Persian Humor in the International Context

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The discipline of comparative folk narrative research, against the theoretical backdrop of which the present contribution has been conceived, aims to identify, trace, and study the interdependence of internationally distributed narrative data. Rather than being concerned with national traits of character or mentality, it focuses on the transethnic and transnational relations of narratives and the channels employed for their distribution. Seen from this perspective, Persian humor to a large extent constitutes the specific expression of jokes and anecdotes whose motifs enjoy a wider, and in many cases, an international diffusion. For the sake of clarity, the present contribution on Persian humor in the international context focuses on jocular narratives represented in both Persian literature and the written or oral tradition of at least one other Asian or European ethnic group. Tales with single or multiple versions only in Persian will not be considered.[1]

A short jocular tale originally published in German may serve to introduce the discussion of Persian humor in the international context. The following is an English rendering of the tale, whose title reads "The Scholar and the Fisherman" (Der Gelehrte und der Elbefischer).

Once, a learned man had a simple fisherman ferry him across the river Elbe. During the passage, the scholar asked various questions. First he asked: "Do you know philosophy?" The fisherman answered: "No. I have never heard of that!" — Whereupon the scholar remarked: "Poor man, a quarter of your life has been wasted!" Next he asked: "Do you know geography?" — "No," replied the fisherman, "I don't know that either. People of my trade don't have time to bother about scholarly issues." At this, the scholar showed great concern and compassionately remarked: "You poor man! Half of your life has been wasted!"

After a while, the scholar resumed his questioning: "Do you know mathematics?" — "No," said the fisherman. "I do not even know what that is supposed to be!" — "You very poor man," remarked the scholar. "So three quarters of your life have been wasted!" He had not even finished talking when suddenly the boat turned over and both men fell into the water. The scholar shouted

1. For older surveys of Persian humor, see Clouston 1888; Christensen 1923 and 1924; and Kuka 1937.

and screamed as if he were being burned alive. Meanwhile, the fisherman grabbed his jacket and yelled: "Do you know how to swim?" — "No," gasped the scholar, who was so exhausted that his face had already turned blue. "Well then," said the fisherman. "You had better hurry up and hold on to my back or else all four quarters of *your* life will have been wasted!"

This jocular tale was published in 1943 in a book titled *Das Volk erzählt* (The People Narrate), a work that purports to contain tales collected from the oral tradition of Germans living in what is now the Czech Republic.[2] Readers with little more than a basic knowledge of Persian literature will recognize it as an elaborated version of the well-known rendering in the *Mathnavī* of Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), where the tale is followed by an elaborate mystical interpretation, to which it obviously lends itself.[3] In the *Mathnavī*, the narrative proceeds as follows:

A certain grammarian embarked in a boat. That self-conceited person turned to the boatman and said, "Have you ever studied grammar?" "No," he replied. The other said, "Half your life is gone to naught." The boatman became heart-broken with grief, but at the time he refrained from answering. The wind cast the boat into a whirlpool: the boatman shouted to the grammarian, "Tell me, do you know how to swim?" "No," said he, "O fair-spoken good-looking man!" "O grammarian," said he, "your whole life is naught, because the boat is sinking in these whirlpools."

About a century later, a shorter Persian version (with the direct speech in Arabic) appears in the *Risāla-yi dilgushā* of ʿUbayd-i Zākānī (d. 772/1371).[4] As far as can be judged given the present state of research, the tale, in one version or the other, first occurs in Persian language sources. While the German text quoted above constitutes the other end of the tale's distribution in both geographical and chronological distance, the story is also documented in a number of geographically intermediary instances, such as Arabic, Sephardic and Romanian oral tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[5] It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the ways in which the tale's various occurrences are related to each other, or how the thirteenth-century Persian tale migrated so that it ended up in mid-twentieth-century German oral tradition or indeed when it entered German oral tradition. Other instances of a similar geographical and/or chronological distribution have been explained by the intermediary of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century calendar literature, a popular European genre that in many cases can be held responsible for the introduction of originally "Oriental" tales

2. Jungbauer 1943, 331–2.
3. Rūmī, *Mathnavī*, 2, 155 (Book 1, verses 2835–40).
4. Zākānī, *Risāla-yi dilgushā*, 349.
5. El-Shamy 2004, Type 1293C*§; Haboucha 1992, Type **1588A; Stroescu 1969, no. 5658.

to the European public.[6] At any rate, present-day access to a large variety of sources strongly suggests the monogenetic origin and subsequent diffusion of structured tales, as opposed to the model of polygenesis.[7] In the case under discussion, the link between the Persian and non-Persian traditions may reasonably be presumed to be quite recent, as both Rūmī's and ʿUbayd-i Zākānī's work were not introduced to the European public before the nineteenth century, and an oral link without reference to a written version remains hypothetical.

The jocular tale of the scholar and the fisherman serves to introduce some of the main theoretical concerns of comparative folk narrative research. These concerns are essentially linked to the questions of Whence? Whither? and How? In theory, any given tale occurring within the traditions of more than one specific ethnic group forms part of an international tradition, and it is the task of research to determine the given version's position within a multidimensional web of traditions. From this point of view, jocular material in the Persian tradition has been studied with regard to its origins, documentation, diffusion and related consequences.[8] The following example shall serve to illustrate these elements in more detail:

A certain sultaun [sic] hearing that a man of wit was reckoned in person very like himself, was curious to see him, and sent for him to court. Upon his introduction, he said: "I remember your mother well. She was a handsome woman, and used to attend the harams [sic] of the sultaun and nobility with rich goods and jewellery, [...] reaping much profit from her honorable calling." The wit, understanding the sultaun's allusion, replied, "Not so; my mother was a secluded woman, who never left her house, and knew nothing of trade; but my father was an eminent designer, who was frequently called to the gardens of the royal and noble harams, to lay out, sow flowers, and plant trees." The sultaun admired his wit, and made him one of his intimate courtiers.

This tale, quoted verbatim from Jonathan Scott's collection *Tales, Anecdotes, and Letters. Translated from the Arabic and Persian*, published in 1800,[9] obviously draws on ʿUbayd-i Zākānī's Persian jokes as contained in the *Risāla-yi dilgushā*.[10] While the initially quoted tale of the scholar and the fisherman is first documented in Persian literature, the tale of the sultan and the wit

6. For a general assessment of the role of popular calendars in folk narrative research, see Brunold-Bigler 1993.

7. For an overview of recent studies on polygenesis, see Chesnutt 2002.

8. Studies of the present author in this vein include Marzolph 1983b, 1987a, 1988, 1990, 1991. See also Omidsalar 1987.

9. Scott 1800, 300. For bibliographical references to the following discussion, see Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 89–94, and vol. 2, no. 315.

10. Zākānī, *Risāla-yi dilgushā*, 317 f.

belongs to the large stock of material adapted from Arabic into Persian literature. ʿUbayd-i Zākānī's version derives from the Arabic compilation *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ* ("Conversations of the Learned") of the eleventh-century author al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, to which ʿUbayd owes numerous items.[11] In Arabic literature, it can be traced back even further to the book on witty ripostes *al-Ajwiba al-muskita* ("Silencing Answers") of Ibn Abī ʿAwn (d. 322/934). ʿUbayd-i Zākānī quotes the tale in relation to a certain Khalaf, an otherwise unidentified ruler in Khurāsān. In this way ʿUbayd levels the tale's point while widening its adaptability beyond any specific, let alone contemporary circumstances. In contrast, the standard Arabic version situates the anecdote in the city of Basra and identifies the protagonists as the well-known poets Kuthayyir and al-Farazdaq, both of whom lived in the second half of the first century A. H. Inasmuch as al-Farazdaq was famed for his invective poetry (Arabic *hijāʾ*),[12] the Arabic version is more convincing than the Persian one. Nevertheless, the joke does not originate in Arabic sources. It is documented in a long chain of tradition beginning with the *Facta et dicta memorabilia* compiled about 31 C. E. by the Latin author Valerius Maximus. It was further quoted by the classical authors Pliny (the elder), Plutarch, Solinus, and Macrobius. By way of the humanistic reception of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, the tale was introduced to European chapbook literature, where it is profusely documented. In the particular case under discussion here, neither the Persian tale nor its Arabic model is directly linked to the modern European tradition, as both the Oriental and the modern European strand of tradition constitute independent derivations from the literature of Latin antiquity.

The tale of the sultan and the wit also serves to demonstrate the consequences implied in the process of transmission. The most startling point that emerges from a comparison of the tale's various versions is the frequency with which the characters change. While Valerius Maximus quotes anonymous characters, the fourteenth century *Mensa philosophica* mentions Julius Caesar, the sixteenth-century German author Johannes Pauli mentions Octavianus, the seventeenth-century German chapbook *Exilium melancholiae* cites the pope Boniface VIII, the eighteenth-century German chapbook *Vademecum* Augustus, and Sigmund Freud, in his *The Joke and Its Relation to the Subconscious*, the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph (r. 1867–1916).[13] Clearly, this adaptability to a variety of regionally celebrated protagonists has helped to secure the tale's position in international tradition. On the other hand, it also contributes to the veiling of whatever regional or national con-

11. The relationship between the works of Zākānī and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī has been discussed in detail in Halabi 1980; see also Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 104, note 69.

12. See Blachère 1965.

13. See Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 89–94.

notations the tale might hold in previous variations. These arguments lead to the general evaluation that internationally distributed jocular tales often contain a structure and content that facilitate their adaptation to a variety of different contexts.

As for jocular tales adapted into Persian literature and, from then on, regarded as "Persian," Arabic literature has supplied the largest amount of material. In order to identify a given tale as "Persian," it is important to take into account the fact that until the twelfth century, the Arabic language in certain literary genres was tantamount to a *lingua franca*.[14] Accordingly, a considerable number of authors writing in Arabic were of Persian origin and are believed to have also written works or composed poetry in Persian that has not survived. Among the authors of this category whose works contain jocular tales are Ibn Quṭayba (d. 276/889), Abū-l-Qāsim al-Naysābūrī (d. 406/1015), Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), Abū Manṣūr al-Ābī (d. 421/1030), Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, already mentioned, and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 528/1144). All of these authors wrote against the backdrop of their Persian socio-cultural milieu while using Arabic as the dominant language of communication. Whether or not the jocular material they quote should be regarded as originally "Persian" can hardly be decided. Moreover, the search for "authentic" or "original" versions of given tales is to a large degree futile, since the material's adaptability often permits it to be relevant within different ethnic, regional, cultural or religious contexts. In addition to Arabic sources, Indian literature also contributed to early Persian humor to a significant degree. Major examples of such diffusion are Buddhist collections of jocular tales, such as those included in Somadeva's tenth-century *Kathasaritsagara* ("The Ocean of the Streams of Stories").[15]

The reception and integration of originally alien jocular tales into Persian literature can be divided roughly into two periods separated by the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The period prior to the Mongol invasions is characterized by a dynamic reception, as jocular tales mainly taken from Arabic sources were readily adapted and actively integrated into the interpretative discourse of mystical poets such as Farīd al-dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 618/1221) and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, the latter of whom lived contemporaneously to the Mongol invasions.[16] Even though a major prose collection of jocular

14. See Bosworth 1978/79.

15. See Hertel 1922.

16. For a detailed discussion of a tale contained in the works of both ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī, see Marzolph 1990. For the sources of tales in the works of ʿAṭṭār, see Ṣanʿatī-niyā 1980 and Ritter 2003; for Rumi, see Furūzānfar 1983.

tales, Muḥammad ʿAwfī's (d. 629/1232) *Javāmiʿ al-ḥikāyāt*,[17] had already been compiled at the beginning of the thirteenth century, adaptations in prose came to be the significant characteristic of the later period. Contrasting with the active reception of the previous era, the later period is characterized by reproduction, or the rendering of jocular tales into Persian without adapting them to the requirements of a specifically Persian context. Prototypical collections of jocular prose belonging to the later period include the works of ʿUbayd-i Zākānī (although many of his amusing tales do have a definably Arabic context) and Fakhr al-dīn ʿAlī Ṣafī (d. 939/1532).

The Persian mystical poets employed jocular tales in order to convey their specific worldview. They never quoted jokes or anecdotes simply for the joy of superficial entertainment, but rather to demonstrate the consequences of vanity and human foibles, as distinct examples of the intended mystical instruction. In this way, they turned simple anecdotes into heavily laden symbolic narratives, such as the previously mentioned tale about the scholar and the fisherman, or, to mention the most daring example, the tale of the maid-servant's (and, subsequently, her lady's) sexual intercourse with a mule, quoted by Rūmī.[18] As already noted, many of these jocular tales were adapted from Arabic sources. Yet, whereas in Arabic literature they are often related in a simple manner without interpretations of any kind, the Persian mystical poets adapted these tales in two ways: (1) by turning the Arabic prose into Persian poetry, and (2) by adding interpretations. In consequence, the Persian adaptations, while retaining the basic structure and content of the Arabic material, supply additional attractive features in both form and meaning. These changes also gave lasting life to many of the classical Persian jocular tales, and laid the ground for their continuous active quotation in contemporary Persian culture.

The most impressive work of Persian mystical poetry, Rūmī's *Mathnavī*, contains, besides those narratives that are known to derive from earlier sources, several first instances of tales that subsequently became part of international tradition.[19] While direct links between the various known citations of these narratives have yet to be discovered, it is interesting to see how previous research has hypothesized in this respect.

The tale of the bald-headed parrot (AT 237)[20] concerns a bird whose master punishes him by pulling out the feathers covering his head; when the parrot later sees a bald-headed beggar, he imagines the beggar to have

17. While various sections of ʿAwfī's work have been published in facsimile and critical editions, the only complete survey to date remains Nizámu'd-dín 1929.

18. Rūmī, *Mathnavī*, vol. 6, 82–7, 203 (Book 5, verses 1333–429, 3391 f.).

19. See Marzolph 1995a.

20. The tale-type numbers (AT) refer to Aarne/Thompson 1961.

suffered a similar misfortune.[21] Alexander Clouston, who knew the version recorded in the *Mathnavī*, believed the tale to be present in the work of some "early Italian novelists" and concluded that it had been "doubtless introduced by Venetian merchants from the Levant."[22] In fact, the tale's earliest occurrence in European literature is only found about a century later than Rūmī, in the work of the fourteenth-century French author Geoffrey de La Tour-Landry. Another of Rūmī's parrot-stories, in which the bird, when caught, pretends to be dead and thus regains his freedom (AT 233 A), has been characterized as a "story derived from the Arabic and carried back to England at the time of the Third Crusade"[23]— after which date it is documented in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* as well as in the works of Alexander Neckam (died 1217), best known for his adaptations of Aesopian fables, and Jewish author Berechja ha-Nakdan. Original tales from the *Mathnavī* that enjoyed an international distribution further include the tale of the impaired companions (AT 1716*), widely known in contemporary Turkish *tekerleme*; the story of the disguised king who joins a band of robbers (AT 951 C); and the joke about the (burglar's) noise that will be heard the following day (AT Persian *1624*).[24]

Similar characteristics may be observed in the two major prose collections of Persian jocular tales, ʿUbayd-i Zākānī's *Risāla-yi dilgushā* and ʿAlī Ṣafī's *Laṭāʾif al-tavāʾif*.[25] These collections are significant in that their authors often adapt materials extracted from extraneous sources to the Persian context to the point that their origin becomes (almost) unrecognizable. ʿAlī Ṣafī's collection of more than 400 items, of which about 40% derive from Arabic sources, shows its indebtedness to Arabic models even in the layout of its chapters. While it is little known in Western research, 'Ali Safi's work holds an important position in Persian tradition, as demonstrated in the numerous imitations produced up to the Qajar period, such as the anonymous *Laṭāʾif va ẓarāʾif*, *Riyāḍ al-ḥikāyāt*, or *Laṭāʾif-i ʿajība*.[26] These chapbooks have contributed to the continued appreciation of jocular tales dating from the Safavid period or even earlier.

Probably the most striking illustration of the hybrid character of Persian humor is supplied by its most popular protagonist, Mulla Nasruddin.[27] To sum up a complicated history in a few words, up to the middle of the nineteenth

21. On parrot-stories in Rūmī's work, see Perry 2003.
22. Clouston 1890, 115.
23. Friend 1970, 62.
24. See Marzolph 1984, Type *1624*.
25. For the following, see Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 103–14, 116–25.
26. See Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 125–30.
27. See Marzolph 1995c; Mujāhid 2003.

century, Mulla Nasruddin was known in Persian literature only by the name of Juḥī (adapted from the Arabic Juḥā). In the first printed Arabic versions of his anecdotes in the nineteenth century, Juḥā was consciously merged with the Turkish character Khoja Nasreddin.[28] When this amalgamated collection was translated from Arabic into Persian, the composite character met with an approval for which the interethnic community of Iran had paved the way, with the result that Arabic versions of tales adapted from both Arabic and Turkish tradition eventually *became* Persian. No single jocular character of Persian humor rivals Mulla Nasruddin in his international fame. The character of Buhlūl (Arabic Bahlūl, Turkish Behlül) shares a similar fate, yet in his case it was the Persian-language tradition that supplied the originally Arabic character with a religious aura that earned him prominent recognition in Shiite Iranian literature. This recognition in turn influenced the oral traditions of virtually all countries and ethnic groups neighboring Iran, including Turkish-, Azeri-, Kurdish-, Arabic-, and Urdu-speaking communities.[29]

No survey of Persian humor in the international context would be complete without taking into account Persian humor in South Asia, particularly in India. Most notably, Persian language chapbooks such as *Ḥikāyāt-i laṭīf* played an important role in the diffusion of Persian humor.[30] The *Ḥikāyāt-i laṭīf*, a small collection of some 75 jocular tales, was originally compiled as a reading exercise and appended to Francis Gladwin's grammar of the Persian language, *The Persian Moonshe*, first published in 1795. The collection's compiler, apparently a Persian-speaking Indian secretary (*munshī*), drew the tales from a variety of sources, including classical Persian, (contemporary?) Indian, and traditional European literature. Following an enthusiastic reception, the appendix was eventually turned into an independent collection, translated into various Indian and other South Asian vernacular languages, and finally, its tales influenced South Asian oral tradition to a certain extent. Strangely enough, the *Ḥikāyāt-i laṭīf* was only introduced to Iranian readers some two hundred years after its compilation.[31]

To conclude this brief essay, Persian humor from the point of view of comparative folk narrative research constitutes a unique amalgam of data deriving from a variety of origins, above all including the Arabic, Indian, and Turkish traditions, as well as materials first attested in Persian. At the same time, Persian humor is known to have influenced the jocular traditions of all its neighbors, including the little-studied areas of Kurdish and Judaeo-Persian jocular traditions.[32] The geographically distant occurrence of jokes

28. See Marzolph 1999.
29. See Marzolph 1983a, 1987b; Nūrbakhsh 2003.
30. See Marzolph 1995b.
31. Javādī 1996.
32. For relevant surveys, see Allison 1996; Marzolph 1993.

first attested in Persian sources must in most cases be explained by way of intermediaries — Arabic and Turkish to the West, Indian and Chinese to the East. At any rate, the comparative perspective proves Persian humor to be firmly rooted in its greater regional context. At the same time it underlines the importance of the Persian tradition as a powerful medium for the preservation and transmission to modern tradition of jocular tales that might otherwise have been relegated to the obscurity of the historical past.

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