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The Hoopoe on the Pulpit

Without a doubt, ‘Attar’s most famous work today is the *Conference of the Birds*. Since 1863 it has been translated multiple times into European languages, and it has recently inspired two original illustrated books as well as multiple stage performances.¹ It is also easily ‘Attar’s most studied work. Its academic and non-academic popularity is largely due to its allegorical frame-tale, which is commonly summarised as follows: a hoopoe leads a group of birds on a dangerous journey towards their king, the Simorgh, who resides on Mount Qaf at the edge of the world. To arrive there, they must journey through seven valleys. Many of the birds perish along the way, and when they finally encounter the Simorgh, only thirty of them are left alive. When those thirty remaining birds gaze on the Simorgh, they are astonished to see themselves reflected in the Simorgh, and the Simorgh reflected in themselves. They are ontologically linked to the Simorgh, who nevertheless remains utterly transcendent. In this way, they experience effacement (*fana*) in the divine, which is encapsulated in the poem’s central pun on ‘thirty birds’ (*si-morgh*) and ‘Simorgh’. The poem is thus an allegory of the sufi path, in which the birds symbolise sufi seekers, the hoopoe their *pir* and the Simorgh, God.

The above summary, however, corresponds only to a portion of the frame-tale. Before they actually set out on the quest, the birds voice objections and concerns about the proposed journey, which the hoopoe proceeds to demolish; they then ask a series of questions about spiritual virtues and vices, to which the hoopoe responds in the fashion of a preacher delivering a homiletic assembly. These are more than brief preliminaries introducing the quest. In fact, the hoopoe’s homiletic performances are, in many ways, the heart of the *masnavi*. They represent the vast majority of the poem (approximately 88 per cent of its total length), and it is through these performances, the contents

of which are recapitulated by ‘Attar for the benefit of his readers, that the birds are rendered fit for their journey. Only at the very end of the poem do they actually set out on the path towards the Simorgh, and the events of the journey are only briefly alluded to before their final admission to the divine presence. This is not to deny the importance of the birds’ allegorical journey or the significance of their final climactic encounter with the Simorgh. Rather, it is to place that climactic scene in context, and to recognise that most of the poem’s content is devoted to the homiletic speech that *motivates* the journey and which makes that final encounter possible. The poem is not just the story of an allegorical journey towards God through seven valleys: it is the story of a series of homiletic performances that prepare, instigate and serve as a vehicle for that allegorical journey.

Through the frame-tale, the implicit homiletic speech situation that suffuses the genre of the didactic *masnavi* is made visible in a concrete narrative form. As we have seen, by the twelfth century preaching had become a significant avenue for spiritual instruction and the dissemination of sufi ideas to broad audiences. The genre of the didactic *masnavi* idealises and adapts the discourse of preachers to a literary context through its use of short illustrative narratives, its style of direct exhortation and its evocation of orality; in the *Conference of the Birds*, this imagined homiletic context is further embodied in the characters, setting and actions of the frame-tale. This allows a for more concrete depiction of the genre’s imagined homiletic context, including the rhetorical effects of the speaker’s discourse, the participation of the audience and various bodily and para-lingual channels of communication. As we shall see, the hoopoe delivers his discourses in accordance with the established practices and conventions of preaching, not only in terms of the content of his speech, but also in his position on the pulpit, the opening Quranic recitations and his relationship to his audience. Most strikingly, the frame-tale allows ‘Attar to capture something of the dynamic, interactive quality of an oral sermon. The hoopoe engages his (fictive) listeners according to their specific needs, responding to questions and meeting their objections with a calibrated mixture of admonishment and encouragement. By virtue of the frame-tale, ‘Attar can show the effects that the hoopoe’s homiletic performance induces in the birds, including ecstasy and wailing, as he convinces them to undertake the dangerous journey towards the Simorgh.

The *Conference of the Birds* can thus be read as a narrative demonstration of the perlocutionary power of homiletic speech, in particular its ability to motivate spiritual reform and push listeners forward on the mystical path. The poem is composed of a series of homiletic assemblies that, in the end, lead to the birds' effacement in the Simorgh, and it thereby shows how homiletic performance instigates the ethical reform that leads to mystical experience and proximity with the divine. This valorisation of homiletic speech is not disinterested, however: the text is composed of the very same mode of discourse whose efficacy it strives demonstrate. To read the *Conference of the Birds* is to place oneself on the receiving end of the hoopoe's exhortations and admonishments, so the poem's framing of the latter's rhetorical power is critical to the transformative work that it aspires to perform.

The present chapter thus investigates how homiletic speech and its perlocutionary effects are portrayed in the *Conference of the Birds*. It begins by reconstructing, in so far as possible, the practices and procedures of preaching in 'Attar's time, which provide the context for the hoopoe's performance. It then turns to the frame-tale structure, which allows 'Attar to construct an imagined performance setting with an embodied speaker and reactive audience for the sermons and anecdotes typical of the genre. He can thus narrate the effects of the hoopoe's speech – which is ultimately his own speech – on the fictive audience of birds, showing how it counters their doubts, enflames their passion for God and ultimately convinces them to set out on the spiritual path. Finally, the chapter examines the changing nature of speech once the birds reach the court of the Simorgh, where identities and hierarchies dissolve, referents prove elusive and speech – if it is to be any use at all – must be allusive and oblique. Ultimately, the *Conference of the Birds* is a tale of speech, its power and its limits. The hoopoe's performances provoke a journey towards an ineffable God who cannot be grasped in language: homiletic utterances push readers and listeners towards a realm that speech itself can never fully capture.

The Practice of Preaching

As we saw in Chapter 1, didactic *masnavis* recall homiletic discourse in both their content and overall mood: they are composed of direct exhortations in a hortatory mode, illustrated by short anecdotes and generally assume a

paternalistic, advisory relationship between speaker and audience. Again, this is not to claim that didactic *masnavis* are the genetic descendants of oral sermons or their exact formal equivalents. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the genre's tone, rhetorical stance and subject matter would, for most medieval audiences, evoke the sessions of hortatory preachers, which would cue specific expectations that would inform their experience of the text. For the medieval reader-listener, the implied setting of a didactic *masnavi* like the *Hadiqat al-haqiqah* or the *Makhzan al-asrar* was a hortatory preaching session; the poet's primary persona was that of a mystically minded preacher, sermonising from atop a pulpit or at the head of a teaching circle, and his reader-listeners were invited to imagine themselves as members of the audience assembled around him. And many of these poets would themselves preach, or at least were remembered as doing so. 'Attar, as we have seen, is said to have preached weekly in the congregational mosque at Nishapur; Rumi delivered formal sermons as well as more intimate homiletic sessions for his disciples, both of which were preserved by his community; Sana'i associated with preachers like Mohammad-e Mansur; and Sa'di also has a collection of sermons to his name.²

'Attar, however, was not content with the generic implication of a homiletic setting for his didactic *masnavis*. Instead, he creates more concrete homiletic settings for his poems by means of the frame-tale device. Unlike the *Hadiqat* or *Makhzan*, the anecdotes and exhortations in the *Conference of the Birds* are cast as the intra-diegetic utterances of the hoopoe, the frame-tale's fictional protagonist. In the style of a preacher delivering a large public sermon, the hoopoe exhorts an assembly of birds to undertake the arduous journey towards the Simorgh. The bulk of the poem is devoted to these homiletic performances, by means of which the hoopoe ultimately succeeds in prodding his listeners onto the spiritual path. The poem's various embedded (or 'hypo-diegetic') anecdotes thus unfold in an imagined communicative situation, complete with an embodied speaker, detailed setting and responsive audience. Unlike earlier *masnavis*, which evoke a homiletic context by virtue of content and mood alone, the *Conference of the Birds* narrates it on the level of the frame-tale.

The conventions of popular preaching varied across time, space and social setting, and because the tradition was predominantly an oral one, it is difficult to reconstruct. Nevertheless, by triangulating references in different classes of

sources, we can deduce some of the common features of homiletic practice as it was performed (and imagined) in the eastern Islamic world during the Seljuk and Mongol periods. First, some textual works purport to preserve the actual content of specific homiletic performances: we have already mentioned the sermons and assemblies attributed to Rumi, Sa'di, Semnani and Nezam al-Din Owleya. These are probably not accurate transcriptions, however, but edited accounts set down at a later date, or even literary idealisations of how such events were imagined to have unfolded. Still, they give some indication of a homiletic assembly's expected contours. Also useful for reconstructing homiletic practice are hagiographies and travel accounts, which more directly capture the context and non-verbal aspects of the sermon. Finally, normative accounts of preaching – especially Ibn al-Jawzi's manual on the subject and Ghazali's discussions of preaching in the *Ihya'* – are invaluable for reconstructing the horizon of expectations against which 'Attar's idealised accounts of preaching made meaning.

As portrayed in these sources, homiletic assemblies could take place in a variety of settings: in mosques, madrasas and *khanqahs*, or their attached courtyards; in shrines and cemeteries; or when the session was sponsored by a private donor, in the courtyard of a palace or residence.³ Preachers like Ibn al-Jawzi and Ahmad Ghazali could attract huge crowds, and the hoopoe's assembly is hyperbolically described as consisting of 100,000 attendees.⁴ The preacher would usually ascend a pulpit or other platform, especially in these larger gatherings, increasing his visibility and marking him as a spiritual authority. He would generally sit, a standing posture being reserved for the formal, liturgically mandated Friday sermon.⁵ According to Ibn al-Jawzi, the preacher should open the session with praise of God and Quranic recitation, performed either by himself or a professional reciter (*moqri*). The traveller Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217), who attended three of Ibn al-Jawzi's sermons in Baghdad, describes twenty reciters seated before the famous preacher, chanting in rounds.⁶ The recitation is then followed by a eulogy for the Prophet, a prayer for the reigning caliph and his subjects and what Ibn al-Jawzi calls a *khotba*, a benediction of rhymed prose in praise of God, usually climaxing in a Quranic verse or phrase.⁷ The Quranic recitation and rhyming *khotba* endow the performance with a ritual quality and cultivate a sense of pious awe and wonder, encouraging audience attention and receptivity to the sermon proper (*va'z*), which tends to be

more discursive and didactic than the opening material; it should, according to Ibn al-Jawzi, consist of Quranic exegesis along with related exhortations to pious behaviour and ‘stories of pious men’ (*bekayat al-salehin*).⁸

As for specific vocal and bodily techniques, the preacher might emphasise certain points by striking the pulpit with a sword or staff, his traditional accoutrements; such an action ‘arouse[s] the hearts of the people and prepares them to snatch up the exhortations avidly’.⁹ Tone and modulation were important as well; Ibn al-Jawzi recommends ‘raising the voice and displaying zeal in warning and exhortation’, and he cites a hadith that the Prophet would visibly display his excitement while preaching and his eyes would become bloodshot. According to Ibn Jubayr’s travel account, Ibn al-Jawzi reacted visibly and emotionally to his own material in a way that increased its rhetorical effect:

Emotion visibly overtook him and tears prevented him from speaking so that we feared lest he would choke. Then suddenly he got up from his seat and descended from the minbar [pulpit], and having instilled fear into the hearts of those present, he left them as though on burning coals. They followed him with tears of agitation, some weeping profusely, and some rolling in the dust.¹⁰

Some preachers would even allegedly apply a salve of mustard seed and vinegar under their eyes to produce tears on demand. Such behaviour is harshly criticised on the grounds of its insincerity, but it nevertheless demonstrates how preachers sought to trigger affective responses in the audience through their own non-verbal emotional displays.¹¹

By its very nature, oral homily presupposes a ‘circumambient actuality’ in which the audience and preacher are present in the same space over the course of the performance and are thus capable of reacting to and influencing each other.¹² The audience’s participation was not only possible, but encouraged; indeed, it was a central component of the performance. Listeners would intervene by posing questions and voicing objections, and they would register the effect of the preacher’s words through bodily displays. For example, during particularly intense moments of admonishment, some listeners would raise their hands upwards to signal their engagement and approval of the material.¹³ Displays of extreme affect, including weeping, fainting and ecstatic

movements were common – if contested – modes of audience response. Weeping is portrayed as a frequent occurrence in the assemblies, especially when preachers admonished listeners to consider their own sins and reminded them of the terrible fate in store for those who violate God’s law.¹⁴ Ecstatic behaviour (*wajd*) is also reported, similar to that which occurred in sufi *sama*‘ ceremonies. Attendees would allegedly flail about, striking each other and themselves, and sometimes even ripping off their clothing.¹⁵ Some were said to fall down in swoons and even die.¹⁶

These intense displays of affect were a focus of much scholarly debate. In general, Ibn al-Jawzi did not approve of them, not because he thought the audience should remain unmoved by the preacher, but because he worried that these particular practices were often feigned and insincere, and that ecstatic movements could lead to a potentially lascivious mingling of the sexes. He does not condemn them absolutely, but suggests that, in most cases, they are to be discouraged.¹⁷ On the question of crying, Ghazali is more permissive, allowing it on the part of both the preacher and the audience.¹⁸ Sibṭ b. al-Jawzi (d. 1256; the grandson of Ibn al-Jawzi) considered the audience’s weeping to be a sign of a sermon’s efficacy, and he boasts of his own ability to reduce great men to tears.¹⁹ In any case, despite scholarly debates over their legitimacy, these practices appear to have been widespread. According to Ibn Jubayr, the assemblies of Ibn al-Jawzi were full of weeping and ecstatic displays, even though the latter opposed such behaviour in his prescriptive writings.

Through these displays – as well as more subtle cues – the audience could not only demonstrate their attention and receptivity to the material (or lack thereof), but also influence how the sermon unfolded. Most sermons were semi-improvised events, so a skilled preacher could pick up on the audience’s expectations and reactions and adjust his performance accordingly. This dynamic has been well documented by ethnographers in modern oral performance settings, and while our own premodern sources are much more reticent on such matters, they do hint at the extent to which audience reaction shaped the course of a homiletic assembly. For example, the sufi preacher Abu Sa‘id is said to have been able to intuitively sense when a listener was struggling with a particular concept and immediately clarify his position with an apt verse or anecdote:

The shaykh would speak at an assembly every day, and whenever a concern would pass through someone's heart, he would turn to them in the middle of his discourse and respond to whatever was in their heart with an allusion (*ramz*), a verse (*bayt*) or a narrative (*hekayat*) in such a way that they would understand.²⁰

The above quotation is taken from Ebn Monavvar's hagiographical work, which often ascribes the shaykh's perceptiveness in such matters to a miraculous, preternatural intuition (*ferasat*). But these abilities can also be interpreted in a more sober fashion as the knack of an expert orator and teacher for identifying resistant or confused listeners on the basis of bodily cues and adjusting the performance accordingly.

Audiences could influence the course of the homily in a more direct fashion by asking questions, and numerous anecdotes attest to its interactive, dialectical character. The ideal structure of a large, public sermon, as imagined by Ibn al-Jawzi, includes a section devoted exclusively to audience questions. According to Ibn Jubayr, the majority of Ibn al-Jawzi's sessions were spent answering questions posed verbally or passed to him in the form of notes (*reqa'*).²¹ Works such as Rumi's *Fih ma fih* and the *Fava'id al-fo'ad*, which purport to record more intimate homiletic sessions, also include frequent questions and interjections from the audience. These texts may be literary constructions designed to evoke oral homiletics more than records of actual events, but they still show the general form that such assemblies were imagined to take.²²

The conventions of preaching – including the mounting of the pulpit, the opening Quranic recitation, the queries from the audience and the latter's wailing and ecstasy – are incorporated into the hoopoe's performance in the *Conference of the Birds*, which is thereby cast as an idealised homiletic assembly. This performance setting runs throughout almost the entire poem, but it is most obviously encapsulated in a passage immediately after the birds agree to journey towards the Simorgh. Although amenable to the journey in principle, they confess that they remain mired in confusion which must first be resolved because 'this path cannot be trod in ignorance'. After casting lots to choose a leader, they invite the hoopoe to ascend the pulpit as their 'imam of tightening and loosening' so that they might be prepared for the way.²³

The hoopoe complies with their request and ascends the pulpit to conduct an assembly:

Then the hoopoe made the preliminaries for his speech
 He ascended the pulpit (*korsi*) and began.
 When the crowned hoopoe mounted his throne (*takht*),
 whoever saw his face found high fortune.
 The troop of birds formed ranks, shoulder to shoulder,
 more than a hundred thousand before the hoopoe.
 The nightingale and turtle dove came forward together
 so that they might together serve as Quran-reciters (*moqri*).
 They chanted such melodies (*alhan*) then,
 that the world was thrown by them into a tumult.
 As for those whose ears were struck by their melody –
 agitated (*bi-qarar*) they came, stupefied (*madhush*) they left.
 An ecstatic state (*halat*) came over everyone
 None were with themselves, nor without.
 Then the hoopoe began his homily
 He withdrew the veil from the face of meaning.²⁴

The hoopoe first ascends the pulpit and performs the ‘preliminaries’: presumably the invocation, praise of the Prophet and perhaps the *khotba* as discussed by Ibn al-Jawzi. By virtue of the crown of feathers lining his head, he is cast as a king on his throne (*takht*), bestowing fortune on those who approach him – it is useful here to recall Becker’s argument that at the dawn of Islam, the pulpit functioned not only as a platform for oratory, but as a ‘throne’ for the Prophet.²⁵ If we understand the hoopoe to be sitting on this ‘throne’, which seems reasonable, that would also indicate that this is a hortatory assembly and not the liturgically mandated Friday sermon, during which the preacher would traditionally stand. Before the hoopoe begins the homily proper, the nightingale and the turtle dove, both renowned for their beautiful voices, play the role of Quran-reciter (*moqri*). More specifically, they chant ‘melodies’ (*alhan*) with the Quran, a particular style of recitation that was sometimes criticised for being too close to secular singing. (Ibn al-Jawzi, for instance, fiercely attacks it, writing that melodious recitation ‘pleases and stirs human nature’ and thereby ‘diverts the people from contemplating the Quran itself’.)²⁶ As we have seen,

Quranic recitation could also sometimes trigger ecstatic states in its listeners, which was a source of religious anxiety for more sober critics, who worried that these behaviours were insincere affectations. The birds behave in precisely this way; the melodious recitations of the nightingale and the turtle dove throw them into an ecstatic ‘tumult’.

Compared to a live homiletic performance, literary texts are something of a one-way street, at least as far as the author’s relationship to their later readers is concerned. While a preacher might respond in real time to their audience, and a reciter might deviate from their script in response to listeners’ reactions, ‘Attar composes his poetry, at least in part, for an anonymous textual readership that he will never meet. Literary communication with these anonymous readers necessarily lacks the circumambient actuality of oral homiletics and thus their dialogical character. Through the frame-tale, however, ‘Attar manages to mimic, within the text itself, something of the interactive, circumambient performance and reception environment that literary, authorial communication is otherwise denied.²⁷ The birds not only react to the hoopoe’s sermons with extreme displays of affect, but, as we shall see, actually steer the direction of the performance through their questions and objections, consistent with non-literary homiletic practice.

Question and Answer

The frame-tale can be heuristically divided into four major sections. In the first section, the birds are introduced and the hoopoe urges them to seek the Simorgh; one by one they present their excuses, which the hoopoe counters with exhortations and illustrative anecdotes. In the second section, the hoopoe mounts the pulpit and continues his assembly, answering specific questions about the way. In the third, the hoopoe discourses on the seven valleys, describing each of them before launching into a thematically related set of anecdotes and homilies. In the last section, the birds finally set out and ‘Attar provides a brief narration of their journey followed by their encounter with the Simorgh.

Even before reading a single verse of these exchanges, the poem’s title hints at the importance it attaches to language in general and homiletic utterance in particular. Titles were notoriously fluid in the medieval period, and the poem circulated under several names in the manuscript tradition, including the *Manteq al-tayr* (*Conference of the Birds*), *Maqamat-e toyur* (*Spiritual Stages*

of the Birds) and the *Toyur-nama* (*Book of the Birds*). All of three of these titles, however, can be traced back to how ‘Attar himself describes the work, and they are all somehow related to speech. The first two, found in a single verse in the poem’s conclusion, might not have been intended as titles but as references to the events of the frame-tale more generally:

The ‘conference of birds’ and the ‘spiritual stages of the birds’
have found their completion in you [O ‘Attar], like light in the sun.²⁸

Regarding the former, the Arabic root *n-t-q* encompasses a semantic field related to language and meaning: *manteq* is usually translated as ‘speech’, ‘language’ or ‘logic’, but also ‘oration’, whence the poem’s common English title, *Conference of the Birds*.²⁹ The phrase also alludes to Solomon, who, according to the Quran, was taught ‘the language of the birds’ (*manteq al-tayr*). Not only could he perceive the significance in what others mistakenly believe to be meaningless chirping, but he was able to use this knowledge to command an avian host and dispatch the hoopoe to the Queen of Sheba as a messenger. Consistent with Solomon’s image as a sorcerer-prophet-king, the phrase is endowed with theurgic overtones.³⁰ The second expression from the above-quoted verse, *maqamat-e toyur*, is usually translated as the *Spiritual Stages of the Birds*, and ‘Attar also uses this expression as one of the poem’s proper titles in his introduction to the *Mokhtar-nama*.³¹ In technical sufi terminology, a ‘stage’ (*maqam*) refers to one of the psycho-ethical waypoints along the sufi path towards the divine, and the seven valleys traversed by the birds can easily be read allegorically as such a sequence of mystical stages. Yet there is notable polysemy here: *maqamat* is also the plural of *maqama*, which signifies the place in which one stands to deliver a discourse, especially a homiletic one, and by way of metonymy, the homily itself.³² It is used in this sense in the picaresque *maqamat* genre, in which eloquent, rogue heroes repeatedly dazzle audiences with their oratory in a variety of locales. The *Maqamat-e toyur*, then, could also be translated as the *Homilies of the Birds*, a rather apt title given the bulk of the poem’s content. Finally, yet another title is suggested in the prologue to the *Mokhtar-nama*, where ‘Attar enumerates his previous works. The particular title he gives here is rather generic – the *Toyur-nama* (*Book of the Birds*) – but it is praised in terms drawn from the conceptual field of language and coupled with a Persian calque of the Arabic *manteq al-tayr*:

‘the language of the birds (*zaban-e morghan*) of the *Toyur-nama* has transported rational (*nateqa*) souls to the site of unveiling (*kashf*).’³³ The work is thus cast a transformative utterance that gives rational – literally ‘speaking’ (*nateqa*) – souls access to knowledge inspired directly from God.

In contrast to the *Mosibat-nama*, which features a pedagogical discussion between a sufi shaykh and a single disciple, the *Conference of the Birds* depicts a much larger homiletic performance for a multitude of seekers. The journey towards the Simorgh and the discourses that motivate it are a group affair. After the customary doxologies, ‘Attar’s narratorial voice welcomes various birds one by one onto the field of action, including a parrot, peacock, eagle, pheasant and falcon, among others.’³⁴ The various fowl then assemble themselves into a group (*jam‘*, *majma‘*) and observe that every city and clime, except for their own, is ruled by a king. Without a king, they complain, there can be no ‘order or arrangement’ in the army, nor can they progress further along ‘the way’. In this manner, ‘they all arrive at one conclusion’: they must seek out a king for themselves, too.³⁵ The birds’ quest is thus, from the very beginning, an explicitly social undertaking. The birds commit to seek out their ruler not as individuals, but as a group. A ruler is necessary precisely because they are bound together by social ties: they constitute a ‘city’ (*shahr*) and therefore need a ‘monarch’ (*shahryar*).

Although the birds jointly decide to set out, their endeavour is profoundly hierarchical. Immediately after they settle on the search for their king, the hoopoe emerges as their de facto leader on the quest. He recounts his bonafides as Solomon’s companion, and he tells the birds he already knows the identity of their lord – the fabled Simorgh – and he claims to be uniquely positioned to guide them towards its royal court. Already we can discern the asymmetrical, pedagogical axis that will structure most of the remainder of the poem. The hoopoe must continuously prod his resistant and fickle flock to move forward. Only at the end of the tale, when they enter the court of the Simorgh, does that hierarchy dissolve. At the same time, even though the hoopoe stands above his fellow birds, he does not stand apart from them; he is an integral member of the group. As he confesses in his opening speech, he has travelled much and knows the identity of their king, but he cannot make the journey alone.³⁶ The quest for the Simorgh is a social, dialectical project, undertaken collaboratively by both teachers and students.

The Simorgh has its origins in pre-Islamic Iranian mythology, but it remained a resonant cultural symbol even after the Islamisation of Iran. In early New Persian literature, it is famously found in the *Shah-nama* where it is endowed with a variety of magical powers, especially healing, and nurtures and protects the hero Zal after he is abandoned as a newborn.³⁷ In the following centuries, the Simorgh and similar mythical birds were incorporated into Islamic mystical and philosophical writings, where they were often associated with Gabriel, the Holy Spirit and the Active Intellect.³⁸ It appears, for example, in the *Safir-e simorgh* (*Simorgh's Cry*) of Sohrawardi (d. 1191), where it calls a hoopoe upwards towards unification with itself.³⁹ The allegorical *Treatise of the Birds* by Ibn Sina (d. 1037) explores similar themes: it is the story of a bird (told in the first person) who is freed from the nets of terrestrial hunters by his avian brothers who have already escaped. Although no longer captives, bits of cord remain bound to their feet that hobble them slightly. Together they journey across eight mountains to the summit of a ninth, the residence of the supreme king. Although not explicitly identified as the Simorgh, the king's mountainous perch certainly recalls that of the mythological fowl.⁴⁰ Ahmad Ghazali later composed his own rendition of the treatise, in which a group of birds journey to the island of their avian king. His version exists in both Arabic and Persian; the birds' monarch is a phoenix (*anqa*) in the former and a Simorgh in the latter. Many of the birds perish along the way, and when they finally arrive, they are denied entry because their king, in his complete self-sufficiency, has no need of their devotion or love. They are admitted through his grace only when they realise the futility of their own action and his ultimate independence from them.⁴¹

'Attar's frame-tale seems to be based primarily on Ahmad Ghazali's version, but it also includes elements from Ibn Sina's treatise as well as his own innovations.⁴² As in Ghazali's telling, many birds in the *Conference of the Birds* perish along the way, and they are initially rebuffed by the Simorgh's chamberlain of glory before being admitted by the chamberlain of grace. But like Ibn Sina's birds, their journey is also a sequential quest to the mountainous home of their king through a symbolically significant number of stages (here seven valleys instead of nine mountains). The play on 'thirty birds' (*si-morgh*) and 'Simorgh' seems to be 'Attar's own invention, by means of which he explores the disintegration of identities at the moment of effacement (*fana*'). Ibn Sina's treatise can be read as an allegorical, Neoplatonic ascent from concrete, sensory

particulars towards the Active Intellect (or beyond), while Ghazali's version of the narrative emphasises the necessity of grace to reach the divine beloved. 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds* incorporates elements from both of these, but it is also run through with specifically sufi concerns, especially the interior connection between self and God.

In addition to its particular theological vision, the *Conference of the Birds* also represents a striking formal deviation from these earlier works: the stand-alone, allegorical narrative of the birds has here been reworked into a frame-tale structure. The figure of the guide is completely absent from Ghazali's treatise, and while the avian protagonist in Ibn Sina's version is shown the way by others, they are not granted extensive speaking time. In the *Conference of the Birds*, by contrast, the majority of the story is given over to the hoopoe's hypo-diegetic performances. In the first section of the poem, the hoopoe meets the excuses of specific birds, starting with the nightingale, who, in accordance with its conventional characteristics in Persian poetry, proclaims the rose his sole object of desire.⁴³ Why search for the Simorgh, he asks, when the rose suffices? Why endure ascetic deprivations (*bi-bargi*), when he could dally with his beloved, adorned with a hundred petals (*barg*)? The hoopoe responds critically, accusing the nightingale of falling prey to the superficial charms of an inappropriate beloved:

The hoopoe said to him, 'O you who are mired in form,
don't boast of your love for a flirt!
Love for a rose-face has brought nothing but thorns;
she has really done a number on you!
Although the rose is lovely,
in only a week her beauty begins to fade.
Love of something that decays
vexes those who are wise.
Although the rose's smile gets you going,
she throws you into plaintive singing, day and night.
Pass by the rose, for every new spring the rose
laughs at you, not for you! Have some shame!'⁴⁴

Although the rose is beautiful, her beauty is temporarily bounded.⁴⁵ Born of contingency, she is destined to wither within a week, and it is the height of

folly to love something so ephemeral. According to the hoopoe, her smile – a conventional metaphor for the opening rosebud – is in fact a mocking grin as she laughs at the nightingale’s foolishness. For all these reasons, the hoopoe castigates the nightingale, asking whether he has any shame and exhorting him to ‘pass by the rose’ and towards the Simorgh who is the only object truly worthy of love. He then transitions into an illustrative narrative that concretises this point. It tells of a dervish who falls in love with a princess, and he is encouraged in his devotion by her smile. When he persists in public professions of his love, he faces execution for his breach of decorum. Before he is killed, however, he learns that the princess’s smile, like that of the rose, was one of mockery, and that all his love-pains have been for naught.

The hoopoe’s excoriating tone in the above passage reflects the rough-and-tumble nature of homiletic rhetoric as well as the power imbalance between the preacher and his audience. His address opens with the disparaging epithet, ‘O you who are mired in form’, and he admonishes the nightingale to ‘have some shame’. Although harsh and seemingly contemptuous, such a tone is pedagogically motivated. The nightingale, like many of his avian fellows, resists a transformation that would ultimately be to his own benefit; therefore, he must be made to see the precariousness of his current spiritual situation, and a belittling, cajoling address is, according to contemporary homiletic norms, one way to do this. Ibn al-Jawzi, for example, would address his listeners with vocatives such as ‘O you who forget’, and ‘O you who are banished from the company of the pious’.⁴⁶ Likewise, homiletic poets such as Attar and Rumi routinely chastise their reader-listeners for their weakness or ignorance. As we have seen, these homiletic reproaches are often gendered on the basis of an assumed association between masculinity and spiritual strength and effeminacy and spiritual weakness; thus, the wayward individual is derided in Attar’s poems as a ‘woman’ (*zan*) or a ‘non-man’ (*mokhannas*), while the spiritual hero is praised as a ‘man’ (*mard*).⁴⁷

In this way, the hoopoe adopts the preacher’s conventional language of rebuke in an effort to disabuse the nightingale of his foolish attachment to terrestrial beauty. Over the course of the section, he counters the objections of the nightingale and nine other birds: for each of them, he begins a cajoling admonishment with a dismissive epithet and then narrates an illustrative anecdote. Each of these dissenters embodies a particular spiritual fault on the

Table 4.1 *The birds' objections*

<i>Bird</i>	<i>Objection</i>	<i>Hoopoe's response</i>
Nightingale	Loves only the rose	The rose passes away
Parrot	Desires only eternal life	Life must be sacrificed for the beloved
Peacock	Desires only to return to Paradise	Seek the whole, not the part
Duck	Pridefully content with his own asceticism and purity	Purity is for the unclean
Partridge	Desires only gems	Don't be dazzled by colour
Homa ^a	Sees no reason to seek out the Simorgh because he is himself a king-maker	Don't take so much pride in yourself
Falcon	Already serves kings	The Simorgh is the ultimate king; human kings are fickle and dangerous
Heron	Content to sit mournfully beside the sea	Unlike the Simorgh, the sea is inconstant and unstable
Owl	Desires only treasure	Love of treasure is idolatry
Sparrow	Considers himself, like Jacob, too weak to travel to the Simorgh	This is hypocrisy; set out on the path!

^a According to folk beliefs, whoever was touched by the shadow of the *boma* (a kind of vulture) was destined to be king. See H. Massé and Cl. Haurt, 'Humā', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, posted 2012, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2947.

basis of its species' conventionally understood appearance and behaviour.⁴⁸ The duck is thus portrayed as a fastidious ascetic, constantly performing ablutions; he is too concerned with purity to seek the Simorgh. The owl, known to haunt ruins associated with buried treasure, is a miser so myopically obsessed with gold that he sees no profit in the long journey. The falcon proudly serves temporal kings, and because the latter have restricted his sight with blinders and hood, he cannot see their deficiencies in comparison with the Simorgh. The hoopoe lambasts each of them for their spiritual weaknesses and exhorts them to move past such short-sighted objections (Table 4.1).

This general pattern of question and answer continues through the second section of the poem, which comprises approximately 1,500 lines, or 40 per cent of the narrative (Table 4.2). Unlike the hoopoe's initial discourses, which he delivered in response to the excuses of specific birds, the questioners here are left anonymous. The hoopoe responds to around twenty enquiries, most of which are introduced by the formula 'another said to him' or 'another asked

Table 4.2 *The birds' questions*

<i>Interlocutor's question/topic</i>	<i>Hoopoe's response</i>
What is our relation to the Simorgh?	We are connected to the Simorgh through the heart
How can we, being so weak, travel this way?	Tale of Shaykh San'an
Why is the way empty?	Because of the glory of the king
How did you [i.e. the hoopoe] take precedence over us?	Divine grace
What if I die on the journey?	We all must die anyways; better to try and fail
What if I am sinful?	The door of repentance is open
Effeminacy/fickleness	Such is the human condition; work to constrain the lower soul
Power of the lower soul	The lower soul will never be worthy
Power of the Devil	Withdraw from the world
Love of gold	Look to inner meaning, not external form
Love of possessions/worldly entanglement	The world is a rubbish pit and death is coming
Love of a beautiful human beloved	The human form is grossly material and contingent; true beauty belongs to the unseen
Fear of death	Death is inevitable
Worldly sorrows	These will pass away with the world
Obedience to God's command	We are all his slaves
Going 'all in' (<i>pak-bazi</i>)	To travel this way, you must lose all you have
Spiritual ambition	High spiritual ambition propels us forwards
Justice	Justice is desirable; it is best preformed in secret to minimise the threat of hypocritical egoism
Can one speak frankly with God?	Only those intimates who have lost their reason to love
I love God, and it is time for union	You cannot attain to the Simorgh by vain boasts
What if I have already reached perfection through ascetic practice?	You are deluded by your self
What will bring me happiness on the way?	Happiness is through him
What reward should I ask of him at the end of the way?	Ask him for nothing but himself
What gift should I bring?	The burning of your soul and the pain of your heart

of him'. Approximately the first ten questions involve specific spiritual weaknesses. One bird admits that he is scared of death, another that he is enmeshed in earthly love and another that he suffers from excessive pride; the hoopoe castigates them for their failings and attempts to guide them to the straight path. Other birds enquire of the specific mystical virtues that they have already begun to develop, such as love of justice, submission to the divine will and high mystical aspiration (*hemmat*): these birds are met with the hoopoe's praise.⁴⁹ Still others ask the hoopoe what they ought to bring to the Simorgh as a gift, or boast of their exclusive focus on the divine. The hoopoe answers each of these interlocutors with some mixture of praise and admonishment, followed by a series of illustrative anecdotes coupled with explanatory exhortations. A typical response contains around four or five of these anecdote-exhortation pairs.

Generally speaking, as soon as the hoopoe's discourse on a particular topic comes to a close, another question is posed. At key points in the poem, however, the birds' reactions to a specific story or set of stories are narrated. For example, the first question posed by the birds in this section concerns their relationship to the Simorgh. How might they, as weak as they are, ever attain the Simorgh's lofty perch? How could there be any relation (*nesbat*) between them and the Simorgh? In response, the hoopoe narrates a series of parables, including the story of Mahmud's secret passage to Ayaz's bedchamber, which illustrate the internal connection between God and the human heart. After the hoopoe finishes these narrations and commentary, 'Attar describes their impact on the assembled birds:

When the birds heard this speech (*sokhan*),
 they traced back the ancient secrets.
 They all found their relation (*nesbat*) to the Simorgh,
 and that's how they found a desire (*raghbat*) for wayfaring.
 Due to this speech (*sokhan*) they all came to the path
 in empathy and agreement with each other.⁵⁰

The hoopoe's speech (*sokhan*), as the passage makes clear, is a powerful causal agent that works on the birds as they interpret it. By decoding its allegorical message, they learn how their innate connection to the Simorgh makes spiritual wayfaring possible, which sparks their desire (*raghbat*) and leads them to step up to the path, together. In this way, the hoopoe's stories carry perlocutionary

effects over and above their spiritual meanings and moral points. Speech's effects are not confined to the linguistic realm: it changes its listeners' dispositions and provokes them to action, just as the hoopoe's anecdotes lead the birds to the path and convince them to set out.

Still, some birds continue to worry that they lack the strength necessary to finish the quest: how might the birds, weak as they are, ever hope to tread the entirety of this path? In response, the hoopoe explains that lovers always strive to reach their beloved no matter how low the chance of success: 'Whoever becomes a lover, thinks not of his life,' he proclaims. Indeed, life, the soul, even religion are only obstacles on the way of love, and the hoopoe narrates the story of Shaykh San'an to illustrate this point. This is one of the most complicated stories in 'Attar's oeuvre, and it has been well discussed in the scholarship, but I would like to draw attention to the profound effects that it produces in its fictive auditors:

When the birds all heard this speech [*sokhan*, i.e. the tale of Shaykh San'an],
 they gave up any care for life.
 The Simorgh had stolen repose from their hearts
 The love in their souls increased from one to a hundred thousand.
 They all turned to the road with firm intention
 They stood fast in the devotion to wayfaring.⁵¹

Through their act of audition, love in their hearts increases 100,000 fold, and the Simorgh, on the model of the Christian girl who beguiles Shaykh San'an, steals all repose from their hearts. The story causes the birds to behave exactly as 'Attar says true lovers should: after hearing it, they 'g[i]ve up any care for life' and turn with firm intention towards the path, eager to risk it all – although they do not set out just yet. As taken as readers and scholars have been with the tale, it seems to exert just as strong an influence on its fictive audience within the text. Their audition marks a key turning point in the poem, after which the hoopoe no longer needs to convince them to set out but rather must prepare them for the journey.⁵² And this, too, is accomplished through speech: the hoopoe now mounts the pulpit and answers the above-listed questions about the nature of the road before them.

Discoursing on the Seven Valleys

The famous seven valleys appear in the third section of our heuristic, quadripartite division of the poem. But again, the birds do not actually traverse them at this point. Instead, the hoopoe delivers seven sermons, one for each ‘valley’, explaining its particular significance to his avian flock. One of the best-known aspects of the *Conference of the Birds*, these valleys represent a specific ordering of the various mystical ‘stages’ (*maqam*) that, according to the sufi manuals, populate the mystical path. At each stage, sufi wayfarers are expected to master a particular virtue, state of being or modality of experience, and only when that stage has been completely internalised under the eye of the spiritual guide can they move on to the next. The number and order of the stages varies widely between traditions, authors and texts, and the *Conference of the Birds* by no means provides a standard or universal ordering.

In response to a question about the route to the Simorgh, the hoopoe explains that they will have to pass through seven valleys: desirous seeking (*talab*), love (*‘eshq*), gnosis (*ma‘refat*), detachment (*esteghna*), unification (*towhid*), bewilderment (*hayrat*) and, finally, spiritual poverty and effacement (*faqr o fana*). For each valley, the hoopoe delivers an introductory homily in which he explains the spiritual state associated with it, followed by anecdotes and further exhortations on related themes. This set of discourses comes to almost 800 verses.

There is no direct, narrative account of the birds traversing each of the seven valleys at this point, or at any other point in the poem: their names appear only in the context of the hoopoe’s homiletic speech, in which he explains the various spiritual states that they symbolise.⁵³ In my experience, students and readers unaccustomed to the conventions of the didactic *masnavi* are frequently left somewhat disappointed by this aspect of the *Conference of the Birds*, expecting a denser allegorical plot akin to Spencer’s *Faerie Queene*. Tellingly, modern adaptations of the poem almost always inflate the frame-narrative while diminishing or even eliminating the embedded homiletic performances. For example, Edward FitzGerald and Rafiq Abdulla keep the focus more directly on the story of the birds in their renderings by reducing the number, frequency and length of the embedded narratives and sermons. In both versions, the hoopoe generally responds his flock’s questions with a single

anecdote or exhortation instead of branching off into a full thematic chapter bound by an associative logic. More recently, the *Conference of the Birds* has been reimagined as an illustrated children's book by Alexis York Lumbard and a gorgeous graphic novel by Peter Sís. The hoopoe plays a guiding and encouraging role in both of these, but he recounts no stories: the frame-narrative has become the only narrative, and the original's focus on the transformative power of embedded homiletic performances is necessarily lost.

These modern illustrated adaptations also include many images of the birds in flight as they journey towards the Simorgh. Premodern illustrated manuscripts, on the other hand, generally depict the events of the embedded anecdotes, and in the rare cases that they do depict a scene from the frame-tale, it is invariably that of the birds' homiletic assembly. In the famous illustrated manuscript at the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 4.1), dating from the Safavid period, the diminutive hoopoe occupies the compositional centre of the painting, perched on a rock like a preacher on a pulpit, while the other birds form a loose ring (*halqa*) before him. They gaze intently at the hoopoe, and his beak is partly open as if in speech. This same scene is illustrated in the Staatsbibliothek and Czartoryski Museum manuscripts. In the British Library composition (Figure 4.2), the hoopoe again stands on an elevated rock-pulpit, but he berates the peacock alone as his audience of one. The 1493 Bodelian manuscript (Figure 4.3) contains the same scene as the Met, Staatsbibliothek and Czartoryski manuscripts, but it includes a dazzling, multi-coloured Simorgh among the other birds. This is not, however, an illustration of their final encounter – rather, as the painting's position in the manuscript and the accompanying paratextual header makes clear, it is another illustration of the 'birds' assembly' (*majma'-e toyur*). The Simorgh has been added into the scene as a creative act of interpretive illustration and painted in accordance with its appearance in the epic tradition. There is likely no single reason that can explain why this particular scene was favoured by the pictorial tradition: the availability of models, anxiety about the possible theological implications of depicting the birds at the moment of union and the illustrators' personal interests may have all played a role. Whatever the case may be, these premodern illustrations stand in sharp contrast to modern pictorial approaches to the work, and their presence serves to emphasise the centrality of the birds' preparatory, homiletic assemblies to their journey.

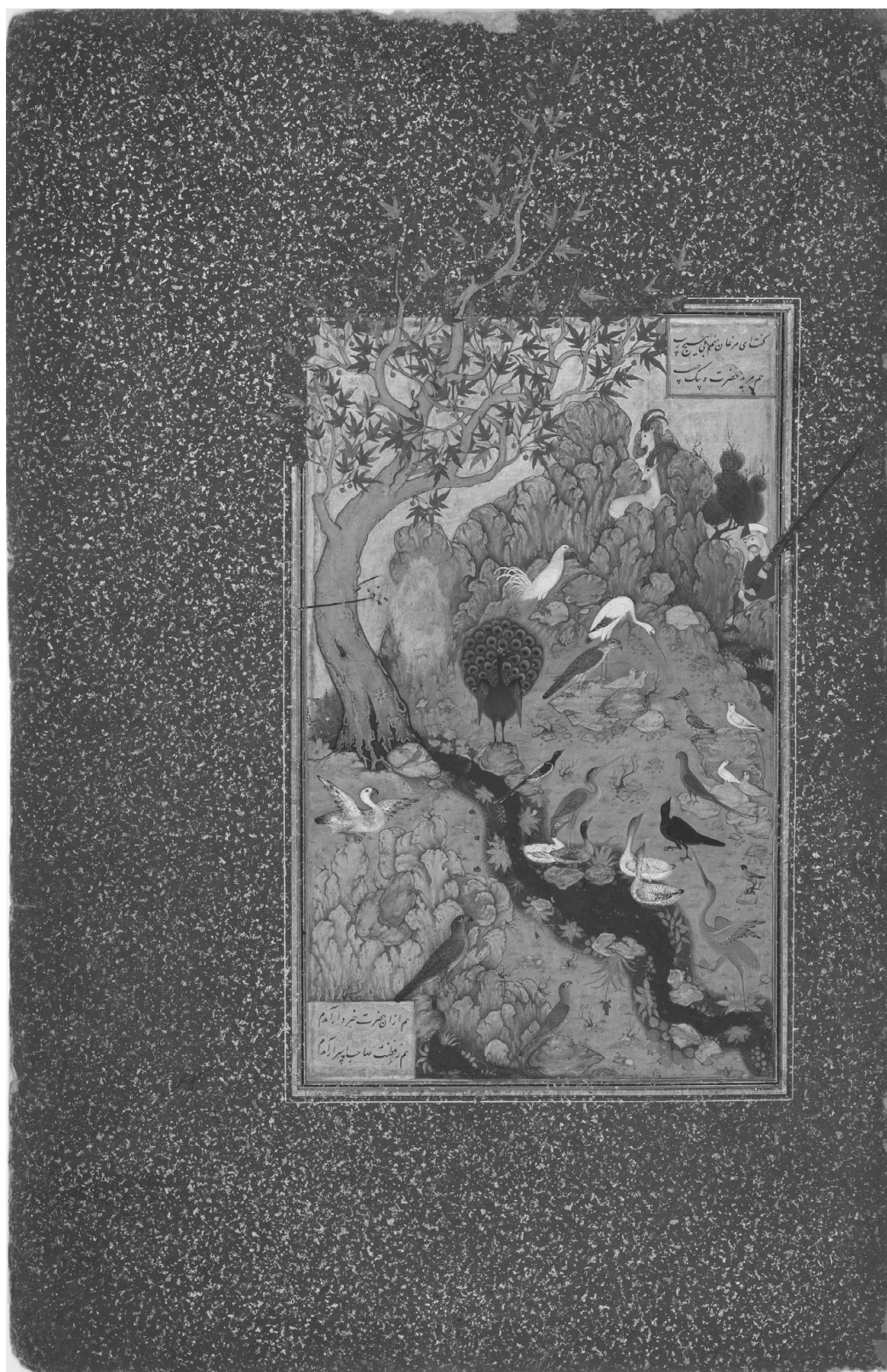


Figure 4.1 'The Assembly of the Birds', Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 63.210, 11r.

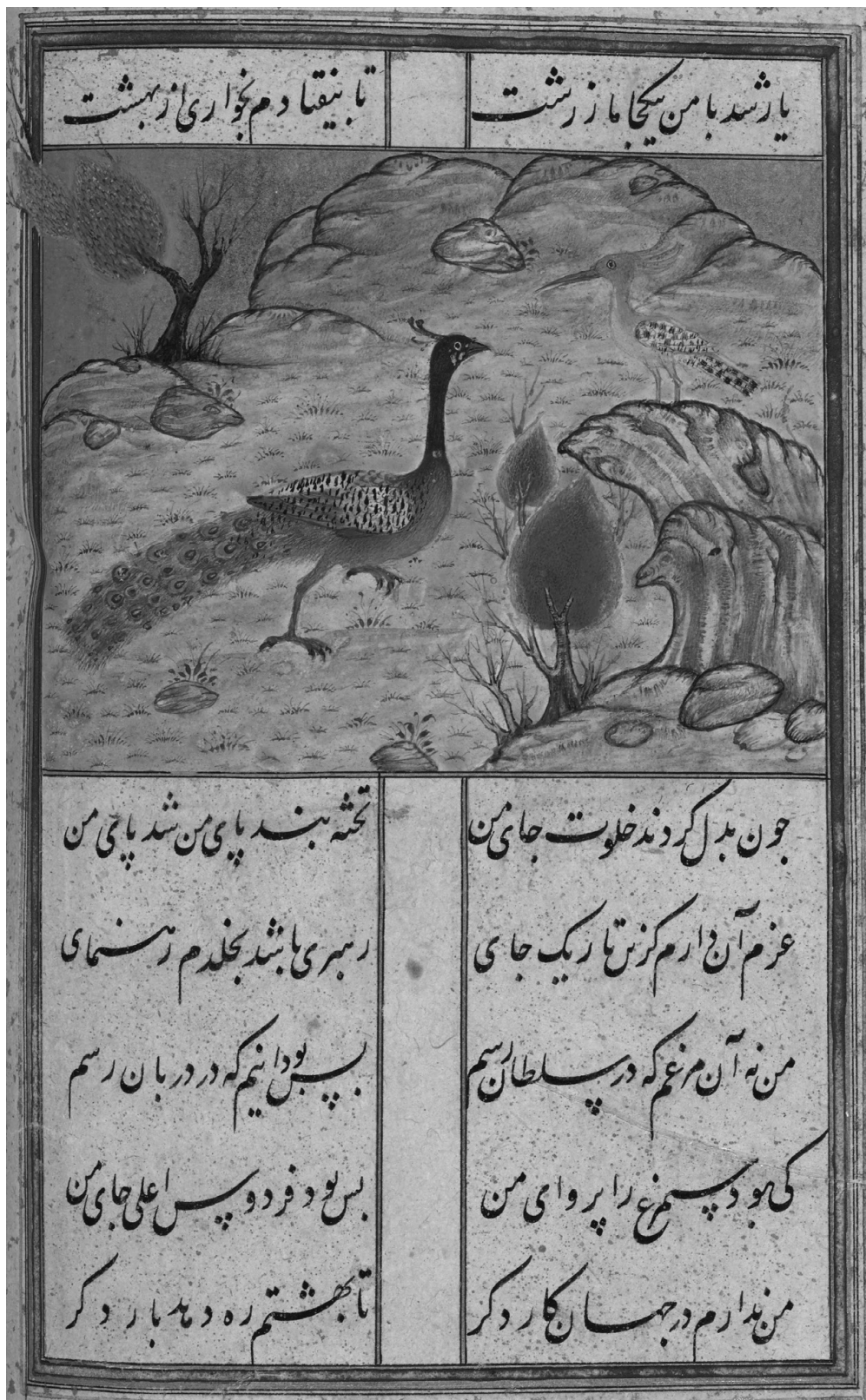


Figure 4.2 'The Hoopoe Lectures the Peacock', MS Add 7735, 30v. By Permission of the British Library.

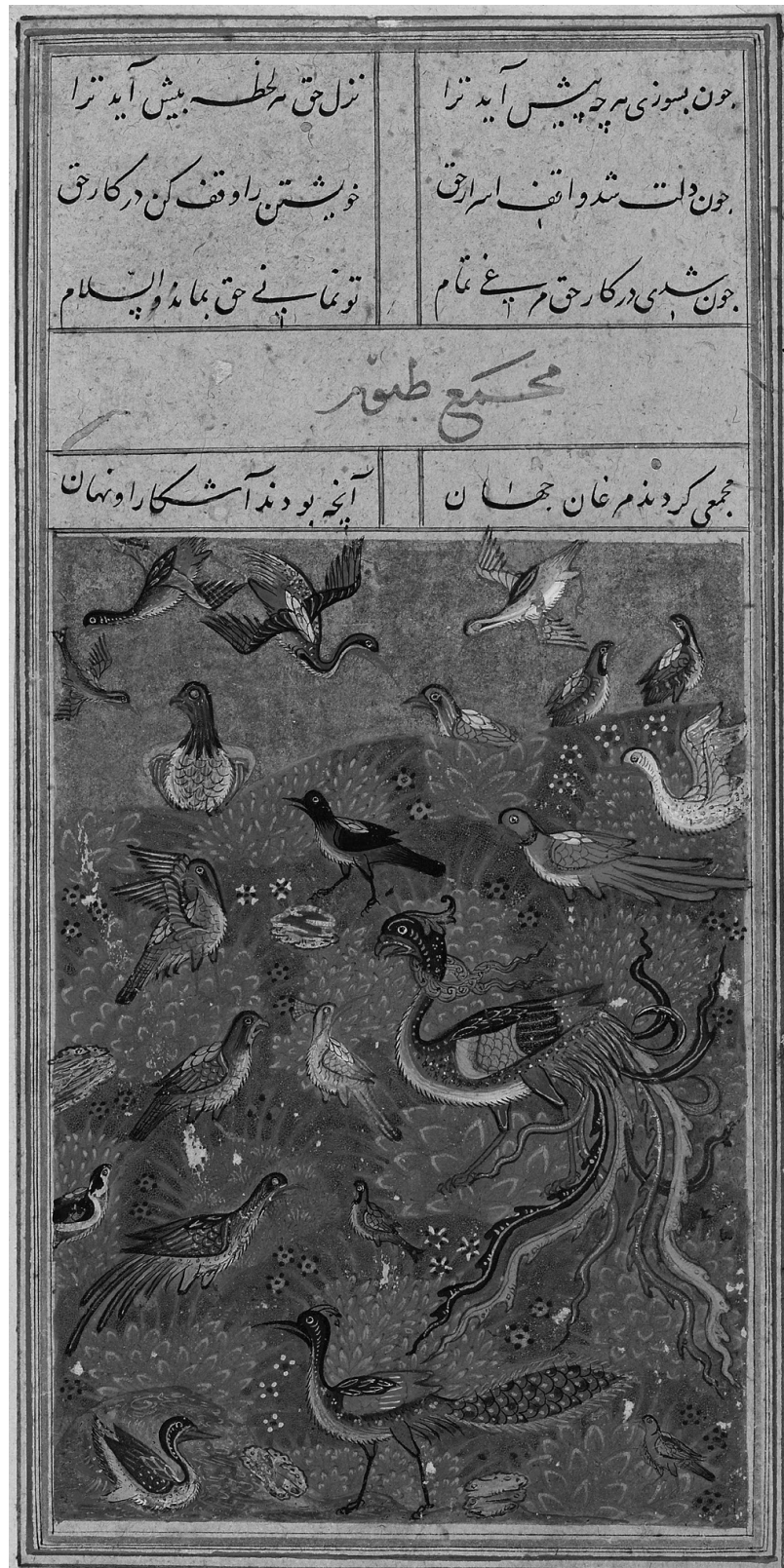


Figure 4.3 'The Assembly of the Birds', MS Elliott 246, 25v.
By Permission of the Bodleian Library.

The hoopoe's sermons on the seven valleys further feed the birds' desire for the Simorgh and provide them with the final push they need to actually embark on the journey. His speech is so powerful that many die on the spot, a conventional trope of extreme audience reaction to powerful oration:

Their souls became restless from these words,
and many died right in that staging area.
All of the birds left in that place
headed out on the road in longing.
For years, they travelled high and low,
a long lifetime exhausted on their way.⁵⁴

Their journey takes years, but as to its details, 'Attar largely demurs. He explains that many perished along this way, and he lists some the dangers they faced including panthers on the mountaintops and excessive hunger and thirst, which can be allegorically interpreted as the hazards that await novices along the spiritual path. This passage, however – which comes to less than a dozen lines – is the extent of his direct narration. The seven-fold spiritual geography of the valleys is drawn through the hoopoe's preparatory sermons, not through extra-diegetic narration of the journey itself, which is allegedly beyond explanation:

How could any explanation answer
for that which befell them on this way?
If, one day, you come to this path,
then you will see its passes one by one,
and you will know what the birds experienced;
it will be clear to you the blood they swallowed.⁵⁵

For one to understand what it is like to actually make this arduous journey, one has to undertake it themselves. Thus, rather than recount this experience in detail (an impossible task in any case) 'Attar devotes the bulk of his narratorial energies within the first three sections of the poem to the didactic lessons that provoke the birds' quest and that constitute its ethical core.

Effacement in the Simorgh

The fourth and final section of the poem recounts how the birds arrive at the threshold of the Simorgh's court, where, after initially being turned away, they are finally admitted to its presence. The hoopoe, the central figure of the first three sections of the poem, is noticeably absent here. In fact, after he completes his sermons on the seven valleys and his flock sets out, he is not mentioned again. At this point in the narrative, when the birds speak, they speak together with one voice, freed from the pedagogical axis of teacher and student that previously conditioned their discourses. There are theological reasons for this flattening: the Simorgh's court is a place of unity, where divisions, hierarchies and even identities are transcended. A few narratives are embedded in this section, but they are no longer homiletic performances undertaken by the hoopoe. Rather, they are spoken by 'Attar himself *in propria persona* or read or recited by the birds as a group. Several of these narratives – including the story of Joseph and the king who orders the execution of his beloved – are (like the frame-story itself) introduced as allegories that obliquely gesture towards matters that, according to 'Attar, are not amenable to more direct explanation. The power of language thus remains a major concern of this section, but it is the limitations of speech – as well as its capacity to indicate, allude and parabolically signify – that come to the fore.

The frame-narrative is noticeably thicker in this section of the poem with more direct narration from 'Attar. He begins by recounting how, out of the thousands of birds who set out, only thirty birds survive to arrive at the Simorgh's court, consistent with the sufi notion that proximity with God is a privilege only afforded to an elect few. And those that do arrive are in rough shape, with 'wings and feathers lost, sick and weak / broken hearted, souls departed, bodies unsound'.⁵⁶ The Simorgh's 'chamberlain of glory' appears before them and demands to know their business at the exalted threshold. They respond that have come in hope of an audience with their king, the Simorgh, and that they have suffered many tribulations on the path. The chamberlain denies them entry (much like Ghazali's version), berating them for thinking that the Simorgh, in its transcendent detachment, has any need for them or their suffering. The birds are on the brink of despair, but they resolve to be like Majnun who so loved Layli that he rejoiced even in her rebuke. When the chamberlain

warns that they do not have the strength to bear the Simorgh's glory, they reply that, like the moth who welcomes immolation in the candle, they will not turn away from the Simorgh's blazing majesty even if it means their own death. Their devotion thus established, the 'chamberlain of grace' approaches, raises the curtains and sets them on the 'couch of proximity'. He hands them a manuscript that contains the story of Joseph's reunion with his brothers (a fascinating case of narrative embedding considered in detail in Chapter 5), and the 'light of proximity' shines on them. It is then that the birds gaze upon the visage of the Simorgh, where, much to their surprise, they see themselves.

This mystical merging of identities, often considered the highlight of the *Conference of the Birds*, is rooted in the sufi notion of 'effacement' (*fana*): that state in which the mystic's consciousness is so overwhelmed by God's unity that everything else seems to melt away, even their own self.⁵⁷ In some interpretations, this loss of self takes on the flavour of an apotheosis. The sufi ceases to exist as an independent being and instead experiences their true reality as a manifestation of the divine. All conceptual categories fade away in the face of God's oneness, including, paradoxically, the boundary between God and not-God. But just as God's unity cannot, according to most sufis, be adequately expressed in words, neither can this state of effacement. Mystical writers and poets thus push syntax, morphology and vocabulary in new and unexpected ways in an attempt to gesture towards the experience of union without reifying it into a fixed, easily digestible form.⁵⁸

In Attar's case, he playfully meditates on the birds' bewildering experience of mystical union by punning on Simorgh and 'thirty birds' (*si-morgh*). The pun is an example of 'compounded paronomasia' (*tajnis-e morakkab*), a rhetorical device in which a word is juxtaposed with a phrase of an identical or similar pronunciation.⁵⁹ Persian also lacks capitalisation, and in most manuscripts Simorgh and *si-morgh* are both written as one word (or the orthographic distinction between them is not consistently maintained), rendering them visually as well as aurally identical. In the passage below, the bewildered birds look back and forth between themselves and the Simorgh, and they are shocked to find that they cannot distinguish between themselves and their king. To preserve the dizzying quality of the original, in which one quickly loses track of which '*simorgh*' refers to the thirty birds and which to the Simorgh, the term is left untranslated here and its referent unspecified:

The light of proximity shone from ahead
 All their souls were dazzled by that beam.
 And reflected in the face of the *simorgh* of the world,
 they then saw the visage of the *simorgh*.
 When those *simorgh* looked closer,
 without a doubt, this *simorgh* was that *simorgh*!
 In confusion all were bewildered
 These didn't know how they'd become that.
 They saw themselves as the complete *simorgh*,
 and the *simorgh* itself was the eternal *simorgh*.
 When they looked towards the *simorgh*,
 that *simorgh* was this over here.
 And when they glanced at themselves,
 this *simorgh*, they were that one there.
 And when they glanced at both at once,
 both were one *simorgh*, in all respects.
 This one was that, and that one this,
 no one in all the world has heard such a thing!⁶⁰

The term is repeated twelve times in only seven verses, the sheer weight of repetition serving to detach the verbal signifier from its distinct signifieds. At the same time, the contrasting indexicals 'this' and 'that' show that difference itself is never totally transcended; indeed, the very assertion of co-identity presumes some kind of distinction between the two elements to be equated. The frequent alteration of these demonstratives also makes it difficult to discern whether the antecedent in any given case ought to be understood as the divine Simorgh or the thirty birds, at least when reading the poem at a normal speed. Unlike English, demonstrative adjectives in Persian are not marked for number: 'this' and 'these', and 'that' and 'those', are identical, so we cannot rely on the presence of a plural to distinguish between the thirty birds and the Simorgh. The passage thus does not present a simple case of absolute identification, but a bewildering state of simultaneous identity and difference, linguistically expressed in the homonym of Simorgh and *si-morgh*, parallel grammatical structures and dizzying repetition.

Sufism's interest in dismantling conceptual boundaries at the point of union is concomitant with a concern for preserving God's ultimate transcendence: the divine should never be bounded by the reductive frameworks of human language, thought or even experience. The result, especially in more imaginative sufi writing, is a dynamic vacillation between attempts to describe the ineffable in parabolic, allusive or otherwise indirect speech, followed by disavowals of those same descriptions as insufficient or inappropriate. The pun on Simorgh and *si-morgh* is itself only a temporary heuristic that cannot fully capture the truth of the Simorgh or its relationship to the birds. Whatever its merits, it too must ultimately be discarded as insufficient.

The Simorgh thus reaffirms its ultimate transcendence and unknowability after the birds' experience of co-identity, disabusing them of any notion that they could understand, much less achieve union with it:

This sunlike-presence is a mirror;
 whoever arrives here sees himself in it –
 body and soul sees body and soul in it.
 Since you came here as thirty birds (*si-morgh*),
 you appeared as thirty in this mirror.
 If you were to return as forty or fifty,
 you would still just remove the veil from yourselves.
 Far have you roamed, but
 you see and have seen only yourselves.
 How could anyone's vision reach us?
 how could an ant catch sight of the Pleiades?
 Have you seen an ant carry an anvil?
 or a fly grab an elephant in its teeth?
 Whatever you've known or seen – it wasn't that!
 Whatever you've said or heard – it wasn't that!
 . . .
 You remain thirty birds (*si-morgh*), perplexed,
 heart-broken, patience-tried, soul-stripped,
 but we in our 'simorgh-ness' are so much greater,
 since we are the true Simorgh in essence.⁶¹

The birds' experience of identity with the Simorgh is born out of their own limited perspective, which is incapable of grasping its true nature. The mystic pun that seemed to have captured, however obliquely, something of this state is unmasked as an accident of language and a one-sided imposition. If forty or fifty birds had made the journey to the Simorgh's court, they would have seen forty or fifty birds there. All attempts to articulate or even understand this experience originate with the human (or avian) observer.

One reaches a point at which further speech simply muddies the waters. Ultimately, the birds' climactic union with the Simorgh cannot be articulated, even by its own subjects: 'As long as they travelled, they spoke these words,' writes 'Attar, 'But then they arrived, and there was no beginning or ending / Here, no doubt, speech was cut short.'⁶² The birds do not speak again in the poem, and 'Attar soon joins them in silence. At several points in this final section, he voices his reluctance to speak, especially near its conclusion. After the birds are effaced in the Simorgh, they are returned to themselves in 'subsistence' (*baqa*'), a mystical state that is frequently paired with effacement but even less clearly defined; it usually seems to involve some sort of recovery of individual existence, albeit in an altered form. 'Attar reports that the birds enter into 'subsistence after effacement', but he demurs direct discussion:

No one, ancient or contemporary,
 has ever had words for this 'effacement' and 'subsistence'.
 Just as he is far, far from vision,
 this explanation is far from commentary or report.
 Nevertheless, some of our companions have, by way of allegory,
 requested a commentary on 'subsistence after effacement'.
 How could we discuss that here?
 It would require the compilation of a new book,
 since the secrets of 'subsistence after effacement'
 are known by them that are worthy.
 As long as you exist in the world of being and not-being
 how can you step foot into this realm?⁶³

No speech can encompass the states of effacement and subsistence; they cannot be explained, nor do they fit in 'commentary' or 'report'. Its secrets can

only be known by those worthy ones who have already transcended the world of being and not-being.

Nevertheless, at the urging of his companions, ‘Attar does narrate a story in an allegorical mode that, unlike other kinds of discourse, is apparently flexible and allusive enough to gesture towards these spiritual truths without circumscribing their ineffability. A king, after he finds his male beloved dallying with a female slave, orders him executed in a bout of jealousy. Unbeknownst to him, his vizier (who is also the boy’s father) hides the boy and has a murderer executed in his place. The king soon regrets his decision and is wracked with guilt and sorrow. On the fortieth day, he sees his beloved in a dream and begs his forgiveness; the actual boy emerges from hiding with a sword and shroud, prepared to accept execution in recognition of his own transgression. Lover and beloved are thus reunited. As Davis has observed, it is not immediately obvious which of the pair represents God and which the believer, a structural ambiguity that echoes the thirty birds’ mystical dissolution into the Simorgh.⁶⁴ This story of reunion, restoration and unexpected returns is presented by ‘Attar in his introductory comments as clarifying something of the nature of subsistence after effacement, but it remains indirect and parabolic enough not to violate the ineffability of that state.

Sometimes, however, even such indirect measures are too blunt an instrument. Once the king and his beloved are restored to each other, ‘Attar refuses to narrate what passes between them:

After this, anything I might say is unspeakable
 A pearl in the depths cannot be pierced.
 When the king found deliverance from his separation,
 both went happily into the private pavilion.
 After this, no one knows the mysteries
 for here is no place for strangers.
 Whatever this one said and that one heard
 only a blind eye has seen it, a deaf ear heard.
 Who am I to them to explain these secrets?
 If I did, I would sign my own death warrant.
 Since I have not arrived, how would I explain it?
 I must remain silent, pinned on this chessboard.⁶⁵

Such intimate secrets are known only through experience, and even if one could articulate them, it would be improper and dangerous to do so. In the end, silence is the only choice.

Although language is unable to fully communicate this mystery of effacement and subsistence, it is far from useless. From a Neoplatonic, sufi perspective, allegory and other kinds of parabolic speech can give readers and listeners a taste of certain higher realities in an allusive, indirect fashion that allows them to ontologically participate in those realities while preserving their ineffable mystery; this function of allegory will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6. On a more concrete level, speech can also motivate the ethical reforms necessary to bring one closer to God. The birds only experience mystical union, allusively described in the Simorgh/*si-morgh* pun, because they were convinced to set out and prepared for the journey by the hoopoe's homiletic performances. The first three sections of the poem are dominated by those performances, and the perlocutionary, rhetorical function of speech is repeatedly demonstrated on the level of the frame-tale. The *Conference of the Birds*, when taken as a whole, can thus be read as a narrative exploration of the power (and limits) of speech: it shows how homiletic exhortations and didactic anecdotes can propel seekers along the path towards God, where, if favoured by his grace, they might activate an internal connection to the divine to which allegorical speech can allude but never fully capture.

The poem's exploration of speech is curiously self-reflexive: by demonstrating the perlocutionary effects of the hoopoe's discourse, 'Attar also asserts the transformative power of the *Conference of the Birds*, through which he presents that speech to his readers. Indeed, one of the most fascinating characteristics of the frame-tale device is its potential to blur narrative boundaries even as it establishes them. The birds' intra-diegetic, fictive audition of the hoopoe's oral sermons cannot be equated with actual readers' experiences of the poem, but the frame-tale structure elides that distinction: readers are invited to approach the text as if they were among the imaginary audience depicted within it. These complexities are the subject of the next chapter, in which we investigate the frame-tale's function as a tool of authorial control that conditions readers' encounters with the embedded homilies and anecdotes.

Notes

1. The poem was translated into French by Garcin de Tassy in 1863, followed by an adaptation into English by Edward FitzGerald (posthumously published in 1889) and an abridged translation by Rustom Masani (1924). The version of Stanley Nott (1952) is an indirect translation produced via de Tassy's French, and the version of Rafiq Abdulla (2003) is a rhyming adaptation based primarily on Nott's prose. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis's fluent English verse translation (1984) is done in rhyming couplets directly from the Persian. Peter Avery's prose translation (1998) cleaves extraordinarily close to the Persian text: essentially a gloss, it is the most accurate and appropriate for scholarly uses. Most recently, Shole Wolpé has published a prosimetric version (2017). Illustrated retellings of the story have been done by Peter Sís (2011) and Alexis Lumbard (2012). The poem was adapted for the stage by Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière (1977). On the various translations and adaptations, see Shackle, 'Representations of 'Aṭṭār'.
2. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Majales-e sab'a: Haft khetaba*, ed. Towfiq Sobhani (Tehran: Kayhan, 1365 [1986]); Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Fibi ma fib va payvastha-ye no-yafta*, ed. Towfiq Sobhani (Tehran: Parsa, 1388 [2009–10]); Lewis, *Rumi*, 128–33, 292–4; Sa'di, *Kolliyat-e Sa'di*, ed. Mohammad 'Ali Foroghi (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1367 [1988–9]), 895–916; De Bruijn, *Piety and Poetry*, 169.
3. Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1964), 198; Swartz, 'Rules of Popular Preaching', 224–7.
4. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 305.
5. Jones, *Power of Oratory*, 161–2.
6. Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 196–200. A full translation can be found in Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. R. J. C. Broadhurst (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 229–34.
7. This *khotba* must be distinguished from other uses of the term, including the formal, liturgically mandated Friday sermon.
8. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 140/trans. 224; Swartz, 'Rules of Popular Preaching', 229; Swartz, 'Arabic Rhetoric', 41.
9. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 137/trans. 220. On the preacher's staff and sword, see C. H. Becker, 'Die Kanzel im Kultus des alten Islam', in *Orientalische Studien: Theodor Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag (2. März 1906)*, ed. Carl Bezold (Gieszen: A. Töpelmann, 1906), 336–7.
10. Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 199. Translation from Swartz, 'Rules of Popular Preaching', 234.

11. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 94/trans. 171. See also Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, 121; Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 1:112.
12. Walter Ong, 'Writer's Audience', 10.
13. The motion of 'raising the hands' (*rafʿ al-yadayn*) can be traced back to pre-Islamic practices of prayer and supplication, but it also evokes the gestures of Islamic ritual prayer. Its use in hortatory assemblies, like weeping and ecstatic movements, was sometimes contested, but Ibn al-Jawzi seems to have approved. See Swartz's long note on the subject in his translation of Ibn al-Jawzi's *Qussas*, 120–1n5.
14. Jones, *Power of Oratory*, 243–4; Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, 141–4.
15. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 95/trans. 174–5. We should keep in mind that Ibn al-Jawzi opposed these practices as we read his descriptions.
16. Swartz, 'Rules of Popular Preaching', 234–5. Several of the anecdotes in the *Qussas* mention such deaths.
17. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 117, 140–2/trans. 203, 225–6.
18. Pedersen, 'The Islamic Preacher', 247.
19. Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, 141–2.
20. Ebn Monavvar, *Asrar al-towhid*, 1:62.
21. Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 198; Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 139/trans. 233.
22. Pourjavady, 'Genres of Religious Literature', 292.
23. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 304. In classical Islamic political theory, the 'people of tightening and loosening' (*ahl al-hall wa'l-'aqd*) were the scholars and religious elites who were theoretically responsible for the selection of the caliph. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Ahl al-ḥall wa-l-'aqd', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, posted 2007, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0027.
24. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 305.
25. Becker, 'Die Kanzel', 335–44.
26. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Qussas*, 120–1/trans. 205. Regarding the debate over appropriate styles of Quranic recitation, see F. M. Denny, 'Tadjwīd', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, posted 2012, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1145.
27. See also the discussion in David A. Wacks, *Framing Iberia: Maqāmāt and Frametale Narratives in Medieval Spain* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 53–65.
28. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 435.
29. Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. 'n-t-q'; *Loghat-nama-ye Dehkhoda*, s.v. 'manteq'.
30. Quran 27:15–27.

31. ‘Attar, *Mokhtar-nama*, 72. Peter Avery suggests that the two titles refer to two distinct sections of the poem; the *Conference of the Birds* (or as he renders it, *Speech of the Birds*) would refer to the hoopoe’s homilies about the way, and the *Stages of the Birds* would refer to their traversal of the stages. See Farid al-Din ‘Attar, *The Speech of the Birds: Concerning Migration to the Real*, trans. Peter Avery (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998), 397, 539n458.
32. In actuality, both *maqam* and *maqama* could refer to a homily. According to Devin Stewart, the singular *maqama* may be more properly applied to picaresque writings, and *maqam* to the non-ironic harangue. See Devin Stewart, ‘The *Maqāma*’, in *Arabic Literature in the Post-classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 154–5; C. Brockelmann and Ch. Pellat, ‘*Maḳāma*’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, posted 2012, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0634; Jones, *Power of Oratory*, 18–19, 164, 171.
33. ‘Attar, *Mokhtar-nama*, 70. See also p. 33 above.
34. For a list of all the birds named by ‘Attar and a discussion of their poetic characteristics, see Shafi‘i-Kadkani, intro. to *Manteq al-tayr*, 169–80.
35. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 262.
36. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 263.
37. Purnamdarian, ‘Simorgh va Jebra’il’, 76–81; ‘Ali Soltani Gerd-Faramarzi, *Simorgh dar qalamrov-e farhang-e Iran* (Tehran: Mobtakeran, 1372 [1993–4]), 39–126.
38. Throughout the history of Islamic philosophy there has been a tendency to interpret the angels as allegorical references to the various cosmic intellects. Among philosophers of the Illuminationist school, the Simorgh is often added into this mix as well. See Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 46–122; Purnamdarian, ‘Simorgh va Jebra’il’, 81–93; Gerd-Faramarzi, *Simorgh*, 193–229.
39. Shehab al-Din Yahya Sohrawardi, *Majmu‘a-ye mosannafat-e Shaykh-e Eshraq*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: Anjoman-e Shahanshahi-ye Falsafa-ye Iran, 1976–7), 226–39, 314–32.
40. Avicenna’s treatise was later translated into Persian by Sohrawardi. See the commentary and translation in Corbin, *Visionary Recital*, 183–95. See also Purnamdarian, ‘Attar va resalaha-ye ‘erfani-ye Ebn Sina’.
41. Ahmad Ghazali, *Majmu‘a-ye asar-e farsi-ye Ahmad-e Ghazali*, ed. Ahmad Mojahed (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Tehran, 1979), 77–92. On the question of the treatise’s authorship, see Mojahed’s introduction to the work, 75–6. An English

- translation of Ghazali's text is included as an appendix in Avery's translation of 'Attar, *The Speech of the Birds*, 551–60.
42. See the comparison of Ghazali, Avicenna and 'Attar in Corbin, *Visionary Recital*, 183–203.
 43. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 265–6.
 44. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 266.
 45. I have gendered the rose female here because the hoopoe compares it, in the following anecdote, to a princess. There is no indication of gender in the nightingale's address itself, however.
 46. See the examples collected in Swartz, 'Arabic Rhetoric', 44, 60n59.
 47. Lewis, 'Sexual Occidentation', 694–5.
 48. For an extensive summary and commentary on this section, including the embedded tales, see Lucian Stone, 'Blessed Perplexity: The Topos of *Ḥayrat* in Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Mantiq al-tayr*' (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 2005), 79–96.
 49. Davis divides the questions into exactly two groups of ten, the first of which focuses on negative spiritual attributes, and the second on positive. This is part of his effort to show that a total of thirty birds pose questions (twenty anonymous questioners in this section along with the ten objectors from the beginning of the poem), who together represent the thirty birds who complete the journey. As Davis himself admits, however, this division requires a little 'juggling'. In actuality more than thirty questions are asked – I count a total of thirty-three, excluding two questions that the birds ask as a group. It seems to me that such methodologies can easily fall into the trap of numerological confirmation bias. See Davis, 'Journey as Paradigm', 174, 181–2n4; Julian Baldick, 'Persian *Šūfī* Poetry up to the Fifteenth Century', in *History of Persian Literature: From the Beginning of the Islamic Period to the Present Day*, ed. G. Morrison (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 120–2.
 50. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 284.
 51. 'Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 302. Treatments of the Shaykh San'an tale can be found in Ardalan 'Attarpur, *Eqteda be kofr: Pazhubeshi dar dastan-e Shaykh San'an* (Tehran: An va Hama, 1382 [2003–4]); Claudia Yaghoobi, 'Subjectivity in 'Attār's Shaykh of San'an Story in *The Conference of the Birds*', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2425>; De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 103; Taqi Purnamdarian, 'Tafsiri digar az dasatan-e Shaykh San'an', in *Didar ba simorgh* (Tehran: Pazhuheshgah-e 'Olum-e Ensani va Motala'at-e Farhangi, 1374 [1995–6]); Lewis, 'Sexual Occidentation'.
 52. The key structural position of the tale has been discussed by Davis, 'Journey

- as Paradigm’, 175–9; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘The Flight of the Birds to Union: Meditations upon “Attār’s *Mantiq al-tayr*”’, in *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 105–7; De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 102–3.
53. There is also something of a false start earlier in the narrative, directly after the Shaykh San‘an tale, when the birds ‘catch a glimpse of a valley from the way’ and are struck with terror: this prompts a narration from the hoopoe and then his ascent of the pulpit (‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 303).
 54. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 422.
 55. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 422.
 56. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 422.
 57. Gerhard Böwering, ‘*Baqā’ wa Fanā’*’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, posted 2020, https://doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_6606; Fazlur Rahman, ‘*Baqā’ wa-Fanā’*’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, posted 2012, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1083; Andrew Wilcox, ‘The Dual Mystical Concepts of *Fanā’* and *Baqā’* in Early Sūfism’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011): 95–118. See also Zargar, *Polished Mirror*, 237–62.
 58. On this point, see especially Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
 59. Browne, *Literary History*, 2:49–50.
 60. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 426.
 61. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 427.
 62. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 427.
 63. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 428.
 64. Davis, ‘Journey as Paradigm’, 179–80.
 65. ‘Attar, *Manteq al-tayr*, 435.