

8.6 Rūmī and the *Mathnawī*

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī was born in 604/1207 in Balkh, in what is now northern Afghanistan. His father, Bahā' Walad, was a popular preacher and teacher of the religious sciences as well as a Ṣūfī, and Jalāl al-Dīn followed in his footsteps in each of these areas. Around 610/1213, the approach of the Mongols prompted Bahā' Walad to flee Balkh with his family. They eventually settled in Konya, in present-day Turkey, which is why Jalāl al-Dīn, who spent most of the remainder of his life there, became known as Rūmī ('of the West'). In 642/1244, a wandering mystic from Tabriz called Shams al-Dīn arrived in Konya and started a much celebrated teacher–student relationship with Rūmī which changed the course of his life. From dry scholarship and pious exhortations, Rūmī was inspired by Shams al-Dīn to write volumes of mystical poetry. Rūmī's intense relationship with Shams aroused jealousy and suspicion among his own students, and consequently, within a couple of years of arriving in Konya, Shams finally left without a trace.

Although he wrote a number of important prose works as well, Rūmī is best known for his poetry: the collection of thousands of ghazals, quatrains and other short pieces, which he entitled the *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīz*, and his six-volume didactic work, the *Mathnawī*, which contains over 25,000 couplets in total. (Rūmī dedicated his own *Dīwān* of poetry to Shams-i Tabrīz as a gesture of his own annihilation in the love of his inspiring mentor.)

The *Mathnawī* was written during the 660s/1260s at the request of Rūmī's disciple Ḥosām al-Dīn Chalabī. The title of this work is the generic name for its verse form, the *mathnawī*, or couplets following the rhyme pattern *aabbccdd* and so on. Before Rūmī, the Persian poets Sanā'ī and 'Aṭṭār had established the *mathnawī* as an effective form in which to write didactic Ṣūfī poetry, but Rūmī's work is considered the supreme example.

Like other mystical *mathnawīs*, it consists mostly of stories that serve to illustrate the specific teachings of Ṣūfism. Not having a frame-narrative, they appear to be held together relatively loosely without any obvious principle of order. The characters of Rūmī's stories, which are mostly based on those recounted in earlier written sources, range from prophets and kings to shepherds and slaves, and often animals also feature. Rūmī is renowned for his ability to expound and illustrate mystical doctrines through the description of everyday situations. His *Mathnawī* is also distinctive for the frequency with which he breaks off from narratives in order to comment on, or expand, a specific point – often at great length and through further, shorter narratives – suggesting that for him the importance of the message far outweighed stylistic concerns.

While it has been described as 'the Qur'ān in Persian' by the fifteenth-century Ṣūfī poet 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, the *Mathnawī* has also been influential on Turkish literature and culture, since most of Rūmī's successors in the Mevlevī Ṣūfī order came from the region where he settled rather than his homeland. Rūmī died in 1272 in Konya, where his shrine today is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the whole Islamic world. His successors named their order 'Mevlevi' after him, for they referred to him as Mevlana, 'Our master', but they are better known in the West today as the 'whirling dervishes' because of the unique form of dance which they perform for worship.

The translations offered here include the famous first eighteen couplets, which Rūmī is said to have composed before being asked to write a *mathnawī* work, two narratives, describing the early Şūfī Bāyazīd (Abū Yazīd) Baṣṭāmī encountering a poor old Şūfī shaykh and Moses encountering a simple shepherd, respectively. Also included is a passage on the necessity of following a guide on the Şūfī path, which refers to the archetypal teacher–student relationships between Muḥammad and ‘Alī, and between Khidr and Moses, to which the relationship between Shams-i Tabriz and Rūmī would be added in the later Şūfī tradition.

Further reading

Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: past and present, east and west*, Oxford 2000.

R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalāl’uddin Rumi*, London 1925.

Rumi, *The Masnavi: Book 1*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi, Oxford World’s Classics Series, Oxford forthcoming.

Annemarie Schimmel, *The triumphal sun: a study of the works of Jalāloddin Rumi*, second edition, Albany NY 1993.

Source text

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *The Mathnawi of Jalāl’uddin Rumi*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, London 1925, Persian text vol. 1, vv. 1–18 (part I); vol. 1, vv. 2943–80 (part II); vol. 2, vv. 1720–96 (part III); and vol. 2, vv. 2218–51 (part IV). This is still the most readily accessible edition and offers the advantage of a line-by-line literal prose translation to refer to, not to mention extensive commentary for books 1 to 4. The translations offered here employ rhyme and metre in order to convey the musicality and pithy, aphoristic form of the Persian original, through an equivalent English verse form, heroic couplets. Earlier versions have appeared in a different format in the journal *Sufi* (2000–2).

I The song of the reed

Now listen to this reed-flute’s sad lament
 About the heartache being apart has meant:
 ‘Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
 My song’s expressed each human’s agony,
 A breast which separation split in two
 Provides the breath to share this pain with you:
 Those kept apart from their own origin
 All long to go back to rejoin their kin;
 Amongst the crowd to mourn alone’s my fate,
 With good and bad I’ve learnt to integrate,
 That we were friends each one was satisfied,
 But none sought out my secrets from inside:
 My deepest secret’s in this song I wail,

But eyes and ears can't penetrate the veil:
 Body and soul are joined to form one whole,
 But no one is allowed to see the soul.'
 It's fire not air the reed-flute's mournful cry,
 If you don't have this fire then you should die!
 The fire of love is what makes reed-flutes pine,
 Love's fervour thus gives potency to wine;
 The reed consoles those forced to be apart,
 Its melodies will open up your heart,
 Where's antidote or poison like its song
 Or confidant, or one who's pined so long?
 This reed relates a tortuous path ahead,
 Recounts the love with which Majnūn's heart bled:
 The few who hear the truths the reed has sung
 Have lost their wits so they can speak this tongue;
 The day is wasted if it's spent in grief,
 Consumed by burning aches without relief,
 Good times have long passed, but we couldn't care
 If you're with us our friend beyond compare!
 While ordinary men on drops can thrive
 A fish needs oceans daily to survive:
 The way the ripe must feel the raw can't tell,
 My speech must be concise, and so farewell!

II The Ṣūfī guide

Follow the journey's guide, don't go alone,
 The path is filled with trials that chill the bone!
 Even on routes which numerous times you've used
 Without a guide you're hopelessly confused,
 Beware now of this path you've not yet tried!
 Don't go alone, keep focused on your guide!
 If you're not safe in his protective shade
 The ghoul's deep wails will leave you stunned, afraid,
 Diverting you straight into further harm,
 Much shrewder men than you could not keep calm;
 Heed the Qur'ān on those who went astray
 And how the wicked Satan made them pay:
 He lured them all a thousand miles from here,
 Reducing them to nakedness and fear.
 Look at their bones and hair, and now take heed,
 Don't be an ass, don't let your passions lead!
 Grab hold of its thick neck and pull it back
 Away from lust towards the guide's own track,
 If left alone this donkey's bound to stray
 Towards the field with golden mounds of hay,
 Don't you forget to hold with force its leash,

Or it will bolt for miles to find hashish!
 A donkey stoned – what greater enemy!
 That donkey's ruined countless, can't you see?
 If you're unsure of what's correct, just do
 The opposite of what it wants to do,
 'Consult them, then do just the opposite!
 Or else you'll always be regretting it.'
 Don't ever tolerate your carnal lust,
They'll lead you off the path, betray your trust, (Q 38/26)
 While nothing conquers passion better than
 The company of fellow travellers can:
 The prophet summoned 'Alī to his side,
 'Hey, lion of God, brave hero of my pride,
 Don't count on courage on its own to cope,
 Take refuge also in the tree of hope:
 Enter the realm of that pure intellect
 Whom no opponent can from truth deflect.
 Just like Mount Qāf, he reaches to the sky
 His spirit like the Simorgh soars so high,
 We could continue with this man's applause
 Until the end of time without a pause,
 He is the sun, though human to our sight,
 Please understand that "God knows best what's right."
 'Alī, in preference to all pious deeds
 Follow the one whom God's direction leads,
 Others persist with acts of piety,
 Hoping to flee their egos' tyranny,
 Take refuge here instead with this true guide,
 Just leave the hidden enemy aside!
 Of all the acts of worship it's the best,
 It makes you far superior to the rest.'
 If he accepts, surrender to the guide
 Like Moses, who with Khidr once had tried,
 Stay calm, don't question what he should commit,
 So he won't say, *Enough, Now we must split!* (Q 18/8)
 If he destroys their boat, don't you go wild,
 Don't tear your hair out if he kills a child!
 Since God has said this man's hand's like his own,
And, Up above their hands rests God's alone, (Q 48/15)
 With God's own hand he slays the helpless boy,
 To bring him back with new, eternal joy;
 The few who tried this journey on their own
 The guide still helped, they didn't walk alone:
 His helping hand's for all across the land,
 It has to be then naught but God's own hand,
 If he can stretch his help out far and wide
 There's even more for those stood by his side,
 If absent ones receive such gifts for naught

Imagine what those present shall be brought,
 You can't compare his faithful followers
 With those who choose to be mere onlookers;
 Don't be too delicate when he's around,
 As weak as water, crumbly like the ground,
 If each blow leaves you bitter don't expect
 Without pain like a mirror to reflect.

III Moses and the shepherd

Once Moses overheard a shepherd pray:
 'O you whose every whim we all obey,
 Where do you live that I might meet you there
 To mend your battered shoes and comb your hair,
 To wash your clothes and kill the lice and fleas,
 To serve you milk to sip from when you please,
 To kiss your little hand, to rub your feet,
 To sweep your bedroom clean and keep it neat?
 I'd sacrifice my herd of goats for you,
 This loud commotion proves my love is true.'
 He carried on in this deluded way,
 So Moses asked, 'What's that I hear you say?'
 'I speak to my creator there on high,
 The one who also made the earth and sky.'
 Moses replied, 'You've truly lost your way,
 You've given up the faith and gone astray,
 It's gibberish and babble stupid twit,
 You'd better learn to put a cork in it!
 Your blasphemy pollutes the atmosphere
 And tears to shreds that silk of faith so sheer,
 While socks and shoes might be superb for you
 How can they fit the sun, have you a clue?
 If you don't shut your mouth immediately
 A fire will burn up all humanity.
 You don't believe? Then please explain this smoke,
 And why your soul turned black when you just spoke!
 If you're aware that He is God, our Lord,
 Why act familiar when that is abhorred?
 Friendship like this is worse than enmity,
 The Lord's above such acts of piety,
 For family friends reserve your generous deeds,
 God has no body, nor material needs:
 Milk is for babies, who must drink to grow,
 And shoes for those with feet, as you must know;
 Even when you address his chosen slave
 Select your words with care, don't misbehave,
 Since God has said, "I'm him and he is Me."

'When I was ill you never came to see':
 He wasn't left alone with his disease
 That servant who 'through Me both hears and sees'."
 Don't talk to saints without the reverence due
 It blocks your heart, and blots your record too;
 If you address a man by Fāṭima's name
 Though man and woman are inside the same
 He'll still seek vengeance for it, if he can,
 Even if he's a calm and patient man,
 That glorious name which women all revere
 Can wound a man more deeply than a spear;
 While feet and hands are great for you and me
 They'd just contaminate God's purity,
He was not born, nor does the Lord beget, (Q 112/3)
 But reproducing beings are in his debt:
 Those with a body once were born – that's sense,
 Creation must stay this side of the fence,
 That's all because we wither and decay,
 Unlike our source we're bound to fade away.'
 The shepherd said, 'Your words have struck me dumb,
 Regret now burns my soul, and I feel numb.'
 He breathed a heavy sigh and rent his cloak,
 Then in the desert disappeared like smoke.
 A revelation came down instantly:
 'Why did you turn a slave away from Me?
 Your mission's to unite all far and wide,
 Is it instead your preference to divide?
 As far as possible don't separate,
 "Above all else divorce is what I hate",
 I've given each one his own special ways
 And his unique expressions when he prays:
 One person's virtue is another's sin,
 His meat might seem like poison, listening in;
 I stand immune to all impurity,
 Men's pride and cunning never bother Me,
 I don't command for My own benefit,
 But so My slaves themselves can gain from it;
 For Indians their own dialect seems best,
 But folk from Sindh think Sindhi's much more blest,
 I'm not made any purer by their praise,
 Their own impurities these prayers erase,
 And I pay no attention to their speech
 But their intention and the heights they reach:
 Pure, humble hearts within are what I seek
 Regardless of the haughty way they speak.'
 The heart's the essence, words are mere effects,
 The heart's what counts, the cackle he neglects!
 I'm tired of fancy terms and metaphors,

I want a soul which burns so much it roars!
 It's time to light one's heart with pure desire,
 Burn thought and contemplation with this fire!
 How far apart the meek and well-behaved
 From ardent lovers who may seem depraved!
 Each moment lovers burn themselves away:
 A ruined village has no tithes to pay,
 Don't pick at faults and call him a disgrace,
 Don't wash the blood upon love's martyr's face!
 His blood exceeds your water's cleanliness:
 This martyr's blemish beats all righteousness;
 Those at the Ka'ba scrap the *qibla* rule:
 What use are boots to divers in the pool?
 You don't seek guidance from those drunken men,
 So why insist they mend their rags again?
 The lovers stand beyond religion's hold,
 From God himself truth's creed and laws they're told:
 If rubies have no seal stamped there's no harm,
 Midst seas of grief love stays serene and calm.
 Then in the depths of Moses God concealed
 Such secrets that can never be revealed,
 Into his heart poured words, pure and refined,
 Transparent just like speech and sight combined,
 He lost his wits and then found them anew,
 From pre- to post-eternity he flew,
 I'd just waste time by trying to explain,
 It's far beyond the ordinary brain:
 This mystery would blow your brain to bits,
 While writing it the firmest pencil splits;
 Moses, on hearing God's reproach, just ran
 Towards the desert searching for that man:
 He followed footprints that the shepherd laid,
 Scattering dust throughout the track he'd made,
 Footprints of drunkards are a special kind
 Distinct from those the sober leave behind:
 He starts just like a rook, steps straight ahead,
 Then bishop-like diagonally instead,
 Sometimes just like a wave's crest rising high
 And then as if a fish has slithered by,
 Occasionally he'd write his thoughts in sand
 Like fortune-tellers reading what is planned,
 At last when Moses found the shepherd there
 He gave the message, 'God's decree is fair,
 Don't bother with mere custom anymore
 But let your heart express what's in its core!
 True faith salutes your infidelity,
 Through you the world has found security,
 Absolved by God *whose will must be fulfilled*

(Q 14/27)

Scream out, without the fear that you'll be killed!
 The shepherd said, 'I've gone beyond that stage,
 My heart's blood cannot still this thirst assuage,
 I've even passed that tree at heaven's end
 A thousand spheres beyond – I still ascend:
 You cracked the whip and made my stallion vault
 Above the heavens with a somersault!
 For spurring me towards divinity
 God bless that hand which cracked the whip for me!
 Right now my state's beyond what tongues can say,
 What I've described gives just a glimpse away.'
 The image in the mirror that you see
 Is yours, and not the mirror's property,
 The breath inside the reed its player has blown
 Is just a tiny portion of his own,
 Whenever you give praise to God, beware
 It's worth no more than this poor shepherd's prayer!
 You might suppose your own immaculate,
 But still for God they're all inadequate,
 So when the veil is lifted don't protest:
 'What's now revealed we never could have guessed!'

IV The pilgrimage of Bāyazīd

For Mecca Bāyazīd one day set out
 To make the pilgrimage, to be devout,
 At every town he passed along the way
 He'd seek what local sages had to say:
 He'd wander asking, 'Who here has the light?
 Who only leans on truth's supporting might?'
 God said, 'When on your travels always seek
 The few who take from Me each word they speak!'

Seek treasure, shun the world of gain and loss,
 This world is second-best, no more than dross!
 In hope of wheat whoever sows his seeds
 Soon finds his field has also sprouted weeds,
 But if it's weeds you sow no wheat will rise,
 Seek masters of the heart, the meek and wise!
 Head for the Ka'ba when it's time to go
 And you'll see Mecca too, as all must know:
 God was, on his *mīrāj*, the prophet's aim,
 He saw the throne and angels all the same.
 A new disciple built a house one day,
 The master passed and saw it on his way,
 He questioned the disciple as a test,
 Knowing that his intentions were the best:
 'Why did you put a window over here?'

'To let the light come in to make things clear.'
 'That's secondary, it's not like breathing air,
 Your primary need's to hear the call to prayer!'

While travelling Bāyazīd searched far and wide
 To find his epoch's Khidr, the perfect guide,
 He found him like a crescent hunched and pale,
 Majestic, speaking just like those we hail,
 His heart like sunshine though his eyes were blind
 Like elephants seeing India in their mind:
 Countless delights are seen with eyes shut tight,
 But when they're opened none are seen in light!
 While you're asleep the mysteries are shown
 Your heart's a window viewing the unknown,
 The mystic even dreams when wide awake,
 Prostrate and feel the ground beneath him shake!
 So Bāyazīd then asked him, 'How are you?'

The man was poor and had a family too,
 'O Bāyazīd, why did you take this road?
 Where is it that you're carrying that load?'
 'To *hajj*, since day-break I've been travelling.'
 'For your expenses how much did you bring?'
 'Two hundred silver coins is all I've got,
 I've tied them to this garment with a knot.'
 'Just walk around me seven times right here,
 That's better than the *hajj* for you, fakir!
 Then hand your coins to me, you generous man,
 Complete your *hajj*, fulfil your mission's plan!
 You've run to Şafā, entered purity,
 You've done the *umra*, live eternally!
 He judges me much loftier, I swear,
 Than that mere house of bricks they flock to there:
 That Ka'ba is the home of piety,
 But I possess his deepest mystery,
 Inside the Ka'ba no one's ever stepped
 And none but God will my pure heart accept,
 When you've seen me, you've seen the lord as well,
 Truth's Ka'ba you've just circled, can't you tell?
 To serve me is obeying God's decree
 So don't suppose he's separate from me:
 Open your inner eye, see if you can
 Perceive the light of God inside a man!'

This wisdom pierced right into Bāyazīd,
 Just like an earring, making him take heed,
 For he had heard such wisdom from this friend
 Enabling him to reach the journey's end.