They came to him prostrate with pain and grief. When first he looked upon that wooden bier, Dastán dismounted from his golden saddle. Rostám came forward then, on foot. His clothes were torn to shreds, his heart was pierced by grief. The heroes one and all let fall their arms, and bowed down to the earth before his bier. Zal spoke, "This was a strange event indeed. Sohráb could lift the heavy mace; of this the greatest in the land would speak with awe. No mother in the world will bear his like."

And Zal spoke on; his eyes were filled with tears.

His tongue with words of praise for bold Sohráb. When Tahamán had reached his palace gate, he cried aloud and set the coffin down.

He wrenched the nails out, threw the lid aside, and drew the shroud off as his father watched, showing his son's body to those noble men.

It was as if the heavens burned with grief.

Those famous heroes tore their clothes and wept; like dust their cries ascended to the clouds. From end to end the palace seemed a tomb, in which a lion had been laid to rest.

It seemed as though great Sam was lying there. The battle'd wearied him, and now he slept.

He covered him again with gold brocade, and firmly closed the coffin's narrow lid.

"If now I build Sohráb a golden tomb
And strew it round with fragrant, sable musk,
When I am gone, it won't remain for long.
If that's not so, yet so it seems to me."

With horses' hooves they built a warrior's tomb, and all the world went blind with weeping there.

Thus spoke Bahram the wise and eloquent,

"Don't bind yourself too closely to the dead,
For you yourself will not remain here long.
Prepare yourself to leave, and don't be slow.

One day your sire gave you a turn at life.
The turn is at its end, that's only right.
That's how it is, the secret why's unknown.
The door is locked; nor will the key be found.
You won't discover it, don't even try.
And if you do, you'll spend your life in vain."

It is a tale that's filled with tears and grief.
The tender heart will rage against Rostám.

Farid ud-Din Attar
C. 1145–C. 1221

One of three great Persian Sufi poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Farid ud-Din Attar is less well known today than his younger contemporary Jalaloddin Rumi (1207–1273), but his most famous poem, The Conference of the Birds, remains a perennial best-seller in the Islamic world. All three of the great medieval Persian poets—Sana'i (d. 1196), author of The Garden of the Truth (Hadithiqul Haqiqat), Attar, and Rumi—wrote in the mathnawi form, a long didactic verse form employing a structure similar to the heroic couplet in the West. All also treated subjects inspired by their engagement with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. As a child Rumi met Attar and received the gift of a volume of his work; later on Rumi counted Attar as one of his mentors: "Attar was the spirit and Sana'i its two eyes"; he wrote, "I followed on Sana'i and Attar."

Attar's most important work, The Conference of the Birds (Manzilat-ul-Allah), like Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is an account of a spiritual pilgrimage. All the stories in Attar's collection, unlike those in The Canterbury Tales, are intended to illustrate the spiritual allegory of the journey. The Western work The Conference of the Birds most resembles is the later allegory by English Evangelical John Bunyan (1628–1688), The Pilgrim's Progress (1678), which describes the journey of Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, a work whose popularity with English readers was exceeded only by the Bible. The Conference of the Birds has enjoyed a similar popularity with readers in the Islamic world.

An Obscure Life. Even the dates of Attar's birth and death are uncertain. He was born in the city of Neishapour in what is now northeastern Iran—a also the home of the famous Persian poet Omar Khayyam (died c. 1123), author of The Rubáiyát—sometime around 1145. His name Attar, from the Persian word for perfume, identifies him as a perfumer, pharmacist, and medical practitioner, a profession he inherited from his father. Educated in medicine, Arabic, and theology at an Islamic school in Mashhad, he first started his work life in his father's pharmacy before taking off several years to travel throughout the Middle East—to Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Turkestan, and India as well as important cities in Persia. Such travels were common at the time, particularly for Muslims on a

\footnote{1}{mathnawi: Persian poetic form used for romantic, epic, didactic, and other poems whose subjects demanded lengthy treatment. The mathnawi uses a verse structure similar to that of the heroic couplet in the West in which each line is made up of two rhyming halves.}

\footnote{2}{heroic couplet: A two-line, rhymed, iambic-pentameter stanza that completes its thought within its two-line form. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) is the most accomplished practitioner of the form in English; in this couplet from An Essay on Criticism, he writes: "True wit is nature to advantage dressed, /What oft was thought, but never so well expressed."}
spiritual quest and for poets who, like the troubadours of the West, went off in search of poetic inspiration. After several years of travel, Attar returned to Neishapour and to his profession as a druggist and doctor.

One legend has it that Attar wrote 114 literary works, a number equal to the number of suras in the Qur’an (Koran), but the true number was probably far fewer. Today he is remembered largely for two works, Memoirs of the Saints (Tadhkarat al-Awliya), a collection of anecdotes about the lives of Islamic saints, and The Conference of the Birds. How Attar became a believer in Sufism and the details of his spiritual life are unknown, although one plausible story claims that he was accused of heresy, a real danger for a believer in Sufism, which challenged the role of the established religious authorities. Even his death remains a mystery. One account reports that he died at the hands of the Mongols who invaded northern Persia in 1229 and were said to have massacred all 1.7 million Neishapour inhabitants. Attar probably died earlier than the time of the invasion, and his career marks the end of a great age of poetry in Persia. His younger follower, Rumi, would survive to write Persian poetry only by escaping to Turkey and eventually to Asia Minor.

Sufism. Like mystics in all regions, Sufis sought a direct, unmediated experience of the divine, and they practiced meditation and other spiritual disciplines as ways of achieving purification and approaching God. Some Sufi sects, which practice a form of dance as a spiritual discipline, are sometimes referred to as “whirling dervishes.” Sufi, from the Arabic word for a weaver of wool, originally identified the mystical practitioners by the coarse cloth that was used in their clothing, similar to the hair shirts worn by some Western mystics who disciplined the body to free the spirit. Sufi doctrine asserts that God alone exists, extending the Islamic notion that there is no absolute reality except for God. This belief does not lead to pantheism, which asserts that everything is divine, but rather to monism, to the one truth that God alone is. This doctrine, along with their rejection of institutional mediators between humans and God, often brought Sufis dangerously close to heresy in the eyes of established Islamic clergy. Mansur al-Hallaj, for example, a tenth-century Sufi, after experiencing the unity of all things, was executed in Baghdad in 922 for asserting “I am the truth,” or “I am God.” Attar considered al-Hallaj, who appeared to him in a dream, one of his important teachers.

The goal of Sufi practice is the extinction of the ego and the total identification of the believer with the divine, a state the Sufis describe as love. The process of arriving at this unified consciousness, the Way (taririth), has several stages: repentance, avoiding doubt, abstinence, poverty, perseverance, trust in God, and contentment. These spiritual states, which may overlap and will not necessarily occur in any particular order, make up the stages of the spiritual journey undertaken by the believer. They are also the spiritual beliefs and ideas on which Attar’s poetry is based.

The Conference of the Birds. Attar’s famous poem translates the doctrines and disciplines of Sufism into popular allegory, a narrative in which the characters, settings, and episodes are meant to stand for an order of persons, places, and events. In the poem’s allegorical frame narrative, a hoopoe—a bird similar to the hornbill found in Europe,
Like Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, The Conference of the Birds is a group of stories bound together by the convention of a pilgrimage, and as in Chaucer's work the convention allows the author to present a panorama of contemporary society; both poems can accommodate widely differing tones and subjects, from the satirical to the exalted and pathetic (and, occasionally, it must be admitted, the bathetic); both authors delight in quick character sketches and brief vignettes of quotidian life.

— Abraham Darwish

and Dick Davis, 1984, critics

Africa, and Asia — calls a conference of birds to organize an expedition of all birds to seek their god, the Simorgh. At first the birds are enthusiastic, but when they consider the difficulty of the journey they manufacture excuses for why they are unable to go. The nightingale, for example, says he must remain behind to sing for the lovers who listen for his song, and the duck claims that he will be unable to stay clean while traveling. The hoopoe, who represents a spiritual teacher or Sufi master, answers each bird's excuses with a brief theological challenge and a story, parable, or fable to illustrate his point. After challenging all the birds' excuses, the hoopoe responds to their questions about the journey, its difficulties, with similar tales and fables. Finally, before setting out, the hoopoe describes each of the seven valleys of the Way that the birds will pass through on their journey: the quest, love, insight and mystery, detachment, bewilderment, poverty and nothingness, and unity. He illustrates each of these spiritual challenges with stories. The actual journey takes up only a few pages of the poem. Only thirty birds arrive at the final destination. When they meet their god, the Simorgh, whose name means thirty (si) birds (margh), they allegorically fulfill the purpose of their quest. They discover that their god is not separate from them. The Simorgh is themselves; the birds have become one with the divine.

To answer his fellow birds' objections and questions, the hoopoe draws on episodes from the Qur'an, historical anecdotes, fables, animal fables, and legends. Typically, his stories are brief, and many were probably familiar to the poem's readers. Each makes a particular point, which is often explained by the hoopoe as he introduces a story or links one story with the next. Since there are no words to describe the mystical experience or the spiritual stages leading to it, the poet must speak in metaphors. Just as the birds' journey stands for the process of spiritual discipline and growth in the poem, so carnal love represents unity with the divine, sleep suggests spiritual contemplation, and intoxication stands for religious ecstasy. A number of the hoopoe's stories seem to transgress the strictures of Islam which, for example, forbids drinking and illicit sexuality. In "The Story of the Princess Who Loved a Slave," the hoopoe addresses spiritual bewilderment through a forbidden relationship across class lines, the couple's sexual fulfillment symbolizing spiritual ecstasy and understanding. Such stories may have been meant to challenge readers to abandon conventional dogmas and give fresh consideration to their spiritual condition. Partly because they portrayed transgressive behaviors such as drinking and sexual license in positive ways, the Sufis were seen by some as heretics.

The hoopoe's commentary frames all his stories, however, so their theological purpose is not forgotten. While reading the poem, the reader may also experience the unity of the divine and the human, for finally there is no distinction between worldly and spiritual love.

### CONNECTIONS

The Thousand and One Nights, p. 451. The Conference of the Birds, like Thousand and One Nights, is a collection of Islamic stories enclosed within a frame narrative. A frame narrative can serve to give the individual stories it contains larger significance.

Directing the reader to interpret them as illustrations of larger thematic issues. Attar's frame narrative is much more explicit about the significance of the tales it encompasses and the connections among them than the frame in Thousand and One Nights. Is Attar's scheme simplistic, didactic? How does Shahrazad indicate the thematic significance of the tales she tells?

Boccaccio, The Decameron, "The Tale of Tancred and Chismonda," p. 550. Like Boccaccio's tale of Tancred and Chismonda, Attar's "Story of the Princess Who Loved a Slave" is about a ruler's daughter who loves outside accepted class lines. Consider the differences between the two stories, especially the ways in which they are resolved. How might these differences indicate the intentions of the two authors? What reasons might there be for the tragic way in which Boccaccio's story ends and the comic resolution of Attar's?

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 150: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"

(Book 3). In Sonnet 150, Shakespeare makes fun of the cliché poetic hyperbole often used to celebrate a lover's beauty. In "The Story of the Princess Who Loved a Slave," Attar employs such cliché expressions to characterize the princess and her lover. How do the differences between the two works make such expressions appropriate or inappropriate?

### FURTHER RESEARCH

Translations


Commentary and Background

Leo, Reuben. An Introduction to Persian Literature. 1969.


### PRONUNCIATION

Aznar’al: AZ-ray-el

Bimfoli: BISS-WIL-uh

Farid ud-Din Attar: fa-HIH-REED oo-DEN ah-TAR, AT-ur

Jalaloddin Rumi: jah-lah-loo-DEN noo-MEE

Ka’bah: KAH-buh, KAH-uh-buh

Manus al-Hallaj: MAH-noh-SOOR ah-huh-LIJ

Neshapour: nee-shah-POOR

Sana’i: sah-nah-EE
The Conference of the Birds

Translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis

THE BIRDS ASSEMBLE AND THE HOOPOE TELLS THEM OF THE SIMORGH

The world's birds gathered for their conference
And said: "Our constitution makes no sense.
All nations in the world require a king;
How is it we alone have no such thing?
Only a kingdom can be justly run;
We need a king and must inquire for one."

They argued how to set about their quest.
The hoopoe fluttered forward; on his breast
There shone the symbol of the Spirit's Way
And on his head Truth's crown, a feathered spray.
Discerning, righteous and intelligent,
He spoke: "My purposes are heaven-sent;
I keep God's secrets, mundane and divine,
In proof of which behold the holy sign
Bismillah" etched for ever on my beak.
No one can share the grief with which I seek
Our longed-for Lord, and quickened by my haste
My wide-finding water in the trackless waste.

I come as Solomon's close friend and claim
The matchless wisdom of that mighty name
(He never asked for those who quit his court,
But when I left him once alone he sought
With anxious vigilance for my return—
Measure my worth by this great king's concern!).
I bore his letters — back again I flew—
Whatever secrets he divined I knew;
A prophet loved me; God has trusted me;
What other bird has won such dignity?
For years I travelled over many lands,
Past oceans, mountains, valleys, desert sands,
And when the Deluge rose I flew around
The world itself and never glimpsed dry ground;
With Solomon I set out to explore
The limits of the earth from shore to shore.
I know our king — but how can I alone
Endure the journey to His distant throne?
Join me, and when at last we end our quest
Our king will greet you as His honoured guest.
How long will you persist in blasphemy?

Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny—
Whoever can evade the Self transcends
This world and as a lover he ascends.
Set free your soul, impatient of delay,
Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:
We have a king beyond Ka′f's mountain peak
The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
And He is always near to us, though we
Live far from His transcendent majesty.
A hundred thousand veils of dark and light
Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,
And in both worlds no being shares the throne
That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone—
He reigns in undisturbed omnipotence,
Bathed in the light of His magnificence—
No mind, no intellect can penetrate
The mystery of His unending state:
How many countless hundred thousands pray
For patience and true knowledge of the Way
That leads to Him whom reason cannot claim,
Nor mortal purity describe or name;

The Conference of the Birds. The following selections from this Farīd ud-Dīn Ḥaṭṭār poem written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century are taken from the first English translation of the complete poem, that by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis published in 1974. This translation is rhymed couplets captures the character of Ḥaṭṭār's maznavi verse form, which rhymes the two halves of each line.

The poem itself traces the pilgrimage of a group of birds from its shaky beginning to its fulfillment, when the birds meet their god, the Simorgh. These excerpts from the work begin at the hoopoe, who represents the Islamic Sufi teacher, proposes the pilgrimage; include the hoopoe's response to the bird who asserts that he is unable to abandon his material pleasures and go on the journey as well as the hoopoe's stories describing the spiritual test of the Valley of Bewilderment; and conclude, where the work itself ends, as the remaining group of thirty birds meet the Simorgh, their god. These selections are characteristic of the poem as a whole, ranging from brief anecdotes such as "The Restless Fool and the Dervish" to more sustained stories such as "The Story of the Princess Who Loved a Slave."

A note on the translation. The notes are the editors unless otherwise indicated.

1 Bismillah: "In the name of God": the opening words of the Qur'an (Koran). [Translator's note.]

2 Ka′f: A city in northwestern Saudi Arabia.
There soul and mind bewilder’d miss the mark
And, faced by Him, like dazzled eyes, are dark—
No sage could understand His perfect grace,
Nor see discern the beauty of His face;
His creatures strive to find a path to Him,
Deluded by each new, deceitful whim,
But fancy cannot work as she would wish;
You cannot weigh the moon like so much fish!
How many search for Him whose heads are sent
Like polo-balls in some great tournament
From side to giddy side—how many cries,
How many countless groans assail the skies!
Do not imagine that the Way is short;
Vast seas and deserts lie before His court.
Consider carefully before you start;
The journey asks of you a lion’s heart.
The road is long, the sea is deep—one flies
First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;
If you desire this quest, give up your soul
And make our sovereign’s court your only goal.
First wash your hands of life if you would say:
“I am a pilgrim of our sovereign’s Way”;
Renounce your soul for love; He you pursue
Will sacrifice His inmost soul for you. […]

AN OSTENTATIOUS BIRD

Another bird declared: ‘My happiness
Comes from the splendid things which I possess:
My palace walls inlaid with gold excite
Astonishment in all who see the sight.
They are a world of joy to me—how could
I wrench my heart from this surpassing good?
There I am king; all bow to my commands—
Shall I court ruin in the desert sands?
Shall I give up this realm, and live without
My certain glory in a world of doubt?
What rational mind would give up paradise
For wanderings filled with pain and sacrifice?’

THE HOOPOE ANSWERS HIM

The hoope said: ‘Ungrateful wretch! Are you
A dog that should need a kennel too?
This world’s a kennel’s filthy muck at best;
Your palace is a kennel with the rest.

If it seems paradise, at your last breath
You’ll know it is your dungeon after death.
There’s no harm in palaces like yours,
Did not the thought of death beat at our doors.

A KING WHO BUILT A SPLENDID PALACE

A king who loved his own magnificence
Once built a palace and spared no expense.
When this celestial building had been raised,
The gorgeous carpets and its splendour dazzled
The crowd that pressed around—a servant flung
Trays heaped with money to the scrabbling throng.
The king now summoned all his wisest friends
And said: “What do I lack? Who recommends
Improvements to my court?” “We must agree,”
They said, “no man could now or ever see,
In all the earth, a palace built like this.”
An old ascetic spoke. “One thing’s amiss,”
He said; “there’s one particular you lack,
This noble structure has a nasty crack
(Though if it weren’t for that it would suffice
To be the heavenly court of paradise).”
The king replied: “What crack? Where is it? Where?
If you’ve come here for trouble, then take care!”
The man said: “Lord, it is the truth I tell—
And through that crack will enter Azraél.”
It may be you can block it, but if not,
Then throne and palace are not worth a jot!
Your palace now seems like some heavenly prize,
But death will make it ugly to your eyes;
Nothing remains for ever and you know—

A MERCHANT GIVES A PARTY

To gratify his busy self-esteem,
A merchant built a mansion like a dream,
And when the preparations were all done,

He regally invited everyone
To an enormous entertainment there,
At which they'd feast and dutifully stare.
But running self-importantly around
He met a beggar fool, who stood his ground
And mocked the merchant's diligence. "My lord,"
He said, "I'm desolate (O, rest assured!)
That I can't come and drink your health, but I'm
So busy that I really haven't time—
You will forgive me?" and he gave a grin.
"Of course," the merchant answered, taken in.

**THE SPIDER**
You've seen an active spider work—he seems
To spend his life in self-communing dreams;
In fact the web he spins is evidence
That he's endowed with some far-sighted sense.
He drapes a corner with his cunning snare
And waits until a fly's entangled there,
Then dashes out and sucks the meagre blood
Of his bewildered, buzzing, dying food.
He'll dry the carcass then, and live off it
For days, consuming bit by tasty bit—
Until the owner of the house one day
Will reach up casually to knock away
The cunning spider's home—and with her broom
She clears both fly and spider from the room.

Such is the world, and one who feeds there is
A fly trapped by that spider's subtleties;
If all the world is yours, it will pass by
As swiftly as the blinking of an eye;
And though you boast of kings and patronage,
You are a child, an actor on a stage.
Don't seek for wealth unless you are a fool;
A herd of cows is all that you can rule!
Whoever lives for banners, drums and glory
Is dead; the dervish understands this story
And calls it windy noise—winds vainly flap
The banners, hollowly the brave drums tap.
Don't gallop on the horse of vanity;
Don't pride yourself on your nobility.
They skin the leopard for his splendid pelt;
They'll fly you too before your nose has smelt
A whiff of danger. When your life's made plain,

150 Which will be better, death or chastening pain?
You cannot hold your head up then—obey!
How long must you persist in childish play?
Either give up your wealth or lay aside
The rash pretensions of your crazy pride.
Your palace and your gardens! They're your gaol,
The dungeon where your ruined soul will wail.
Forsake this dusty pride, know what it's worth;
Give up your restless pacing of the earth.
To see the Way, look with the eyes of thought;
Set out on it and glimpse the heavenly court—
And when you reach that souls' asylum, then
Its glory will blot out the world of men.

**THE RESTLESS FOOL AND THE Dervish**
A fool dashed onward at a reckless pace
Till in the desert he came face to face
With one who wore the ragged dervish cloak,
And asked: "What is your work?" The dervish spoke:
"Poor shallow wretch, can you not see I faint
With this strict pressure of the world's constraint?"
"Constraint! That can't be right," the man replied;
"The empty desert stretches far and wide."
The dervish said: "If there is no strict Way,
How has it led you to me here today?"

A myriad promises beguile your mind,
But flames of greed are all that you can find.
What are such flames? Tread down the world's desire,
And like a lion shun this raging fire.
Accomplish this, and you will find your heart;
There waits your palace, pure in every part.
Fire blocks the path, the goal is long delayed—
200 Your heart's a captive and your soul's afraid,
But in the midst of such an enterprise
You will escape this universe of lies.
When worldly pleasures cloy, prepare to die—
The world gives neither name nor truth, pass by!
The more you see of it the less you see,
How often must I warn you to break free?

**SEEING THE WORLD**
A mourner following a coffin cried:
"You hardly saw the world, and yet you've died."
A fool remarked: "Such noise! You'd think that he
had seen the world himself repeatedly!"

If you would take the world with you, you must
Descend with all the world unsealed to dust;
You rush to savour life, and so life goes.
While you ignore the balm for all its woes;
Until the Self is sacrificed your soul
Is lost in filth, divided from its goal.

A perfumed wood was burning, and its scent
Made someone sigh with somnolent content.
One said to him: "Your sigh means ecstasy;
Think of the wood, whose sigh means misery."

THE VALLEY OF BEWILDERMENT

Next comes the Valley of Bewilderment,
A place of pain and gnawing discontent—
Each second you will sigh, and every breath
Will be a sword to make you long for death;
Blinded by grief, you will not recognize
The days and nights that pass before your eyes.
Blood drips from every hair and writes "Alas"
Beside the highway where the pilgrims pass;
In ice you fry, in fire you freeze—the Way
Is lost, with indecisive steps you stray—
The Unity you knew has gone; your soul
Is scattered and knows nothing of the Whole.
If someone asks: "What is your present state;
Is drunkenness or sober sense your fate,
And do you flourish now or fade away?"
The pilgrim will confess: "I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge any more;
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure;
I love, but who is it for whom I sigh?
Not Moslem, yet not heathen; who am I?
My heart is empty, yet with love is full;
My own love is to me incredible."

THE STORY OF THE PRINCESS WHO LOVED A SLAVE

A great king had a daughter whose fair face
Was like the full moon in its radiant grace,
She seemed a Joseph, and her dimpled chin
The well that lovely youth was hidden in—
Her face was like a paradise; her hair
Redeemed a hundred hearts to love's despair;
Her eyebrows were two bows bent back to shoot
The arrows of love's passionate dispute;
The pointed lashes of her humild eyes
Were thorns strewn in the pathway of the wise;
The beauty of this sun deceived the train
Of stars attendant on the moon's pale reign;
The rubies of her mouth were like a spell
To fascinate the angel Gabriel—
Beside her smile, her sweet, reviving breath,
The waters of eternal life seemed death;
Whoever saw her chin was lost and fell
Lamenting into love's unfathomed well;
And those she glanced at sank without a sound—
What rope could reach the depths in which they drowned?
It happened that a humble slave was brought
To join the retinue that served at court,
A slave, but what a slave! Compared with him
The sun and moon looked overcast and dim.
He was uniquely beautiful—and when
He left the palace, women, children, men
Would crowd into the streets and market-place,
A hundred thousand wild to see his face.

One day the princess, by some fateful chance,
Caught sight of this surpassing elegance,
And as she glimpsed his face she felt her heart,
Her intellect, her self-control depart—
Now reason fled and love usurped its reign;
Her sweet soul trembled in love's bitter pain. For days she meditated, struggled, strove,
But bowed at last before the force of love
And gave herself to longing, to the fire
Of passionate, insatiable desire.

Attendant on the daughter of the king
Were ten musicians, slave girls who could sing
Like nightingales—whose captivating charms

Joseph: The story of Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, recounted in the twelfth sura of the Qur'an and in the Hebrew Scriptures, is frequently alluded to in *The Conference of the Birds*. Since Joseph was said to be of unsurpassed beauty, he is frequently compared to heroes and heroines as the standard for beauty.
Would rival David's when he sang the psalms.
The princess set aside her noble name
And whispered to these girls her secret shame
(When love has first appeared who can expect
The frenzied lover to be circumspect?),
Then said: "If I am honest with this slave
And tell my love, who knows how he'll behave?
My honour's lost if he should once discover
His princess wishes that she were his lover!
But if I can't make my affection plain
I'll die, I'll waste away in secret pain;
I've read a hundred books on chastity
And still I burn — what good are they to me?
No, I must have him; this seductive youth
Must sleep with me and never know the truth —
If I can secretly achieve my goal

Love's bliss will satisfy my thirsting soul."
Her girls said: "Don't despair; tonight we'll bring
Your lover here and he won't know a thing."
One of them went to him — she surprised, smiled,
And O! how easily he was beguiled;
He took the drugged wine she'd prepared — he drank,
Then swooned — unconscious in her arms he sank,
And in that instant all her work was done;
He slept until the setting of the sun.
Night came and all was quiet as the grave;

Now, stealthily, the maidens brought this slave,
Wrapped in a blanket, to their mistress' bed
And laid him down with jewels about his head.
Midnight: he opened his dazed, lovely eyes
And stared at him with a mute surprise —
The bed was massy gold; the chamber seemed
An earthly paradise that he had dreamed;
Two candles made of ambergris burnt there
And with their fainting fragrance filled the air;
The slave girls made such music that his soul

Seemed beckoned onward to some distant goal;
Wine passed from hand to hand; the candles' light
Flared like a sun to drive away the night.
But all the joys of this celestial place
Could not compare with her bewitching face.

David (c. 1021-c. 972 B.C.E.): King of the ancient Hebrews whose story is told in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur'an. Traditionally regarded as the author of many of the Psalms.
The world has never known a state like this,
380 This paradox beyond analysis,
Which haunts my soul with what I cannot find,
Which makes me speechless speak and seeing blind.
I saw perfection's image, beauty's queen,
A vision that no man has ever seen
(What is the sun before that face? — God knows
It is a mote, a speck that comes and goes!).
But did I see her? What more can I say?
Between this 'yes' and 'no' I've lost my way!"

THE GRIEVING MOTHER AND THE SUFI
Beside her daughter's grave a mother grieved.

390 A sufi said: "This woman has perceived
The nature of her loss; her heart knows why
She comes to mourn, for whom she has to cry—
She grieves, but knowledge makes her fortunate.
Consider now the sufi's wretched state!
What daily, nightly vigils I must keep
And never know for whom it is I weep;
I mourn in lonely darkness, unaware
Whose absence is the cause of my despair.
Since she knows what has caused her agony,
She is a thousand times more blest than me—
I have no notion of what makes me weep,
What prompts the painful vigils I must keep.
My heart is lost, and here I cannot find
That rope by which men live, the rational mind —
The key to thought is lost; to reach this far
Means to despair of who and what you are.
And yet it is to see within the soul —
And at a stroke — the meaning of the Whole."

THE MAN WHO HAD LOST HIS KEY
A sufi heard a cry: "I've lost my key;
410 If it's been found, please give it back to me —
My door's locked fast; I wish to God I knew
How I could get back in. What can I do?"
The sufi said: "And why should you complain?
You know where this door is; if you remain
Outside it — even if it is shut fast —
Someone no doubt will open it at last.
You make this fuss for nothing; how much more
Should I complain, who've lost both key and door!" But if this sufi presses on, he'll find
420 The closed or open door which haunts his mind.
Men cannot understand the sufi's state,
That deep Bewilderment which is their fate.
To those who ask: "What can I do?" reply:
"Bid all that you have done till now goodbye!"
Once in the Valley of Bewilderment
The pilgrim suffers endless discontent,
Crying: "How long must I endure delay,
Uncertainty? When shall I see the Way?
When shall I know, O when?" But knowledge here
It turned again to indecisive fear;
Complaints become a grateful eulogy
And blasphemy is faith, faith blasphemy.

THE OLD AGE OF SHEIKH NASRABAD
Sheikh Nasrabad made Mecca's pilgrimage
Twice twenty times, yet this could not assuage
His yearning heart. This white-haired sheikh became
A pilgrim of the pagans' sacred flame,
A naked beggar in whose heart their fire
Was mirrored by the blaze of his desire.
A passer-by said: "Shame on you, O sheikh,
440 Shame on these wretched orisons you make;
Have you performed the Moslems' pilgrimage
To be an infidel in your old age?
This is mere childishness; such blasphemy
Can only bring the sufis infamy.
What sheikh has followed this perverted way?
What is this pagan fire to which you pray?"
The sheikh said: "I have suffered from this flame,
Which burnt my clothes, my house, my noble name,
The harvest of my life, all that I knew,
450 My learning, wisdom, reputation too —
And what is left to me? — Bewilderment,
The knowledge of my burning discontent;
All thoughts of reputation soon depart
When such fierce conflagrations fire the heart.
In my despair I turn with equal hate

6 Mecca's pilgrimage: All Muslims were and are instructed to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their lifetime.
Both from the Ka'bah⁷ and this temple's gate—
If this Bewilderment should come to you
Then you will grieve, as I am forced to do.”

A NOVICE SEES HIS DEAD MASTER

A novice in whose heart the faith shone bright
Met with his teacher in a dream one night
And said: “I tremble in bewildered fear;
How is it, master, that I see you here?
My heart became a candle when you went,
A flame that flickers with astonishment;
I seek Truth's secrets like a searching slave—
Explain to me your state beyond the grave!”
His teacher said: “I cannot understand—
Amazed, I gnaw the knuckles of my hand.
You say that you're bewildered—In this pit
Bewilderment seems endless, infinite!
A hundred mountains would be less to me
Than one brief speck of such uncertainty!”
 [...] 

THE BIRDS DISCOVER THE SIMORGH

The thirty birds read through the fateful page
And there discovered, stage by detailed stage,
Their lives, their actions, set out one by one—
All that their souls had ever been or done:
And this was bad enough, but as they read
They understood that it was they who'd led
The lovely Joseph into slavery—
Who had deprived him of his liberty
Deep in a well, then ignorantly sold
Their captive to a passing chief for gold.⁸
(Can you not see that at each breath you sell
The Joseph you imprisoned in that well,
That he will be the king to whom you must
Naked and hungry bow down in the dust?)

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⁷Ka'bah: The sanctuary in Mecca said to have been originally constructed by Adam and reconstructed by the prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael, who were given a black stone, now in the building, to do so, and purified of idol worship by the Prophet Muhammad.

⁸led the lovely Joseph ... for gold: Joseph’s brothers, jealous of their father's favoritism, cast Joseph into a well and sold him into slavery. (See Surat 12, p. 119.)

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Farid ud-Din Attar: The Conference of the Birds

The chastened spirits of these birds became
Like crumbled powder, and they shrank with shame.
Then, as by shame their spirits were refined
Of all the world's weight, they began to find
A new life flow towards them from that bright
Celestial and ever-living Light—
Their souls rose free of all they'd been before;
The past and all its actions were no more.
Their life came from that close, insistent sun
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.
There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world—with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end.
They see the Simorgh—At themselves they stare,
And see a second Simorgh standing there;
They look at both and see the two are one,
That this is that, that this, the goal is won.
They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound)
The meaning of these mysteries that confound
Their puzzled ignorance—How is it true
That 'we' is not distinguished here from 'you'?
And silently their shining Lord replies:
'I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendour see
Themselves, their own unique reality;
You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, fifty—here
An answering forty, fifty, would appear;
Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is yourselves you see and what you are.'
(Who sees the Lord? It is himself each sees;
What ant's sight could discern the Pleiades?
What ant's maw could be lifted by an ant?
Or could a fly subdue an elephant?)
'How much you thought you knew and saw; but you
Now know that all you trusted was untrue,
Though you traversed the Valleys' depths and fought
With all the dangers that the journey brought,
The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine—

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⁹the Simorgh: The meaning of this crucial moment depends on a pun. si means "thirty," morg means "bird(s)." ... It was probably this pun which suggested the idea of the poem to Attar. [Translators' note.]
You slept secure in Being's inmost shrine,
And since you came as thirty birds, you see

530 These thirty birds when you discover Me,
The Simorgh, Truth's last flawless jewel, the light
In which you will be lost to mortal sight,
Dispersed to nothingness until once more
You find in Me the selves you were before.
Then, as they listened to the Simorgh's words,
A trembling dissolution filled the birds —
The substance of their being was undone,
And they were lost like shade before the sun;
Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.

540 The Simorgh ceased to speak, and silence reigned.

Jalaluddin Rumi
1207–1273

For more than seven hundred years the poetry of Rumi has been a source of inspiration to followers of Islam. And because he deals with the whole range of the spiritual journey, from the sacredness of ordinary experience to the more esoteric and sophisticated teachings of mysticism, Rumi has had a wide following among non-Muslims as well, including Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. British scholars produced literal but sometimes unreadable translations of Rumi's poems at the beginning of the twentieth century, but only recently has Rumi become available in English translations that begin to do justice to his poetic style and imagery. In the hands of modern translators, Rumi speaks to people of a wide variety of national and religious backgrounds. The enthusiastic modern revival of Rumi's poetry in the West coincides with a rebirth of interest in Islamic culture, non-Western spiritual traditions like Daoism and Buddhism, and the Eastern practices of yoga, tai chi, chuan, and meditation.

The thirteenth century was a turbulent time across the Middle East. Early in the century Mongol armies conquered established communities from China to eastern Europe and the shores of the Mediterranean. From the eleventh to late in the thirteenth century, Europe was taken up with the Crusades, the struggle between Christians and Muslims for control of Palestine, or the Holy Land. It was a stressful time when prophets rose up preaching reform and renewal, and there was a revived interest in the mystical practices of established religions. Scholars of mysticism suggest that the various mystical groups around the world tend to resemble one another more closely than they resemble the established religions from which they arose. Around 1200, Zen Buddhism enjoyed a revival in Japan. About that same time, while a Muslim dynasty took power in much of India, the mystical religion of Hinduism, the bhakti, moved across northern India. And the mystical branches of Judaism and Christianity were fed by the teachings of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327), respectively.

Rise of Sufism. The thirteenth-century golden age of Islam was supported by the spread of Sufism, the mystical orders within Islam that seek

1 Mysticism: The term mysticism refers to a direct, ecstatic, personal experience of the divine, but by definition, the mystical experience transcends language and learning.

2 Zen Buddhism: Zen teaches the path of zazen, sitting meditation, as the quickest route to enlightenment. (See Glossary, p. 116.)

3 Bhakti: Bhakti teaches the path of ecstatic surrender to God, usually in personal form, as a means to union with God. (See Glossary, p. 116.)

4 Eckhart: Besides Eckhart, Francis of Assisi (c. 1182–1226) and Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), among others, promoted Christian mysticism.