Gurkas points out that the Turkish Folklorist Pertev Naili Baratov has collected 594 old tales, while the Azeri folklorist Tahmasib gathered 512 old Nasreddin tales. In contrast, the 1837 Turkish edition of Nasreddin Hoçâ tales

included only 134 tales. See Gurkas, “Nasreddin Hodja and the Aksehir Festival,” 2008.

<sup>8</sup>Another source for some of the stories was the sixteenth-century collection of anecdotes by Fakhroddin Ali Safi, known as *Lata'if al-Tava'if*, ed. Ahmad Golchin Ma'âni (Tehran: Iqbal Press), 1967.

## The Wise Fool and the Subversive Trickster

In his *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster*, Carl Jung delves into the psychological dimensions of the trickster figure. He points out that the trickster is often a negative hero, “who managed to accomplish through his foolhardiness what others failed to accomplish with great effort.”<sup>9</sup> The trickster is the remnant of a “collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of character in individuals” that had gradually become unacceptable. Human civilization has introduced a strict gender division: men repress their feminine qualities (anima) and women repress their masculine side (animus). But after midlife, for men, a “permanent loss of anima brought about a diminution of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness.”<sup>10</sup>

Jung, who was influenced by Nietzsche and Freud, believes that the retelling and revisiting of folktales satisfies the desire for nonconformity without recourse to rebellion or violence. The repeated telling of trickster stories has a therapeutic effect, as it reminds people of their dormant emotions. Our amazement and enjoyment in hearing trickster tales is rooted in the psychological release we gain when bits and pieces of our subdued desires are permitted to float to the surface without fear of reprimand.<sup>11</sup>

If Jung credits the trickster with the release of trapped emotions, Michel Foucault sees the fool as the gateway to the imagination. In *Madness and Civilization* he notes that the fool was regarded with a certain sense of awe and wonder in Renaissance Europe. The simpleton lived at the border of reason and instinct, of the real and the imagined, between the world of mortals and that of spirits, ghosts, and goblins. Foucault turns to Cervantes, Erasmus, and Shakespeare to show that the idiot, the madman, and the fool reveal certain wisdoms in their folly. They provide a glimpse into the “dizzying unreason of the world.”<sup>12</sup> The fool’s ability to transgress conventional boundaries shows the hypocrisy of the rational world and betrays the ignorance of the pompous theologian, the arrogant scholar, or the wealthy lord.

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin regards the carnivalesque fool as a social equalizer who symbolically flouts norms and privileges. Bakhtin turns to folk culture to show that the celebration of folly was an integral part of both low and high cultures

<sup>9</sup>Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/ Spirit/ Trickster*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 135.

<sup>10</sup>C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 71.

<sup>11</sup>Jung, *Four Archetypes*, 150.

<sup>12</sup>Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Press, 1988), 13.

of Renaissance Europe. Bakhtin shows how official truth was mocked in the novels of Francois Rabelais. It was subverted, degraded, and brought down to earth in spring carnivals and Feasts of Fools; in puppet shows and school plays; and in folk stories, proverbs, and parodies.<sup>13</sup> Folk humor is powerful because of its “grotesque realism,” by which Bakhtin means the free and unfettered description of bodily functions, part of “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract.”<sup>14</sup> Folk humor brings its powerful targets down to earth; it undresses (actually or metaphorically), debases, and symbolically kills them. It levels the ground “in order to bring forth something newer and better.”<sup>15</sup> Calling attention to the nude body, the lower half of the body, the belly, the genitals, the buttocks, and actions involving “defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, birth” creates a sense of degradation.<sup>16</sup> Humor is the main staple of the annual carnival and the comic shows of the market. Humor is also an essential component of various verbal compositions and parodies that were passed down from generation to generation. It has its place in a variety of coarse and abusive expressions.<sup>17</sup> It remains a powerful subversive tool.

In the carnivals of medieval Europe, a fool was elected king, and the public was momentarily released from the regulations of the Church. Hierarchical distinctions of status, class, gender, and age were suspended for a few days. Participants no longer felt bound by proper norms of etiquette and decency. Bakhtin emphasizes the regenerative nature of the spring festival, which marked the death of the old and the birth of the new. He emphasizes its pervasive gaiety and irreverence, also pointing to the occasional violence on the streets during the festivities. Bakhtin laments the fact that by the seventeenth century government authorities restricted the bawdy and grotesque rituals of the festival as well as its “utopian character oriented toward the future.” In this way, the state eventually turned the ritual into a simple holiday.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the wise fool and the carnivalesque have been envisioned in two major ways. At one level, the trickster is a “safety valve” for the social order, offering a little respite, before normal hierarchies are reinstated. But the trickster can also open the door to the world of imagination and present us with a glimpse of alternate forms.

The trickster also transgresses clear demarcations between sacred/profane and order/dirt. In her *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas refers to the Hebrew Bible and other

<sup>13</sup>See Mikail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984); see also Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19.

<sup>15</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

<sup>16</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

<sup>17</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.

<sup>18</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 33.

religious texts in order to demonstrate that “dirt is matter out of place.”<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew Bible was concerned with order, completion, and wholeness. The world was divided into three parts—sky, water, and earth—and each had its proper animal. The animals in the water had fins and scales, those in the sky had wings, and those on earth had legs and hoofs and chewed cuds. “Holiness” meant that individual creatures conformed to the category to which they belonged. Any animal that did not fit its classificatory design was an abomination. Thus, lobster was unholy because it had no fins, while the locust was holy because it had wings, and so forth. Such ordered universes were found among other religions and ethnicities, though what constituted “dirt” differed from one group to the next. A natural outcome of such a worldview was that “dirt”—meaning anything that did not fit the established norms—was shunned. Every culture found a way to deal with its anomalies by controlling or eliminating them. The existence of anomalies was a challenge to the rule and suggested lack of perfection; hence, the desire for order often led to violence, both against animals and humans.<sup>20</sup>

But a completely ordered world, one devoid of dirt, was also a suffocating and sterile one. And so, according to Lewis Hyde, the trickster serves to “erase and violate the line between the dirty and the clean.”<sup>21</sup> Or as Mady Schutzman has argued, the trickster demands that “we, as listeners, reconsider our own boundaries of propriety, question our long held moral codes, and discover, in spite of ourselves, a new and unstable relationship between what is safe and what is offensive.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the trickster figure is simultaneously a conservative and a radical figure. By crossing the boundary between the sacred and the profane, it operates as a “safety valve.” It allows people to engage in activities deemed irreverent and unholy, turns the hierarchical order upside down, and momentarily provides psychological release. In the long run such a release helps maintain the social order by siphoning off violent impulses in a harmless manner. However, in a strictly ordered society, violent impulses do not always focus on the established hierarchy. They can also target “others” who are different, resulting in “ethnic cleansing” and gender wars. In this context, the trickster can play a progressive role since his crossing of social boundaries tempers

<sup>19</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991), 37.

<sup>20</sup>It was not always the case that rules of sanctity were related to cleanliness and health. Rather, in an attempt to establish stability in a chaotic world, classificatory systems were established. Those things that did not fit the schema became “aberrations” that had to be controlled or elimi-

nated. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 58.

<sup>21</sup>Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 177.

<sup>22</sup>Mady Schutzman, “Joint Work, The Trickster, and the Joke(r),” in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications), 282-284.

the urge toward violence. He rattles rigid social divisions and provides a glimpse of a more diverse world.<sup>23</sup> Hyde argues that in societies with a strictly hierarchical and powerful religious order, one often sees the emergence of a form of “sacred dirt,” or a transgressive figure that enters the religious realm and then mocks it.

### The Wise Fool of Persian Literature

The wise fool also appears in classical Persian literature from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries. The Arab satirist Johâ is said to have been a contemporary of Abu Muslim Khorasani, the Iranian rebel leader who helped bring the Abbasid caliphs to power in 750 CE. Persian literary figures initially held Johâ in contempt for his irreverent and indecent sayings. Johâ first appeared in the collected poems of Manuchehri (d. 1040), Naser Khosrow (d. 1072), and Adib Saber (d. 1143), who all treated him with disdain. It was only with the Sufi poets, such as ‘Attar (d. 1220), Sana’i (d. 1150), Sa‘di (d. 1291), and the renowned Rumi (d. 1273), that the earlier condescending attitude was replaced with one of admiration.<sup>24</sup>

According to Zarrinkoob, sainthood was not always confined to wise and serious people but, in Sufi tradition, was occasionally bestowed on fools as well:

Insane and lunatic men have also been occasionally accepted among their sacred ranks. . . . Contrary to Jewish tradition, which considered the “fool” impious or wicked, the Muslims regarded them as people who were excused and freed from religious and social duties. Their insanity was sometimes recognized by the Sufis as a divine madness [*Junun-i Ilahi*].<sup>25</sup>

Annemarie Schimmel points out that in the works of ‘Attar, “social criticism is often put into the mouth of a lunatic. ‘Attar has a whole group of these mentally deranged persons who struggle both with God and with the earthly rulers.”<sup>26</sup> Zarrinkoob locates no fewer than 115 tales about audacious wise fools in ‘Attar’s work.<sup>27</sup>

Johâ is not the only wise fool of the early Islamic period. Another famous character is Bohlul the Fool, also known as Bohlul the Wise (805 CE), who lived in Kufa.<sup>28</sup> In the eleventh century, Bohlul emerged as an early wise fool in Arabic and Persian

<sup>23</sup>Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 187-188.

<sup>24</sup>Marzolph, “Persian Nasreddiniânâ,” 239-240.

<sup>25</sup>A.H. Zarrinkoob, “Persian Sufism in Its Historical Perspective,” *Iranian Studies* (Summer/Autumn 1979): 139–220.

<sup>26</sup>Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of

North Carolina Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>27</sup>Zarrinkoob, “Persian Sufism,” 199; see also Claudia Yaghoobi, “Farid al-Din ‘Attar Nishapuri’s Embrace of Diversity in ‘Tadhkirat al-Awliya,’ ‘Ilahi-nama,’ ‘Musibat-nama,’ and ‘Mantiq al-Tayr’” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2013).

<sup>28</sup>Bohlul is one of several individuals in the

literature<sup>29</sup> and remained popular in Persian and Turkish tales through the twentieth century. Shi'i authorities suggest he was a cousin of the famous Sunni caliph, Hârûn al-Rashid (r. 786–809). Subsequent writers developed an elaborate genealogy for Bohlul and passed him as a model Shi'i and a disciple of the Sixth Imam, Ja'far Sadiq (d. 148 H. Q. /765), who died twenty years before Harun's reign began.<sup>30</sup>

Bohlul's madness is attributed to a request from Harun al-Rashid to issue a *fatwa* sanctioning the death of Imam Ja'far Sadiq. Bohlul refused on the grounds that he was not knowledgeable enough to issue such a *fatwa*. After Harun al-Rashid insisted, Bohlul asked for an extension until the next day. The following morning, Bohlul began to act like a madman. He rode his horse to the bazaar and frightened the public. When Harun al-Rashid learned that he had gone mad, he responded that Bohlul was no fool, but he had found an intelligent way of avoiding the *fatwa*.<sup>31</sup> In other tales, Bohlul himself questions the boundary between wisdom and folly. When asked to count the fools in the city, he responds that it is better to count the wise since the fools are too many.<sup>32</sup>

Another wise fool was the Martyr Sarmad (d. 1661–2), a Jew from Kashan who moved to India and became a devoted Sufi. Like many other fools, he used to walk naked and make outrageous statements. His most provocative act was to utter only half of the Muslim confession of faith, "There is no God but God," reducing it to "There is no God." His justification was that he "had not passed the stage of negation to reach the stage of affirmation." After his patron was overthrown, Sarmad was put to death as a heretic, thus earning the honorific title Martyr.<sup>33</sup>

In his *Mathnawi*, one of the greatest works of classical Persian poetry, Mawlana Jalâl al-Din Rumi (1207–73 CE) includes some anecdotes that later became standard Nasreddin tales in Persian and Turkish. Although Rumi wrote of the superiority of Islam over other religions, he asked his disciples to show respect toward people of other faiths and suggested they were all fellow travelers in the journey toward a more intimate relationship with God. Indeed, many of his tales encourage tolerance toward non-Muslims. One of Rumi's stories that became a standard Nasreddin tale is that of a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian who travel together. At a tavern they receive a small,

early Abbasid era known as Wise Fools (Oqala al-Majanin). Like other trickster figures, little is known about the facts of his life, although we know that his name was Wahib b. 'Amr b. Mogira (d. 190 H Q/805 CE).

<sup>29</sup>Ulrich Marzolph, "Bohlul, Abū Woohayb," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*. [www.iranicaonline.org/](http://www.iranicaonline.org/)

articles/bohlul-abu-wohayb-b.

<sup>30</sup>None of these genealogies can be confirmed historically. See Marzolph, "Bohlul, Abū Woohayb" and Modarres, *Reyhanat al-Adab*, 5: 214–16.

<sup>31</sup>Modarres, *Reyhanat al-Adab*, 5: 206–7.

<sup>32</sup>Modarres, *Reyhanat al-Adab*, 5: 212.

<sup>33</sup>Zarrinkoob, "Persian Sufism," 199.

free plate of *halva* (wheat pudding). Since they had already eaten their dinner, the three men decide to wait until the next morning to eat the *halva*. The plate of *halva* was quite small and not enough to share, so they agreed that whoever had the best dream would eat the *halva* for breakfast. The next morning the Jew said that Moses took him on a glorious trip to the heavens. The Christian said Jesus took him to the height of the universe. The Muslim said, “The Prophet Muhammad appeared in my dream and said, ‘Look fellow! Moses and Jesus took your two friends to the heavens and gave them an exquisite tour. Why don’t you get up and finish this humble dish of *halva* instead? That is why I got up in the middle of the night and ate the *halva*!’” According to Rumi, the moral of the tale is that those who follow opulent and extravagant dreams of reaching the heights of life, of attaining glory and riches, often miss the real opportunities under their noses.<sup>34</sup> But another take on the tale may be that Muslims, Christians, and Jews can be friends, they can travel and share meals, and occasionally they might even cheat one another in a good humored way and without recourse to violence.

Modern distinctions between entertainment and ethics, sacred and profane, or even classical and folk literature are difficult to pinpoint in Rumi’s work. The *Mathnawi* includes numerous popular and vulgar folk tales alongside more and ethical ones, thus challenging our modern and precise segmentation of Persian literature into classical and folk genres. Many of the tales are simply for entertainment, such as the story of the husband who brings home three *mans* (unit of measurement) of meat and asks his wife to make a stew before he leaves for work in the morning. She instead makes a big meal, calls her women friends and they have a feast. When the husband returns home and looks for his dinner, his wife tells him that the cat ate the meat. So he takes a scale out, weighs the cat, which is exactly three *mans*, and says, “If this is the cat then where is the meat? And if this is the meat, then where is the cat?”<sup>35</sup>



Caricature by İhsan Ertürkmen, retrieved from: [karikaturkomik.blogspot.ca/2012/02/nasreddin-hoca-fkra-karikaturleri.html](http://karikaturkomik.blogspot.ca/2012/02/nasreddin-hoca-fkra-karikaturleri.html).

<sup>34</sup>Jalal ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, *Masnawi-ye Ma'navi*, intro. Badi' al-Zaman Foruzanfar (Teh-

ran: Safi Ali Shāh Press, 1996) 5: verse 1030.

<sup>35</sup>Rumi, *Masnawi-ye Ma'navi*, 5: verse 887.

There are quite a number of more outrageous and bawdy stories dealing with fondling in the midst of religious sermons, homosexual sex, and women's complaints about sexually ungratified lives in the *Mathnawi*. Yet after recounting a few pornographic verses along these lines, Rumi often turns to serious theological issues, such as the lives of the prophets, using the tales to draw moral and religious conclusions. He admits that, "My dirty jokes (*hazl*) are not really dirty jokes, but instructions."<sup>36</sup>

The Sufi poet Jami (d. 1492) also uses anecdotes about simpletons to criticize the emerging religious orthodoxy of the fifteenth century. Jami, who had a Sunni Hanafi background, was critical of Shi'i clerics who demanded strict adherence to rituals. Some of the satirical poems of his *Mathnawi Haft Awrang* concern the ritual of ablution—the washing of hands, face, and feet before daily prayers. He points out that Islam originated in sandy Arabia where there was very little water. Yet Shi'i clerics required their followers to wash themselves several times in pure water before performing their daily prayers. But if washing one's hands and feet once before each daily prayer was good enough for the prophet, why was it not good enough for others?<sup>37</sup>

Obeid Zakani (ca. 1300–72) remains the most outstanding satirist of classical Persian poetry. The founder of a new school of social criticism that mercilessly ridiculed rulers and religious elites as well as common folks, Zakani came from an aristocratic Sunni family in Qazvin before moving to Shiraz. A respectable poet and judge before perfecting the art of ribaldry, Zakani's bawdy poems, which often mocked transgressive sexual practices, were extremely frank and written for a small community of literate aristocrats (Browne 1928, 3:230).<sup>38</sup> Modern anthologies of his work usually delete the portions of the poems that mention private body parts and various sexual acts. Paul Sprachman suggests that Zakani was inspired by two earlier schools of satire: (1) a tradition of ribaldry dating back to the Greek playwright Aristophanes (ca. 448–380), and later found in Rabelais, which mocked power games in sexual relations; and (2) a type of pseudo belles-lettres, common in the Arab world, which poked fun at respectable literature and their methods of analyses (Sprachman 1995, vii:45).<sup>39</sup>

Zakani's *Joyous Treatise (Resâleh-yi delgoshâ)* is a collection of Arabic and Persian anecdotes that builds on earlier traditional tales of the wise fool and also invents many new ones. Fools come in at least four types in these stories. The first two tricksters,

<sup>36</sup>Rumi, *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, 5: 2497; see also Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 319.

<sup>37</sup>Nur al-Din Abd al-Rahmân Jami, *Masnavi-ye Haft Awrang*, 7th ed., ed. M. M. Gilani (Tehran: Mahtab Press, 1996) 57-60.

<sup>38</sup>E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*.

vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 3: 230

<sup>39</sup>Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology of Forbidden Literature* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1995), vii: 45.

Johâ and Bohlul, represent the decent and good-natured common folk who mind their own business unless someone wants to make fools of them, whereupon they react with utter shrewdness. The clown Talhak (or Dalqak) pokes fun at the legacy of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (998–1030 CE), the most important political figure of the eleventh century. The fourth fool, Abu Bakr Rabâni, is a drunken and impoverished intellectual, who ridicules his own miserable social and economic milieu.<sup>40</sup>

A common theme in Zakani's work is criticism of religious practices, even good deeds like giving alms (zakat). In one story Johâ routinely steals sheep, slaughters them, then donates the meat to the poor. When asked to account for his bizarre conduct, he explains that his good deed of donating the meat to the poor cancels out his bad deed of stealing the sheep, leaving him with the fat and the skin, which he sells at a profit, making a good living out of the transaction (Zakani 1964, 266).<sup>41</sup>

At other times, Zakani mocks sacrosanct beliefs of both Sunnis and Shi'is. Shi'is believe the first Imam, Ali, should have become the first Muslim caliph, rather than the fourth, suggesting that the first three caliphs, Abu Bakr (r. 632–34), 'Umar (r. 634–44), and Uthman (r. 644–56), were usurpers. Zakani writes that a Shi'i went to a mosque and noticed the names of the first four caliphs on the walls. He wanted to spit on the names of the first two, Abu Bakr and 'Umar, but instead spit on the name of Ali. Annoyed and embarrassed by his disrespect, he said to Ali, "Well, serves you right! This is what you get for sitting next to such rotten fellows!"<sup>42</sup>

No one is exempt from Zakani's sharp humor—not clerics, not kings, not Imams, nor even God himself. Thus, in another anecdote, Zakani questions the idea that God is just and pokes fun at the restrictions in mosques. A Shirazi man (a city known for having fun-loving residents) was boiling opium in the mosque. A servant of the mosque, who was partially blind, deaf, and crippled, yelled at him for doing so. The Shirazi said, "God has not been so just to you, why do you guard his house so scrupulously?"<sup>43</sup> Some, though not all of the anecdotes of the *Joyous Treatise* later became Nasreddin stories, often in more polite language.

### Reading Nasreddiniânâ as Subversive

Nasreddin is not a typical mythical hero. As Warren Walker has noted, Nasreddin's mother is not a royal virgin, and his father is not a king. No one tries to kill him

<sup>40</sup>Mehdi Seyyedi Dasht Tus, "Honar-i Shakhsiyat Pardazi-yi Obeyd-i Zâkâni," in *Baqerzadeh*, 1996, 139–50

<sup>41</sup>Obeyd Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zakani*, ed.

Parviz Atabaki (Tehran: Zavvar Press, 1964), 266.

<sup>42</sup>Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zakani*, 265.

<sup>43</sup>Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zakani*, 279.

when he is born, and no one tries to save him. He never has a kingdom, never fights dragons, beasts, or giants, and never marries a princess. Instead, he is a “counter-hero,” who deals with ordinary problems through ordinary means:

Nasreddin Hoçâ is the little man who speaks FOR the little people of this world and TO the little people of this world. Like the ordinary person in general, the Hoçâ is vulnerable. Like other ordinary people, he has to make accommodations in order to survive amidst a sea of physical and social forces more powerful than he is. He copes competently with a wide range of difficulties by means of his ready wit, his keen sense of humor, his humility, and his willingness to make the best of a bad situation. These are his strengths, and we love him for them.<sup>44</sup>

Mullâ Nasreddin does, however, share some common characteristics with the Jewish trickster, Rabbi Hershel Ostropolier, as well as the German trickster, Till Eulenspiegel, the African American Brer Rabbit, and the Native-American Coyote. Writing about the Shuswap Indian lore, Sheila Watson writes that the Coyote responds to the needs of the *here and now* of the tribe. The Coyote in the Shuswap community answers “to a people’s need to account for their world”—and while he, unlike Nasreddin, employs supernatural tricks and abilities, their goals are the same: To humiliate the powerful and “to *bring down the proud*.”<sup>45</sup>

The tales of Nasreddin are often about people at the margins of society—illiterate peasants and the urban poor—and their entanglements with the powerful and rich. They deal with legends, customs, and beliefs of the common folk, whose traditions have been least affected by modern education.<sup>46</sup>

These stories rely on many of the tropes discussed by Jung, Foucault, and Bakhtin. They are about repressed instincts and behaviors deemed unacceptable by proper society. They offer new ways of thinking about social relations and often reveal neglected wisdoms. The weapons of Nasreddin, Bohlul, and Johâ are the degradation and humiliation of those in positions of authority and power. This grotesque realism as we shall see below accomplishes two subversive acts: it degrades powerful sources of authority and it helps envision an alternative world order.

<sup>44</sup>Warren S. Walker, and Ahmet E. Uysal, *Tales Alive in Turkey* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), 388.

<sup>45</sup>F. T. Flahiff, “Afterword,” in Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (Toronto: McClelland and

Stewart Inc., New Canadian Edition, 1989), 127. Thanks to Elizabeth Kreutlein-Astles who noted this connection.

<sup>46</sup>Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 12th ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 3-4.

## Mullâ Nasreddin's Guile and Dirt Work

An important tactic of Nasreddin is his guile (*zerangi*), his ability to negotiate and interpret language and context deftly, and his mastery of interpersonal relations, even when he is dealing with a higher authority. The anthropologist William O. Beeman has written about the significance of face-to-face interactions in Iranian culture and their role in negotiating power and building alliances. Beeman writes that, among Iranians, interpersonal relations have an aesthetic dimension, and the ability to deftly control interpersonal relations is almost seen as an art form. People are measured by the degree to which they have mastered the art of verbal performance:

The elaborate weaving and intertwining of designs in the finest Persian carpets; the extraordinary complexity of rhyme, meter, imagery, and wordplay in classical Persian poetry; and the intricate improvisatory sweet-sadness of melodic line in traditional Persian music all convey some of the feeling and texture of everyday social interaction. It is not unreasonable to compare interpersonal relations in Iran to art, for negotiating the webs of everyday personal relations and interaction situations requires consummate skill even for those born into the system. Consequently, there are rewards for the adept and setbacks for the clumsy.<sup>47</sup>

The essence of successful interpersonal dialogue is the ability to maintain ambiguity, uncertainty, and even confusion in the minds of others. Guile involves “thwarting direct interpretation of [one’s] own actions or deliberately leading others to erroneous interpretations of these actions, while being able to successfully interpret the actions of others.” It also involves a healthy mistrust toward the actions and deeds of others.<sup>48</sup> Beeman traces the origins of this ambiguity to the Shi’i practice of pious dissimulation (*taqiyyeh*) and the Sufi mystics unfettered interpretation of religious texts (*ta’vil*). He suggests that a similar ambiguity can also be found in classical Persian poetry, where the gender of the beloved is left purposefully vague, allowing the reader the opportunity to interpret the love-object as male/female or as divine/earthly.<sup>49</sup> Although Beeman stresses the Iranian roots of this characteristics, one comes across numerous examples of such cleverness in other Eastern or Western folk traditions as well.

<sup>47</sup>William O. Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1-2.

*Iran*, 27.

<sup>49</sup>Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, 25.

<sup>48</sup>Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in*

Literary scholar Dick Davis has argued that the powerful hero of the epic *Shahnameh* was not just a strong warrior but exhibited some trickster characteristics, as did Ulysses. Rostam used an arsenal of prevarications to defeat his enemies, but died in the end as a result of tricks played on him.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Jerome Clinton has suggested that “guile is a pervasive presence in the *Shahnameh*; despite the consistent and ubiquitous condemnation of all forms of dishonesty, and the parallel exhortations to honesty and truth, lies and deceit are familiar weapons in the armory of heroes as well as villains.” Furthermore, cunning and guile are acceptable tactics in war for both men and women.<sup>51</sup>

Moving from the realm of classical literature to that of folklore, one might also argue that the cunning of Nasreddinânâ performs a type of “dirt-work,” in the manner described by Mary Douglas and Lewis Hyde. Here, “dirt-work” refers to trickster tales that routinely blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Nasreddin is a Mullâ, a form of “sacred dirt” who can playfully question the most intimate rituals of Islam and get away with it. The *shariat* includes thousands of rules that define polluting and purifying actions for the believers. Blood, semen, urine, dogs, non-Muslims, and many other things are deemed *najes*, ritually unclean. As in Orthodox Judaism, detailed regulations describe daily conduct (toilet, preparations for daily prayers), between men and women (after sex, during menstruation, after childbirth), between Muslims and non-Muslims (on the street, during trade and commerce), and between humans and animals. These rules are far more wide-ranging and detailed in Shi‘ism than in Sunnism, but they do exist in both.

Nasreddin is the archetypal clever individual, whose guile is universally admired. The tales of Nasreddin, which often operate on the principles of degradation and cunning, contain many examples of “dirt-work,” where the boundary between the sacred and the profane is crossed. They constitute a type of folk resistance against sources of authority—kings, emirs, and *Qâdis* (religious judges).

Poor men are first and foremost concerned with their daily meal, and many of the stories of Nasreddin concern food, clever ways of fetching food, ingratiating oneself with the rich in order to get food, and imagining food when there is none. The hungry trickster becomes creatively deceptive in satisfying his urge for food.<sup>52</sup> Nasreddin is never one to miss a feast; if he is not invited, he finds other ways to get his share of the meal. In one story, a neighbor has a feast but does not invite Nasreddin and his

<sup>50</sup>Dick Davis, “Rustam-i Dastan,” *Iranian Studies* 32:2 (Spring 1999): 231–41.

<sup>51</sup>Jerome W. Clinton, “The Uses of Guile in

the *Shahnamah*,” *Iranian Studies* 32:2 (Spring 1999): 223–41.

<sup>52</sup>Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 17.

wife. A few days later, the couple feign a big argument. Nasreddin's wife comes out the door screaming and runs to the neighbor's courtyard claiming that her husband is beating her. They know that the wealthy neighbor has the social obligation to play the role of a mediating patriarchal authority figure in the community. The neighbor does intervene and invites Nasreddin and his wife to dine with them as a way of reconciling the two. In this way, the couple succeeds in getting a free meal out of the neighbor who had not invited them to his feast a few days earlier.

If feigning an argument is one way to get a free meal, a more obvious one is getting food through flattery. In the tale "The Servant of Eggplant," Nasreddin describes sycophants who flatter the men in power in order to keep their stomachs full. Nasreddin was invited to the house of the governor for dinner. There was a wonderful eggplant stew on the spread that the governor liked very much. Nasreddin, who is a consummate orator, told a number of tales about the benefits of eggplant for the digestion. An hour later, the governor got indigestion and began to curse the eggplant. Nasreddin immediately reversed himself and now told stories about the dangers of eggplant for the digestion. The annoyed governor asked, "How come an hour ago you were telling us about the benefits of eggplants and now you talk about the dangers of eggplant?" Nasreddin answered, "Sire, I am a servant of yours, not a servant of the eggplant!"<sup>53</sup>

In other stories, poor people use their imagination to satisfy their hunger. A poor man takes his dry loaf of bread, dips it in a pond where ducks are swimming, and imagines he is having duck soup. In another story, a poor man comes across a vendor on the street with a big pot of steaming stew. The poor man takes out a loaf of dry bread, holds it above the steaming soup, and when the bread gets slightly moist, eats it hungrily. When he is finished, the vendor asks for his money. The poor man protests, and the vendor appeals to Nasreddin, who is the local judge in this story. After hearing the complaint of the vendor and the explanation of the poor man, Nasreddin takes out a few coins, rattles them in his hand, and says to the vendor the "price of the steam from your soup is this rattling sound of the coins in my hand. Now get out! You have been adequately compensated!"<sup>54</sup>

Another concern of the poor is clothing. Nasreddin's tales successfully use the theme of proper attire to ridicule the social hierarchies of the time. In "Nasreddin

<sup>53</sup>An earlier version of this story, attributed to Sultan Mahmoud, appears in Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zakani*. 272.

<sup>54</sup>A similar story is attributed to the Jewish trickster Hershel Ostropolier.



*Qeseh-ha-ye Mullâ Nasreddin 5: Buye Kabab va Seday-e Sekkeh.* Written by Ahmad Arabloo. Drawings by Saeed Razâqi. Tehran: Nashr-e Ofîq Press, 1379.

and the Feast,” the trickster acts more like a Sufi mystic, criticizing those who pay inordinate attention to the material world. One day after work, Nasreddin rushes to a dinner party wearing his simple work clothes. When he arrives, he is directed to the far end of the spread, only to find that the more respectable guests have been seated at the head of the spread, nearer the best foods. He rushes home to change into his best clothes and returns, whereupon he is directed to the head of the spread. Nasreddin digs into the food, but instead of eating, he starts pouring handfuls of rice into the long sleeves of his robe. The host and the guests express astonishment, but Nasreddin responds, “When I first came in my work clothes, you asked me to sit at the bottom of the spread; now that I am in my fancy clothes you ask me to sit at the head of the spread. Obviously this food is not for me but for my clothes!”

A number of Nasreddin stories deal with *Qâdis*. As we saw, in “The Poor Man and the Soup Vendor,” Nasreddin is a judge who sides with the victim. In other tales, he plays a plaintiff who confronts dishonest judges, whom he smears symbolically with dirt. In “The *Qâdi* and the Containers of Honey,” for example, Nasreddin gives a lesson to a corrupt *Qâdi*, who is known to accept bribes from plaintiffs in return for taking their side. When his case comes before this judge, Nasreddin takes along a half-dozen containers of honey, which he fills with dirt, spreading a thin layer of honey at the top of the containers. Nasreddin quietly gives them to the judge before his case is presented. The judge opens one of the containers, and seeing that it has honey renders a judgment in favor of Nasreddin. After the *Qâdi* takes the containers home and orders them opened, he realizes that he has been tricked. He calls his servant to fetch Nasreddin. The servant comes to Nasreddin’s house and says, “The *Qâdi* would like to see you. He says there is a problem with the judgment he rendered today, and he would like to discuss it with you.” Nasreddin looks stoically at the servant and says, “Tell the *Qâdi* there is no problem with the judgment, the problem is with the containers of honey,” and shuts the door.

At other times, in the manner of Bakhtin, Nasreddin undresses the *Qâdi* and humiliates him in public. In the story of “Mullâ and the Drunken *Qâdi*,” Nasreddin comes upon the leading *Qâdi* of the town in a meadow and finds him half-naked and unconscious after a drinking bout. Nasreddin steals the *Qâdi*’s robe and turban and leaves him naked in the field. The next morning, when the *Qâdi* is sober, he sends his servant to search for his clothes. The servant finds Nasreddin wearing the *Qâdi*’s robe and turban and brings him in. The *Qâdi* asks Nasreddin, “Is this robe yours?” Nasreddin says, “No, your honor, it belongs to a naked and drunk man, who was lying unconscious in the meadow! I will be happy to return his clothes, if you find

him for me!” The *Qâdi* realizes he has no option but to let Nasreddin go. As he looks wistfully at his stolen clothes, he says, “Yes, unfortunately the town is full of bums.”

Here and elsewhere when Nasreddin confronts men of great power, he literally or symbolically disrobes them, thereby humiliating them in public. In “Timur and Nasreddin,” a classic Turkish tale, Nasreddin Hoçâ suggests that the powerful Mongol ruler, who killed tens of thousands, is a worthless person. One day, when Timur was in a good mood, he asks Nasreddin, “How much do you think I am worth?” Nasreddin immediately responds, “Fifty dinars!” Timur responds, “My clothes alone are worth that much!” To which Nasreddin replies, “My point exactly!”

These examples suggest that the trickster Nasreddin is granted much leeway in folk tradition. He can degrade, debase, and, literally or figuratively undress the powerful and the wealthy. Through such grotesque realism, he levels the ground and shows the vulnerability of those who are in power, creating a moment of psychological respite for ordinary people, as well as pointing to the deficiencies of those in power.

### **Critique of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy**

As Hasan Javadi has pointed out, there are at least three types of satire targeting religion in Persian literature. First, works that express atheistic or agnostic sentiments, such as the Rubaiyât of *Omar Khayyam* (d. 1131) or the poetry of Iraj Mirza (d. 1926) and Sadeq Hedayat (d. 1951); second, works that express intolerance toward non-Muslims or toward other sects/ethnicities within Islam, as in the poetry of Khâqâni (d. 1190) and, sometimes, Ferdowsi (d. 1020/1026 CE); and third, works aimed at one’s own co-religionists, which extol moderation and criticize orthodoxy. This third genre of satire has a long and robust history in classical Persian literature and can be found in famous writers like Rumi and Hafez (d. 1389).<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the Sufis and the Mu’tazalites, Nasreddiniânâ do not pose probing philosophical questions about religion and theology, rather they often deal with every day practices of religion and daily interactions of a multi-ethnic/religious community. They show Nasreddin trying to cut corners, to skip rituals whenever he can, and to get by with as little religious practice as possible, while retaining his position as a low-level Muslim cleric. The Nasreddin tales also suggest that the

<sup>55</sup>Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), 49-90. Similar examples from the nineteenth century include Yaghma of Jandaq (1782–1859) and Qa’ani (d. 1853 or 1854).

average Muslim is too busy to pay meticulous attention to the required ablutions, to perform his daily prayers in the exact manner, to focus on lofty thoughts while in the mosque, or to fast for the entire month of Ramadan. Nasreddin is a real human being with all his frivolities, his desires, and his limitations, and, like the rest of us, he tries to hide his weaknesses.

Theft is a serious crime under Muslim law, which carries severe penalties. But Nasreddin omits no one from his bizarre sense of justice, and steals not just from ordinary mortals but also from God himself. Like other classic tricksters, however, he does not steal to get rich but to “disturb the established categories of truth.” In this way, he opens possibilities for other ways of thinking about religion.<sup>56</sup> One of the classic tales of theft describes the day Nasreddin came home to find that a thief had stolen his front door. Unable to find it, Nasreddin went to the local mosque and hauled its front door home, saying aloud to himself, “Since God is all knowing, let him find the thief and get my door from him instead!”

In another story, Nasreddin challenges the notions of the purity and sanctity of the mosque. Passing by a mosque where he sees people beating a dog, he intervenes to ask why they are beating an innocent animal. He is told that the dog had gone into the mosque, thereby polluting it so that the mosque requires extensive ritualistic cleansing. Nasreddin says, “Leave the poor animal alone. If he had any sense, he would do as I do, and never set foot in the mosque.”<sup>57</sup>

Other tales reveal the frustration of ordinary people with religious obligations and the need to keep up appearances in such matters. In the month of Ramadan all but a few Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk. Only a few groups are exempted such as travelers, ill people, pregnant women or mothers who breast-feed. In this month women wake up early in the morning to prepare a large breakfast, the only meal of the day until the breaking of fast that evening. As a result, there is a lot of hustle and bustle in the neighborhood around 4 a.m., when lights go on and the family prepares to sit down and eat. In one tale, Nasreddin does not fast in Ramadan, but he makes his wife get up every morning to prepare the customary breakfast anyway. One day, she finally gets tired and yells at him, “Mullâ, you don’t fast! Why do you make me get up every morning so early and make breakfast?” Nasreddin, quite perplexed by this naive question, answers, “What? You want people to think I am not a Muslim?”

<sup>56</sup>Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 13.

<sup>57</sup>Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, 279.

Another tale that deals with fasting during Ramadan has Shi‘i origins. According to the Shi‘i calendar, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, called Ashura, is a day of mourning. Nasreddin was present at an Ashura sermon when a cleric declared that God will accept one day of fasting on the day of Ashura to be equal to six months of fasting at other times. That year, Nasreddin did not fast during Ramadan. Instead he paid a visit to the cleric. When the cleric asked why he was not fasting, Nasreddin explained, “I fasted on the day of Ashura. As you said in your sermon, God now owes me six months. Therefore, I will not fast in the month of Ramadan this year, and for the next five years.”

Even the venerable tradition of pilgrimage to Mecca is ridiculed by the wise fool. Zakani writes that an Arab man was advised by someone, “You are old and have wasted your life. Repent and go on a Hajj pilgrimage.” He said, “I don’t have money to go.” He was told, “You own a house, sell it and use the money to go.” He said, “Where would I live when I return? And if I don’t return and stay at the Ka‘bah, wouldn’t God say, ‘You idiot! Why did you sell your house and move into mine?’”<sup>58</sup>

An interesting dimension of Nasreddiniânâ is that there are very few tales that treat the practitioners of other religions with hostility. When non-Muslims, mostly Jews and Christians, are involved in Nasreddin stories, the humor is not malicious. Instead, the emphasis is on the guile and cunning of the Muslim as well as the similarities of people of various faiths, their intermingling, and their sharing of meals and abodes. This may account for the continued popularity of Nasreddin stories among non-Muslims of the Middle East and the Balkans.

One of the common ploys of Nasreddin is to trick his non-Muslim companions into giving him a free meal. Yet this act of breaking bread and sharing a meal with a ritually impure non-Muslim is itself the breaking of a grave religious taboo, one that Nasreddin successfully accomplishes. In the tale called “The Atheistic Nestorian,” we read that during Lent, when Christians are supposed to avoid eating meat, a hungry Nasreddin comes across a Nestorian Christian who is eating meat and immediately joins him in his meal. The Christian, annoyed by this unwanted guest, asks, ‘You are a Muslim! How is that you are eating the meat of an animal that has not been slaughtered in the proper *halal* Muslim way?’ Nasreddin replies, “It doesn’t matter. I am among the Muslims the way you are among the Christians.”

In a more complex tale, Nasreddin appears as a judge who pokes fun at the Muslim law of retribution (*qesas*) and the biblical notion of “an eye for an eye.” The police

<sup>58</sup>Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, 251.

were chasing a thief who escaped into a house. The thief bumped into the lady of the house, who was pregnant. She became frightened and subsequently had a miscarriage. The thief then ran to a neighboring mosque and climbed above a high minaret. But after the police chased him up there, the thief threw himself down into the alley and landed on an old man, who died instantly. The thief frantically got up, but now bumped into a Jew, who fell on the ground and landed on a nail, losing an eye. When the thief was finally caught and brought before Qâdi Nasreddin, the victims and their relatives demanded retribution. Nasreddin told the man whose wife had a miscarriage, "Since this young thief has caused your wife to miscarry, you must put him with your wife in a private place so they make a baby for you." To the man whose elderly brother had died, Nasreddin suggested an equal retribution, "You must go above the *minaret* and jump down on the thief to kill him." And to the Jew, he said, "You have the right to take the eye of this thief out in retribution. However, since a Jew is worth only half a Muslim, you must first let the thief take out your other eye, then you can blind him in one eye." Needless to say, all three plaintiffs decided to forgo their retribution and left in great haste. While this tale is a spoof on the strict laws of retribution, it does contain a kernel of truth, which is what makes it so powerful. Under *sharia*, a non-Muslim man blinded by a Muslim man would first have to pay him for the price of one eye, before demanding retribution, since the eye of a Muslim is worth twice that of a non-Muslim.

In these tales and many others, Nasreddin questions many sacrosanct aspects of religious doctrine, from fasting during Ramadan and going on Hajj pilgrimage to the ritual sanctity of the mosque and the impurity of dogs, and from inequitable laws of retribution to ones prohibiting the mingling of Muslims and non-Muslims, thereby opening the door of the imagination to a far less ritualistic and more inclusive interpretation of religion.

### **Gender Subversions: Women-Centered Tales and Sexual Transgressions**

Wendy Doniger writes that the ideas in folktales have originated with people of different genders, even if the sex and gender of the authors are unknown. Hence it is best "to regard the author of most texts as androgynous."<sup>59</sup> Folktales and myths represent a vast cultural tradition and, as such, express both the male and female points of view. In this sense, while Nasreddin is presented as a male cleric, the stories of Nasreddin are told and retold by both women and men. The tales thus express the desires, fantasies, and frustrations of people who adhere to different sexual and gender practices.

<sup>59</sup>Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 135.

The folktales of Nasreddin are born out of the enormously diverse Middle Eastern cultural cauldron and express their multi-vocality in many ways. At times, especially with the older Johâ tales that have been preserved in the works of Obeyd Zakani, a patriarchal and misogynistic voice is unmistakable and dominant. These tales express men's fear of shrewd, conniving, or unconventional women, who challenge the normative patriarchal order. Often they deal with wives, concubines, and slaves of important men, who successfully cheat on their husbands and masters. Sometimes, these male-centered stories are not so different from classical pornography. They seem to reflect male sexual fantasies that are attributed to women. Among the themes are women's constant preoccupation with the size of a man's penis and various descriptions of rape and/or sodomy.

But other tales reflect women's personal and familial concerns. The stories of Nasreddin, which deal with intimate personal relations, are curiously centered on the home, the bathhouse, and the village market. In this regard, they could be seen more as women's stories than traditional male ones, which would have dealt with courage and cowardice, the raising of armies, or wars. A number of Nasreddin stories deal with cooking and kitchen utensils, often reflecting typically female concerns, such as the anxiety of not having sufficient food in the house when guests arrive. One of the best-known tales, "Mullâ and the Pot," would make a great deal more sense if the dialogue took place between two women, Nasreddin's wife and her neighbor, instead of the way the story is commonly recounted.

Nasreddin goes to the neighbor's house and asks to borrow a large pot. The next day when he returns the pot, the neighbor notices a small pot inside the big one. Nasreddin explains, "Your pot was pregnant and last night gave birth to this baby pot, so I brought them both." The neighbor, thinking he has a fool for a neighbor, thanks him and takes both pots. A few days later, Nasreddin once again borrows the big pot. This time, he does not return it. After a week, the neighbor goes over and asks for the pot. Nasreddin says, "May you live long! I didn't know how to break this bad news. Your pot was again pregnant but



Caricature by İhsan Ertürkmen, retrieved from: [turkeyculturaltour.com/tr/turkiye/70/ataturk-famous-personalities/ataturk\\_founder-of-modern-turkey-and-famous-personalities](http://turkeyculturaltour.com/tr/turkiye/70/ataturk-famous-personalities/ataturk_founder-of-modern-turkey-and-famous-personalities).

this time she died during delivery.” The neighbor gets angry and says, “How could a pot die?” Nasreddin says, “Well, the same way it gave birth last week!”

This story is in many ways a women-centered one. A large pot is a luxury few can afford, both in terms of its cost and the storage space it requires. It is common for Middle Eastern women to run to each other’s houses and borrow a bigger pot when guests suddenly show up and one needs to make more rice or stretch the small piece of meat by making a bigger stew out of it. But the other issues in this story also reflect women’s concerns: multiple pregnancies, pregnancies hidden from view because of a woman’s veil, and death during childbirth. All are daily concerns of women, and yet the protagonist of the story is the trickster Nasreddin. This undoubtedly makes the story more humorous, but it also covers up its likely feminine origins.

In most Western and Eastern folktales, the shrewd and conniving woman is a villain who is ultimately punished, often with a moralizing ending clumsily tacked on to the story.<sup>60</sup> But because ruse and cunning are desirable attributes in Nasreddin stories, the tales of Nasreddin’s wife (or sometimes his daughter) allow women to be masterful tricksters in their own ways. In this way Nasreddin’s story subverts gender norms and undermines or reverses the patriarchal order.

As we have seen, humor is often based on defying and breaking taboos. In Middle Eastern cultures, one of the greatest taboos, regardless of religion, was, and remains, premarital sex for young women. Some Nasreddin tales deal with this subject and describe clever women who avoid social ostracism. In “Three-Month Pregnancy,” Nasreddin’s wife gives birth to a baby three months after their marriage. Soon neighbors begin to gossip and Nasreddin hears about it. He asks his wife, “Doesn’t it take nine months for a woman to have a baby?”

She shakes her head in disbelief and says, “Really Nasreddin, I am surprised at you. Haven’t I been your wife for three months?”

“Yes, indeed you have been,” he replies.

“Haven’t you been my husband for three months?”

“That is also true,” he responds.

“Haven’t I carried this baby for three months?”

“True, very true,” he answers

“Well then,” she says with great conviction, “three plus three plus

<sup>60</sup>Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, 116.

See, for example, the two in Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, 260–61 and 272.

<sup>61</sup>Several different versions of this story exist.

three makes nine!”  
And Nasreddin has to agree.<sup>61</sup>

Occasionally, these gender transgressions verge on heresy. Zâkâni offers a tale about a woman who claims to be a prophet. When she is told that the Prophet Muhammad had declared there would be no prophet after him, she responds, “He said, there will be no prophet after me. He did not say, there will be no prophethood after me.”<sup>62</sup>

The contrast between inner and outer locations constitutes a basic interactive pattern in Iranian culture. Traditional Middle Eastern homes were divided into an *andaruni*, a place for women and children, and a *biruni*, where male guests were entertained. The need to observe and preserve the strict physical border between men and women’s places is endlessly reproduced in the genre of advice manuals known as *Mirror for Prince*.

Linguistic meaning must be analyzed according to its social context and this distinction between *biruni/andaruni*. Social context is defined by time and place. People speak differently in different contexts, depending on whether they are alone or in public, around children or in the company of adults, with people who share their ethnic and religious sentiments, or with those who do not. With these distinctions in mind, we see that people constantly “frame” and “fine tune” their conversations.<sup>63</sup>

In some Nasreddin or Johâ stories, the trickster is baffled by the absurdities of social context and the widely different rules operating in the *andaruni* and the *biruni*. This creates hilarious situations when he follows his own common sense rather than the social rules. For example, Nasreddin takes his cow to the bazaar to sell but finds no takers. A friend tells him that if he claimed his cow is three months pregnant, he might be able to sell it immediately. Nasreddin does as his friend suggests and comes home with a good profit. As he walks into the house he sees that they have guests. Nasreddin’s wife tells him excitedly that there is a suitor for their daughter and he has brought his family to see her. Nasreddin tells his wife he knows just what to tell the guests to get the deal going. He goes into the room, talks about his daughter’s many virtues, and adds as a clincher, “the best thing about her is that she is three months pregnant with a baby!” After the suitor and his family bolt out of the house, a baffled Nasreddin wonders why a pregnant cow was considered a good deal but a pregnant girl is not since the purpose of marriage is procreation after all.

<sup>62</sup>Zakani, *Kolīyat-i Obeyd-i Zâkani*, 272.

Iran, 64-66.

<sup>63</sup>Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in*

Both heterosexual and homosexual transgressions are major preoccupations of the Muslim trickster. Modern editions, which have become children's storybooks, often launder these tales. But a significant portion of earlier tales revolved around such themes. The Turkish folklorist Seyfa Karbas has compared the erotic Nasreddin tales to those of the Native American Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga.<sup>64</sup> Karbas suggests that in the first stage of his life, Nasreddin was discovering his own sexuality, experimenting with bestiality, incest, homosexuality, and various types of rape. Later he was socialized and settled into a heterosexual married life.<sup>65</sup> But because there is no particular order in presentation of the tales, we can never be sure if Nasreddin is socialized. In fact, the trickster neither renounces male homoeroticism nor celebrates normative heterosexuality. He is forever crossing boundaries and rejecting such neat categorization.

The modern collections of Mullâ Nasreddin stories published in Persian have minimal references to transgressive sexual practices, whether adult same-sex relations, pederasty, bestiality, or sex in sacred places. However, many such stories have survived in the works of Obeyd Zâkâni and in a Turkish collection of Nasreddin Hoçâ compiled by Pertev Boratav (1996).<sup>66</sup> In these tales the *minarat* (the mosque's tower from which the call to prayer is announced) is routinely compared to the phallus of the city and the half-moon domes of the *madrâsa* (religious schools) to women's breasts or buttocks.<sup>67</sup> Nasreddin has sex in the mosque with his donkey and with other men and defiles the place in many other ways. This grotesque identification of sacrosanct sites with the activities of the lower stratum of the body (sex, urination, and defecation) is a type of dirt work that challenges the orthodoxy and offers temporary relief from the dictates of orthodoxy.<sup>68</sup> As we have seen, Muslim trickster tales often challenge normative assumptions about social relations, and they do not

<sup>64</sup>Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American-Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973).

<sup>65</sup>Karabas 1990.

<sup>66</sup>We are grateful to Hakki Gurkas for the translations of a selection of these tales.

<sup>67</sup>Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, xxix.

<sup>68</sup>We should note that the Qur'an, like sacred Jewish and Christian texts, regards male homosexuality as an abomination (26:165–66; 15:73–74; 7:80–81; 11:78–83), but the Qur'an and the *shariat* law also show compassion for the repentant (*Qur'an* 4:16). Such relations are socially tolerated if they are not flouted. Ho-

mosexual relations are generally assumed to be between a senior and a junior partner. The boy or younger man is expected to be the passive object of the relationship (*maf'ul*), while the adult is viewed as the active partner (*fa'e*). Passivity is a stigma and a source of shame for an adult man. The idea that two adult men would continue to have homosexual relations is widely viewed as a travesty, though such relations did of course exist and were referred to in popular literature. For details, see Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapters 3, 4, and 5.

let us down here. The tales suggest that, contrary to common perceptions, same-sex relations are not an exception: A practicing Muslim man can be the passive partner in a same-sex relationship with a younger person or a non-Muslim, and homosexual relations between two adult men do in fact occur.

Many tales deal with the routine nature of homosexuality in society. A common theme in Zakani's tales is that in order to move up in the social hierarchy, a youth must have sex with older men:

In your childhood do not withhold the favor of your arse from friend or foe, relative or stranger, those near or remote, so that in your adulthood you can reach the rank of *shaykh*, preacher, world champion, and chief of protocol.<sup>69</sup>

No one is spared the accusation of homosexuality, including kings and religious leaders. In one tale, Sultan Mahmud is crying as he listens to a sermon where a cleric is lecturing about the Day of Resurrection. The cleric warns that any man who has sodomized a boy during his life would be punished in the next world. He would be forced to carry that boy on his shoulders and walk over the narrow bridge of purgatory, where any slip of the foot might land him in hell. Talhak the clown tells the king, "Sultan, don't cry. Be happy, since this means you will also have a ride on the way to the next world." Sultan Mahmud is thus accused of being both an active partner in a homosexual relationship, presumably because he was crying, as well as a passive one, a far more serious accusation in the culture, especially for a sultan.<sup>70</sup> Other tales discuss homosexuality as a rite of passage much like circumcision. A young Christian converts to Islam, and his father asks him how he was treated. He says, "These Muslims are strange people. In daylight they circumcise you. At night they sodomize you!"<sup>71</sup>

Many transgressive tales of Johâ take place in mosques and seminaries. Here we witness a double transgression, since an act that is forbidden everywhere is taking place in a sacred place. In one of Zakani's tales, the Sufi master Mawlana Qotb al-Din is having sex with another man in a small cubicle in a seminary. A third man pushes the door open. Mawlana asks him what he wants. The man asks if there is room for him to perform his prayers. Mawlana replies, "Are you blind? Don't you see there is so little space here we have to go on top of each other?"<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup>Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, 46.

<sup>70</sup>Zakani, *Kolīyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, 26.

<sup>71</sup>Zakani, *Kolīyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, xxx.

<sup>72</sup>Zakani, *Kolīyat-i Obeyd-i Zākani*, 295.

Finally, the tales often question the active/passive distinction between partners, going so far as to suggest that a Muslim man can be the passive partner in a homosexual relationship with a non-Muslim man. Thus a young Muslim man, known to engage in passive homosexual activity, was asked what he did during the days in the month of Ramadan, when observers are supposed to abstain from engaging in sex, to which he responds, “May God save the Christians and Jews,” hence admitting to the fact that inter-ethnic sex did happen, and a Muslim man could be the presumed passive partner in such a relation.<sup>73</sup>

Using Jung, Bakhtin, Foucault this article has shown how the grotesque realism of Nasreddin brought its powerful targets such as kings and clerics down to earth. It also shows how, through humor, powerful men were undressed, actually or metaphorically, debased, and/or symbolically killed, thus leveling the ground and providing a sense of relief and momentary justice for ordinary people. Continuing the work of Mary Douglas, Natalie Zeman Davis, and Lewis Hyde, we also saw how the trickster tales mock cumbersome religious rituals of pollution and purification and turn “dirt-work” into a form of comic relief. Finally, we saw how Nasreddinânâ subvert gender and sexual norms, revealing the absurdity of many patriarchal gender relations. In this way, trickster tales both serve as a safety valve for the social order and open the door to the world of imagination, presenting their audience with the possibility of alternate forms of existence and social interactions.

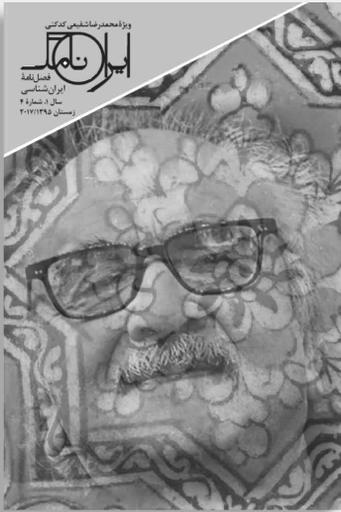
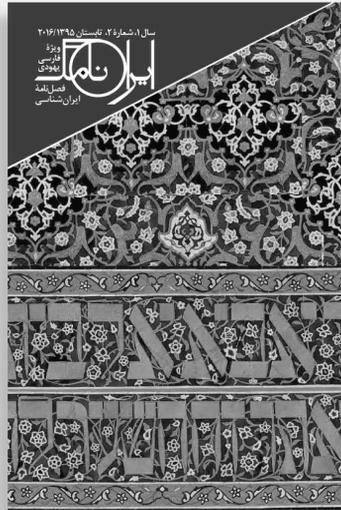
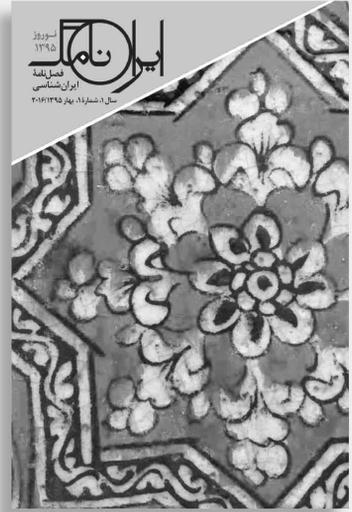
<sup>73</sup>Zakani, *Koliyat-i Obeyd-i Zâkani*, 268.



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