

The Hermeneutics of Eroticism in the Poetry of Rumi

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Michel Foucault writes that in societies that made use of *ars erotica*, secrecy served the purpose of amplifying the truth that is drawn from pleasure and the importance of a master in transmitting it in an esoteric manner.¹ He writes that the need for secrecy in sexuality was “not because of an element of infamy . . . but because of the need to hold it in the greatest reserve, since, according to tradition, it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged.”² It is no surprise, then, that secretive traditions often find in eroticism an apt metaphor for the expression of their esoteric concepts.³ In the same vein as *ars erotica*, secrecy enhances the mystical enterprise and elevates it to the level of esotericism. It is imperative that something of the secret be revealed, because secrecy is not the same as concealment.⁴ A secret that is fully concealed might as well not exist. However, a total revelation would make the secret meaningless, just as in eroticism consummation equates with termination, for eroticism is the deferral of consummation. Thus the constitutive element of secrecy and eroticism is the communicative interplay of disclosure and concealment.

In many passages of the *Masnawi*, the great epic of the thirteenth century Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), mystical knowledge is communicated in erotic terms.⁵ This article examines the dynamics of eroticism in the *Masnawi* in order to explore the range of Rumi’s esoteric intentions and symbolizing practices. When structured along the lines of erotic relationality, Rumi’s symbolizing practices are related to the embodied and gendered subjectivities that are inevitably signified in a particular cultural context. I examine the implications of Rumi’s sociocultural context for the sexed and gendered bodies that are utilized for his

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1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 57.

2. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 57.

3. A useful definition of the erotic is offered by Jeffrey Kripal as “that specifically dialectical manifestation of the mystical and the sexual that appears in any number of traditions through a range of textual and metaphorical strategies which collapse, often together, the supposed separation of the spiritual and the sexual.” See his *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 21.

4. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, “Introduction: Secrecy and its Benefits,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Kippenberg and Stroumsa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), xiii.

5. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’d-din Rumi*, 8 vols., ed. and trans. with critical notes and commentary by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925–40). All references to the *Masnawi* are indicated in the text by book number in arabic numerals, followed by the line number.

signifying purposes. In many passages of the *Masnavi* the production (communication) of mystical knowledge is contemplated as an embodied process through which certain bodies, or more precisely the function of a certain organ of the male body (the penis), are foregrounded or privileged while others are marginalized. The understanding of this process rests on interpreting the significance assigned to the embodied and gendered subjectivities by their cultural context in which they are situated. For the purpose of such an analysis, relevant features of modern theories of gender, semiotics, and psychoanalysis are used as strategic conceptual tools. This article thus supports the relevance of certain trends in psychoanalytical inquiry into subjectivity for new interpretations of mystical texts.⁶

The Erotic Significance of the *Masnavi's* Imagery

There are many passages in the *Masnavi* that may be considered in their erotic significance. In the *Masnavi* the symbolic encounters with the Divine, the scripture, or a mystical text are expressed in embodied and gendered terms that are projected unto sexualized or eroticized bodies. In one passage Rumi speaks of the mystic's state of readiness to encounter the Divine as a state of "nonexistence," in which individual attributes must be annulled (5:1960). He writes that for the Divine Pen to "ennoble" the individual soul, one must become like a paper that is not written on.⁷ He also uses imagery such as "planting a sapling" and "sowing a seed" to convey his message (5:1960–64). In this passage, the gender symbolism of the (Divine) Pen and the blank sheet of paper is self-evident.⁸

The gender significance of the Divine Pen was not lost on the Muslim mystics. For example, Ibn 'Arabi uses sexual imagery in discussing the relationship between Pen and Tablet in terms of the marriage that pervades all atoms:

A supra-sensory intelligible marriage takes place between the Pen and the Tablet, and a visible, sensory trace. . . . The Trace that was deposited in the Tablet was like the sperm that is ejaculated and set within the womb of the female. The meanings deposited within the celestial letters that became manifest from that writing are like the spirits of the children deposited within their bodies.⁹

In a similar passage in the *Masnavi*, Rumi brings into focus the feminine as a hermeneutical category. Here the female biological function of birthing is appropriated for explicating the (male) mystic's divinely inspired creativity:

The Universal Intellect touched upon the partial intellect (the intellect of the subject)
the soul received from it a pearl and put it into its bosom [*jaib*]
Like Mary through that touch that the bosom received,
the soul became pregnant with a heart-captivating Messiah (2:1183–84).

The term *jaib*, translated as "bosom," which also means "hole" or "cavity," denotes the "womb." This is in consonance with its use elsewhere in the *Masnavi* where Mary is described as *pak jaib*, that is, "pure-bosom" or "pure-womb" (3:3708). This passage is an instance of the use of erotic imagery to explain a symbolic encounter with a dimension that transcends the subjective level. The Universal Soul impregnates the individual soul by a contact that is explained here by means of the analogy with a sexual contact resulting in pregnancy. The word *pearl* may be considered as an analogy with semen symbolically deposited into the individual soul; put differently, the womb (of the individual soul) receives the pearl of (the Universal Soul's) semen in this symbolic encounter. The pearl, symbolizing the Divine semen, is the seed that grows to be the Messiah of the soul, or to use the words of

6. Among these inquiries that illustrate the applicability of psychodynamic concepts to Jewish mysticism are *Ultimate Intimacy: The Psychodynamics of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Mortimer Ostow (London: Karnac Books, 1995); and Elliot R. Wolfson, "Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges, 1999), 113–54. I have

benefited immensely from James J. DiCenso's careful observations as well as his book *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999).

7. Rumi incorporates the opening verse of chapter 68 of the Koran: "N. And by the Pen." For Rumi this term seems to indicate the instrument and the source of Divine knowledge bestowed on the one who would naught himself before God.

8. Sachiko Murata writes that in Sufi discourse the Pen and the Tablet are two spiritual beings with obvious gender significance, the Pen corresponding to the masculine and the Tablet to feminine receptivity. See her *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relations in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 154.

9. Ibid., 153.

Rumi's commentator Isma'il of Ankara, "a spiritual Child . . . having the breath of Christ which resuscitates the dead."¹⁰ This spiritual child, or the "Jesus of the soul," comes as a concrete proof of the encounter with the Universal intellect.

In another passage in the *Masnavi* Rumi uses the female biological function of menstruation to illustrate another possible aspect of the relationship with the Divine. He writes, "Indeed (following) the carnal desire is the menstruation of men" (6:2935). Here Rumi is describing carnal desire in terms of the biological function of menstruation.¹¹ In the context of Islamic laws of purity, menstruation is considered to be a state of ritual impurity during which certain ritual obligations, like daily ritual prayer and obligatory fasting, are suspended for female believers, and sexual (vaginal) intercourse is forbidden.¹² Rumi equates the state of a man who follows his carnal soul with menstruation; pollution by worldly desires signified by menstruation is the cause of the Divine's aversion to a soul.

In some passages in the *Masnavi* Rumi hurls certain racial prejudices into his analogy of the human encounter with the Divine. One particular passage plays on the contrasting image of the Turk and the Hindu as the ideal active-receptive opposites to exemplify this encounter. He writes, "Be the Hindu of that Turk [i.e., the Divine Beloved], oh [man made of] water and clay" (3:2839). He portrays the Divine as a forceful and virile Turk and the mystic as a submissive Hindu slave. This analogy is related to the purported ethnic qualities of the two, which are cruelty, aggression, and domination on one side and receptivity and slavery on the other. These qualities are projected

onto the sexualized bodies of the Turk and the Hindu. In Persian mystical poetry, the Turk's body is often eroticized as white and beautiful as a moon, with round face, narrow eyes, and small mouth, while the dark-skinned body of the Hindu is devalued.¹³

Although the analogy is not well developed, there are instances in Sufism where the mystic is portrayed as the bride of God.¹⁴ As a mode of the collapse of the erotic and the mystical, Rumi uses the image of the bride in different contexts. A few examples illustrate this point. In a passage in the *Masnavi*, the theme of a sexual encounter with a beautiful bride in the bridal chamber is played out with reference to the mystical stations on the spiritual path and the mystical state. Rumi writes, "The mystical state is like a self-presentation of that beautiful bride / and the mystical stations are like being alone with the bride" (1:1435). His conclusion is that many Sufis may enjoy a passing mystical state, but rarely do they attain a station: "The bride may be displayed before commoners and nobles alike / In the bridal chamber (however,) the king is alone with the bride" (1:1437). Thus, it is only a certain experiential approach that opens up the inner meaning of Scripture. The opposite of the mystical approach to the Scripture is a superficial encounter with the text. Rumi explains this superficial encounter in the tale of a ninety-year-old woman, an "ancient whore," who cuts pieces of the Scripture and uses her saliva to paste them onto her face to beautify herself (6:1268–92).

In a passage in *Fihī ma Fihī*, Rumi likens the Koran to a bride and describes the hermeneutical approach of the mystic to it in sexually charged terms: "The Koran is like a bride. . . . Seek its pleasure, . . . do it service from afar, and

10. Cited in Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 172.

11. This is consistent with the medieval view of menstruation as a human deficiency sometimes projected unto male bodies, as in the case of medieval Christian clergy; see Dylan Elliott, "Pollution, Illusion, and Masculine Disarray: Nocturnal Emissions and the Sexuality of the Clergy," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. K. Lochrie, P. McCracken, and J. A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1–23. The Jewish male, as an example of a marginalized

body, was believed to have monthly menses; see Steven F. Kruger, "Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories," in Lochrie et al., *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, 158–79.

12. Heterosexual anal intercourse as a recourse during a woman's menses was condemned by the major schools of Islamic law, with the exception of the Maliki school; see Everett K. Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50–79, 75 n. 14.

13. For the theme of Turk and Hindu in Persian mystical poetry, see Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 137–44; also see her "Eros—Heavenly and Not So Heavenly—in Sufi Literature and Life," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. Afaf Lutfi as-Sayyid Marsot (Levi della Vida Sixth Conference) (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1979), 119–42.

14. For example, Nicholson notes the mystic Simnani's repeating Bayazid's saying that "the saints are God's brides whom only close relatives can behold." See his *Mathnawi*, 7:43.

strive to do what pleases it . . . and it will show you its face. You will be seeking the people of God. *Enter among my servants, and enter my garden of paradise.*"¹⁵ The last segment of this passage is a direct quotation of a verse from the Koran (89:27–30), which likens the moment of unveiling to the entrance into the inner sanctuary of a garden, presumably as in a sexual encounter. The garden as a metaphor for the human body or the body of the text is a familiar theme of medieval Persian poetry.¹⁶ The garden's "heightened sense of natural reality," as Maria Subtelny puts it, projected onto the metaphorical plane, made it an apt metaphor for the esoteric dimension of Muslim spirituality.¹⁷

The importance of this passage lies in expressing the hermeneutical approach to Scripture by identifying a latent erotic metaphor in an apparently nonerotic verse from the Koran. A key term of this verse has been used in other passages of the Koran in reference to a sexual encounter. In two instances in the Koran the term "to enter" (*d-kh-l*) is used as a reference to literally "going into" a woman, as in penetration in sexual intercourse that constitutes the consummation of marriage.¹⁸ The use of the term "to enter" with the meaning of "sexual intercourse" elsewhere in the Koran shows that the suggested interpretation of this term as sexual intercourse is consistent with its use in the Koran. Therefore, based on the variance of the meaning of this term in the Koran, it is possible to interpret it as sexual intercourse. There is no clear indication that, by incorporating this verse from the Koran, Rumi does (or does not) refer the reader to other Koranic usages of the term "to enter." However, the use of this term in the Koran to refer to sexual intercourse validates a sexually charged reading of this term as the symbolic analogy of the moment of mystical unveiling.

Even without the Koranic precedent, a contiguity of connotations associated with "entrance" into the garden of paradise and "entrance into a bride" as in sexual intercourse can be established. This contiguity allows for the metonymic displacement of the apparently nonsexual connotation of this term with a sexual one. This metonymic displacement is caused by a rearrangement of signifiers pertaining to the metaphor of approaching a bride. The Koranic precedent of the use of the term "to enter" to mean sexual intercourse is useful in linking (hence authenticating) the alternative meaning of this term to the symbolic matrix of the Koran. In this respect, we can speak of a genealogy of signification, that is, linking the different interpretations to a substantiating ideational matrix through the participating signifiers. The genealogy of signification authenticates the interpretation of a term like "to enter" in a sexual context. In genealogical terms the latent meanings may be viewed as the recessive meanings that *insist* in a signifier and that can be uncovered when the dominant meanings are metonymically displaced.¹⁹

Rumi also explains the encounter with the mystical text in erotic terms. He uses the sexual metaphor of union with a beautiful bride to point out the defect of those who learn the words of the mystics for worldly purposes. In *Fihi ma Fihi* he relates:

These words are like a beautiful bride. What love or affection will a beautiful slave girl have for someone who buys her in order to sell her again? Since the only pleasure such a trader has is in selling the girl, he is impotent. When he buys a girl only to sell her, he does not have the "manliness" to be buying her for himself. . . . And when he sells it, he buys powder and rouge. What else can he do?²⁰

15. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Kitab-i Fihi ma Fihi*, ed. Badi' al-Zaman Furuzanfar (Tehran: Amir Kabir, AH 1330/1951), 229. For a translation of this book, see *Signs of the Unseen: The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. W. M. Thackston Jr. (Boston: Shambhala, 1994). For a discussion of the significance of the often-overlooked *Fihi ma Fihi* (literally *In It Is What Is in It*), see Fatemeh Keshavarz, "Pregnant with God: The Poetic Art of Mothering the Sacred in Rumi's *Fihi ma Fihi*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 22 (2002): 90–99.

16. See Julie Scott Meisami, "The Body as Garden: Nature and Sexuality in Persian Poetry," *Edebiyat* 6 (1995): 245–74.

17. Subtelny, *Le monde est un jardin*, 150.

18. "Prohibited to you [for marriage] are: . . . your stepdaughters under your guardianship, born of your wives who you have gone into; there is no prohibition for you if you have not gone into [them]" (Koran 4:23).

19. The notion of the genealogy of signification corresponds to Lacan's argument that meaning is not fixed in language, but insists in signifying chains, and the stable meaning of language is due to the reference of the displaced signifiers back to earlier ones. See his *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 152–54.

20. Rumi, *Fihi ma Fihi*, 111—"manliness" in this passage is a translation of *rujulīyyat va mardī*; however, both terms denote "penis" as well.

The pseudomystic's lust after the material world, gained through learning mystical words, is like trading a beautiful slave girl for money. This is analogized as the impotence of an effeminate man, implying he lacks a penis that is capable of erection; hence the impotent man cannot penetrate the inner layer of the text. This sexual desire is a metaphor for the desire to penetrate into the inner meaning of the text, as opposed to trading it for worldly gain. Thus it is the penetrating function of the erect penis that is the intended meaning. The potency of a man is an allusion to his sexual desire that is symbolized by the function of the penis.

In the *Masnavi* Rumi repeats the image of an impotent man who buys a virgin slave girl but does not have the "proper capacity" to benefit from her (6:4425–26). In yet another reference to impotence, Rumi notes that for the impotent man, clothing and nudity make no difference (5:3633). In these examples, impotence is related to the nonfunctional penis that cannot become erect. The desire and capacity for penetrating the inner layers of knowledge is analogized as male sexual potency, which is linked to the function of the erect penis. This is not to say that the penis somehow weighs in on the construction of (true) manliness; the penis is like a fetish, an illusory substitute that lacks intrinsic significance.²¹ If the penis had any bearing on the construction of (true) masculinity, every man would have been capable of gaining knowledge of the inner meaning of mystical or sacred texts. As Rumi often asserts, true manliness is not signified by the primary signifiers of masculine gender, like penis or testicles, nor by the secondary signifiers, like beard or moustache: "[True] manliness is . . . not beard and penis / otherwise the donkey's penis would have been the king of men" (5:3711).

An ignorant man is like a hermaphrodite (*mukhannas*), who, as Rumi explains, has both male and female genitals (6:1425).²² He (or

she) "hides his penis [*zakar*] from women and his vagina [*shullah*, also meaning a "menstrual cloth"] from men" (6:1426–27). In Rumi's usage, the term *mukhannas* also means an effeminate man. In the *Masnavi* certain characteristics are attributed to the hermaphrodite. For example, a hermaphrodite cannot be a soldier and cannot engage in physical combat (2:2760). Even if he has a beard and a moustache and runs ahead of the army (leads), he does not have the heart to fight because his heart is filled with unmanliness: "O you effeminate man who has run ahead of the army / your penis testifies to the lie of your beard" (5:2510–11). The proof of unmanliness is found in the genitals of the effeminate man, that is, in his penis that cannot become erect. Another example: "Were there not a challenge of every wicked man / every effeminate would be a Rustam in battle" (3:686).²³ More important, a hermaphrodite exemplifies the man who is unable to travel the arduous path of knowledge: "The path of religion is full of trouble and struggle because / this is not a path for anyone who is a hermaphrodite by nature" (6:508).

The Hermaphrodite and the Androgyne

It is instructive to examine the implications of the figure of the hermaphrodite for a sexual economy that is centered on the function of the male genitals. One may imagine that a gender category like hermaphrodite that contains both gender characteristics should fit well within this binary passive-active arrangement. However, a hermaphrodite is excluded from this symbolic arrangement, because, according to Rumi, a hermaphrodite is an effeminate male who has neither a penis nor a womb that is functional, but instead has two dysfunctional sexual organs.

It is the characteristics of his genitals, not mere effeminacy, that render the hermaphrodite an anomaly. In the context of medieval Persian poetry, the Beloved is described in

21. DiCenso defines fetishism as "imaginary fixation on literalized ideal entities and related symbols and practices." See his *The Other Freud*, 58.

22. This is consistent with the view of the Muslim jurists who developed specific criteria for determining the gender of a hermaphrodite according to the genitals. For example, the organ through which urine was discharged, or discharged in a greater amount, or the occurrence of menses would categorize a hermaphrodite as male or female; see Malek Chebel, *Die Welt der Liebe im Islam: Eine Enzyklopädie (The World of*

Love in Islam: An Encyclopedia), trans. (from French) Ursula Günther, Wieland Grommes, Reinhard Hesse, and Edgar Peinelt (Wiesbaden: VMA-Verlag, 2003), 184.

23. Rustam is the great legendary national hero of pre-Islamic Persia and the epitome of heroic manliness.

ambiguous terms that could be interpreted as referring to an actual person, either male or female, or as a metaphorical and allegorical allusion to the immaterial beauty of the transcendental Beloved. This ambiguity is intensified by the lack of gender distinction in the Persian language. Effeminacy, or the lack of sufficiently marked masculinity, can be discerned in descriptions of the ideal of human beauty in Persian mystical poetry. Particularly in Persian lyrical poetry the Beloved is often idealized as a handsome male youth of premature age.²⁴ For example, in Persian lyrical poetry the ideal of human beauty is described as a boy of fourteen with the first traces of beard or moustache on his face.²⁵ The sexual ambiguity of the Beloved and its exemplification in human form appear to be premised on the collapsing of the gendered categories of masculine and feminine into an androgynous figure. However, the androgynous descriptions of the Beloved do not entail an abandonment of gender categories. The depictions of a handsome beardless boy do not constitute a "neutral" third gender or an abstract body; he may be "feminized," but he remains a prepubescent male and his body is marked with the primary markers of masculinity.

In the context of modern theories of gender it is generally acknowledged that the examinations of the figures of androgyne and hermaphrodite always encounter problems of definition. Some have argued for hermaphroditism as biological fact and androgyny as poetic fiction, while others propose androgyny as the fiction of original plenitude and wholeness and hermaphroditism as the fiction of displaced origins.²⁶ In this context, Mircea Eliade's "divine androgyne" may be an apt term for a transcendental archetype of Divine beauty whose function he describes as "a symbolic

restoration of Chaos, of the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation."²⁷ According to Eliade, androgyny in many religions functions as "an archaic and universal formula for the expression of wholeness, the co-existence of the contraries, or *coincidentia oppositorum* . . . symboliz[ing] . . . perfection . . . [and] ultimate being."²⁸

The androgyne as an archetype, which symbolically fuses the chaos of gendered subjectivities into a plenary and transcendental totality, has no place in Rumi's *Masnavi*. The communication of mystical knowledge is the leitmotif of the entire corpus of Rumi's *Masnavi*; it is what animates every page of this mystical book. The communication of mystical knowledge, however, is a process in which the hidden content of secrecy is never fully divulged, but only disclosed in its concealment. Taking a cue from Lacan's theory of signification, this process could be articulated as a process of signification in which the eventual contents of mystical knowledge are always anticipated by the communicative interplay of signifiers but never fully divulged.²⁹ In other words, a definite closure of mystical knowledge is indefinitely deferred. Creation in its entirety can be viewed as veils (or signifiers) that reveal and conceal, or, as William Chittick writes, "To emerge from one veil is to enter into another veil."³⁰ In this context, no formulation of wholeness in an androgynous figure of male youth is to be found in the *Masnavi*. Rumi's view of the androgynous figure of male youth may be found in the tale of a beardless youth who spends the night in the house of "celibates" and is sexually attacked by a "homosexual" (6:3843–83). In the argument that ensues the youngster explains that both men and women view him as a sexual object wherever he goes. In the Sufi hospice a bunch of greedy porridge-eaters assault him,

24. "Contemplating the young men" was justified by recourse to this alleged saying of the Prophet: "I beheld the Angel Gabriel in the form of Dahya al-Kalbi," a handsome Arab youth. Or, "I saw my Lord in the shape of a beautiful young man, with his cap awry." For a discussion of these sayings, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 289–91.

25. Ibid., 289; also see Annemarie Schimmel, *As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 68.

26. The examples corresponding to the former and the latter opinions include Catriona MacLeod, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1998), 28; and Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 9–11, 17–21.

27. Mircea Eliade, "Androgynes," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Eliade (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 1:277; also see his *The Two and the One*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Harvill, 1965), 110–12.

28. Mircea Eliade, *Myth, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 174–75.

29. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar*, bk. 11, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), 207; also see his *Écrits: A Selection*, 153–54.

30. William C. Chittick, "The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges, 1999), 59–86.

“with their eyes full of semen and the palms [of their hands] squeezing their testicles” (6:3856–57). He explains that even the one who has the most regard for the (Muslim) law (i.e., a jurist), “steals covert glances [while] stroking his penis” (6:3858). All these tribulations are due to the fact that the beardless boy is considered neither a man nor a woman (6:3865). Rumi concludes, “Three or four strands of hair on the chin just for show / is better than [protecting oneself with] thirty bricks around the back [*kun*, literally *ass*]” (6:3868).

For Rumi it is not the androgynous boy of fourteen who symbolizes the Beloved in human form, but the Shaikh, the esoteric master. For example, in Persian mystical poetry the figure of Yusuf (the biblical Joseph), is generally depicted as the transcendental (androgynous) paragon of youthful beauty and purity. In his lyrical poems in the *Divan*, where in hundreds of instances the figure of Yusuf is noted, Yusuf is equated with Shams al-Din Tabrizi.³¹ Shams was the wandering enigmatic mystic who profoundly affected Rumi; the *Divan* in its entirety (more than thirty thousand verses) is inspired by and dedicated to him.³² Shams was the Beloved idealized in human form, the esoteric master who kindles the fire of mystical love in Rumi. As a historical figure, Shams is described as an overpowering charismatic mystic of strange behavior who shocked people with his remarks and harsh words.³³ In fact, his presence in Rumi’s town of Konya and his intense friendship with Rumi caused a disturbance in Rumi’s family

and circle of disciples.³⁴ Perhaps it was Shams’s personal characteristic of agitating the habitual routine that caused the intense attraction between him and Rumi. As if “to shock his listeners out of their complacent, ‘normal’ attitude,” as Annemarie Schimmel puts it, in the *Masnavi* or in his *Divan* Rumi himself utters statements that contradict all logic and orderliness.³⁵

Examples from the *Masnavi* illustrate the point that, far from a symbolic resolution of chaos in an undifferentiated unity, Rumi’s idealized human, the Shaikh, disrupts and agitates the apparently unified and seamless contours of the located subjectivities. The Shaikh functions like a mirror in which the self-absorbing disciple sees his own true self (5:1437). In another passage the body of the Shaikh (or perhaps the “body” of his work, like the *Masnavi*) is likened to a mirror that reflects Divine Creativity in the first place.³⁶ It also reflects the reality of the individual subjects that stand before it back to them. In these examples the body of the Shaikh as a mirror does not merely reproduce the likeness of an already constituted original self. The mirroring effect of the Shaikh’s body shatters the illusions of unity and cohesiveness of the bodies that are reflected in it.

The Phallus and the Androcentric Context of the *Masnavi*

It is uncertain—and in any event irrelevant—how prominent the hermaphrodites were in Rumi’s social milieu; however, his repudiation of the hermaphrodites in the *Masnavi* is

31. Annemarie Schimmel, “Yusuf in Mawlana Rumi’s Poetry,” in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 2, *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 50–59.

32. For a comprehensive examination of historical sources for Shams’s life and teachings, see Franklin Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 134–204.

33. A well-known story about Shams, which is pertinent to the discussion of the contemplation of the Beloved through the visage of a beautiful boy, is the

reported account of his meeting with Awhad al-Din Kirmani (d. ca. 1238). Kirmani was one of the mystical poets who contemplated absolute beauty in the form of an unbearded youth. He told Shams, “I see the reflection of the moon [some versions of the story have the sun] in a vessel filled with water.” Shams rebuked him by saying, “If you have no boil on your neck, why don’t you look at it in the sky?” This story is related in ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahat al-Uns*, Muhammad Tawhidipur (Tehran: Sa’di AH 1336/1957), 59; also see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 313; Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present*, 151–54.

34. Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 19–20; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 313–14. Shams seems to have eventually disappeared, or reportedly murdered, although an investigation of historical sources on his disappearance disputes the murder theory; see Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present*, 185–92.

35. Annemarie Schimmel, “Mawlana Rumi, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5–27.

36. For the concept of the Shaikh and the mirror, see Maria E. Subtelny, “La langue des oiseaux: L’inspiration et le langage chez Rumi” (“The Language of the Birds: Inspiration and Language in the Poetry of Rumi”), in *L’inspiration: Le souffle créateur dans les arts, littératures et mystiques du Moyen Âge européen et proche-oriental* (*Inspiration: The Creative Breath in Art, Literature, and the Mystics in the European and Near Eastern Middle Ages*), ed. Claire Kappler and Roger Grozelier (Paris: CNRS, in press); the English version forthcoming is “The Master behind the Mirror of the Text: Rumi on Inspiration, Initiation, and Language.”

significant for understanding the symbolizing arrangements of this mystical epic.³⁷ The hermaphrodite body is an anomaly that cannot be simply inserted into a signifying process that in some instances can be characterized as phallogocentric, that is, the particular arrangements of signification in which the phallus is the privileged structuring signifier.³⁸ Were it possible to incorporate it into the phallogocentric process of signification, the hermaphrodite body would unsettle a phallogocentric system of signification that is clearly predicated on receptivity and dispossession, symbolized by the feminine on one side and the active-creative impulse symbolized by the masculine on the other. For example, Rumi alludes to this feminine/receptive-masculine/active relationship of symbolization in the context of the sexual encounter during which Moses was conceived. Moses' father tells his wife: "I am like the cloud, you the earth, Moses is the plant" (3:883). The biological function of the hermaphrodite's sexual organs, or lack thereof, is contrary to the premises of phallogocentric signification as found in the *Masnavi*.

The concept of the phallus as articulated by Lacan is an effective conceptual tool for the purpose of engaging the hermeneutics of the *Masnavi*. For example, in the mystical context of the passage about the erotic-mystical encounter of the Universal and the individual souls discussed above (2:1183–84), the Divine creative power corresponds to the phallus, a symbolic configuration that transcends all subjective constructions. In respect to that passage it may be asked, "precisely which part ['organ'] of the Universal soul makes contact with the 'bosom' of the individual soul?" The answer may be articulated as the phallus. In this mystical encounter, analogized in erotic terms, are present the bosom/womb, touch/contact, pearl/seed, and

pregnancy. These obvious elements of erotic-mystical union hint at what is conspicuously absent: the *membrum virile*, the divine creative power analogized as the phallus, whose presence is only implied. Lacan's insight, that in order to function as a signifier, the phallus must be veiled, is most relevant here.³⁹ Thus, the answer to the question of the missing part in the equation of the erotic-mystical encounter of the Universal and the individual soul is clarified in its obfuscation: the presence of the phallus cannot be ruled out, nor can its absence be completely ascertained. However, this much is clear, the phallus is "veiled" in its disclosure in the moment of the "touch/contact" of the Universal soul with the individual soul.

It is by being veiled that the phallus perpetuates the continuity of the process of signification. The phallus is not fantasy or imaginary effect, nor is it an object.⁴⁰ The signifiers try to refer to the signified (in this case, the phallus), but the signified always eludes definite articulation in a particular arrangement of signification. Therefore the signifiers remain associated only with one another, and the exact meaning constantly slips and shifts.⁴¹ The opposite of the continuous process of signification is the literalization of symbols, which reinforces a closure in the process of symbolization. In this phallogocentric system of signification, the penis best represents the static reification of ideals and symbols that should never be literalized. In more than a few passages of the *Masnavi* Rumi likens the imaginary fixation on the external forms to the presence of the penis. For example, in the tale of the prankster and the preacher, where the prankster deceives a woman in a religious gathering to make her touch his penis, Rumi links the self-serving discourse of the preacher to the penis of the prankster (5:3325–50).⁴² In

37. Rowson argues that the category *mukhannās* in medieval Arabic vice lists (which in his opinion can be taken as broadly representative of Middle Eastern societies from the ninth century to the present) had a distinct social identity. They were publicly recognizable, "belonging, like other entertainers, artists, and slave girls, to a kind of demimonde, where public appreciation, and even fame, were accessible, but respectability was emphatically not." See his "Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," 72–73; in his study of "effeminates" in earlier Muslim sources, Rowson concludes, "There is considerable evidence for the existence of a form

of publicly recognized and institutionalized effeminacy or transvestism among males in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabian society." See his "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111 (1991): 671–93.

38. See Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 281–91.

39. *Ibid.*, 288.

40. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143; Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 140.

41. Hence Lacan's argument that there is always a "radical break" between a signifier and any particular signified. See his *Écrits: A Selection*, 154; also see John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Écrits* (New York: International University Press, 1982), 15.

42. For the full translation of this tale, see Nicholson, *Mathnawi*, 6:200–201.

another tale, that of the slave girl who had improper relations with her mistress's donkey, the same connection is established between the deception of the external forms and the donkey's penis (5:1333–1429).⁴³

It is instructive at this point to review the relationship of symbolization between the phallus and the penis to provide a platform for a closer examination of the hermaphrodite body in the phallogocentric context of the *Masnavi*. The symbolic function of the phallus is not entirely disassociated from the biological operations of its corporeal correlate, the penis. It is quite clear that the Lacanian phallus is not an object (even less the penis or clitoris), nor is it an imaginary effect, but it does symbolize the penis or clitoris.⁴⁴ Jane Gallop reiterates Lacan's argument that neither the symbolic phallus nor its separation from the penis is a fantasy: "*Phallus* cannot function as signifier in ignorance of *penis*."⁴⁵ In its erection, penetration, ejaculation, even its physical shape, the penis provides an apt analogy for the symbolizing function of the phallus.

Thus, the phallus is not the penis, but it does symbolize the penis. Judith Butler provides a pertinent articulation of the relationship between the penis and the phallus. She articulates the relationship of symbolization and differentiation between the phallus and the penis as one that presumes and produces the ontological difference between the two. A greater emphasis on the symbolizing (signifying) function of the phallus produces a weaker ontological link between it and the penis. In Butler's words, "Symbolization depletes that which is symbolized of its ontological connection with the symbol itself."⁴⁶ In this dialectical relationship where the range of signifying action of that which symbolizes, that is, the phallus, is dependent on the extent of its differentiation from that which is symbolized, that is, the penis, the penis becomes "the privileged referent to be

negated."⁴⁷ In order to symbolize and signify, the phallus is bound to the penis through what Butler calls "determinate negation"; she writes, "Indeed the phallus would be nothing without the penis."⁴⁸ Thus, the phallus and the penis are linked through negation and identity in which the phallus is dependent on the penis for its signifying action, and the penis, by virtue of not being the phallus, provides the occasion for the signifying activity of the phallus. Butler goes on to argue for the transferability of the phallus, that is, its capacity to symbolize in relation to body parts other than the penis. She suggests that the transferability of the phallus justifies the notion of the lesbian phallus, which otherwise would be a contradictory formulation.⁴⁹

Butler deconstructs the privileged position of the phallus by showing it to be not a complete and originary signifier in itself, but a composite phenomenon dependent on its symbolizing effects. Butler is identifying a significant capacity for adaptation of the Lacanian concept of the phallus to her concerns relating to issues of gender. The same capacity, however, cannot be automatically transferred to the context of the *Masnavi*.

It is important that Rumi's cultural context be kept in view, as Elliot Wolfson points out in relation to the similar concerns in the context of the medieval Kabbalah: "The issue of gender (and body more generally) cannot be isolated from [its particular religious and sociocultural] contexts."⁵⁰ Rumi is writing in the medieval Perso-Islamic cultural context, which is imbued with a predominantly androcentric worldview. In Rumi's androcentric cultural context, the phallus may be viewed as transferable, signifying parts of the body other than the penis or even bodylike objects. However, any part of the body that is signified by the phallus is always related to the masculine discourse of power and authority, if not directly linked to the male

43. For the full translation, see *ibid.*, 6:82–87.

44. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 285. It should be noted that the phallus does not symbolize penis and clitoris in the same way. The phallus symbolizes the clitoris as penis envy, that is, as not having the penis. For the implications of this negative signification, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 263 n. 30.

45. Jane Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 128 (emphasis in original).

46. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 84.

47. *Ibid.* Butler views the dependence of the phallus on the penis in Hegelian terms as "almost a kind of master-slave dialectic." See 263 n. 30.

48. *Ibid.*, 84.

49. *Ibid.*, 57–92.

50. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Woman—the Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Construction of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 166–204.

body.⁵¹ Even when an undoubtedly female organ, like the womb, is put in symbolic communication with the phallus (i.e., re/signified), the male mystic does not assume female characteristics; the function of the female organ is simply appropriated as an analogy of a mystical creativity generated by the Divine contact. Thus the primacy of the male body in the androcentric arrangements of signification is never compromised.

What is the significance of Rumi's androcentric sociocultural context for his esoteric concerns that are expressed in phallogocentric terms? What are the implications of the phallus always privileging the male body in the course of its signifying operation? What is the status of the body in this signifying process if the symbolizing activity of the phallus always designates the penis as the privileged referent—even though this privilege must be negated to avoid closure in the process of signification, and even though the symbolized is clearly displaceable (the phallus may signify other parts of the body than the penis)? To answer these questions, the decidedly androcentric nature of the *Masnavi* must be examined.

To begin with, the representation of women in the *Masnavi* follows the decidedly androcentric cultural context of its composition.⁵² The women in the *Masnavi* embody the negative qualities of the soul. With few exceptions, notably Mary mother of Jesus (6:1884) and the unnamed mother of Moses (3:948–60), the women in the *Masnavi* function as the reminders of the feminine nature of the carnal soul. In this “feminization” of the carnal soul, women are the externalized embodiments of the evils of the carnal soul. The world is likened to a powerful female sorcerer (4:3196) or a ninety-year-old hag with a foul-smelling vagina (4:3149). In a marriage, the wife is “greed and avarice,” the husband is the intellect (1:2903). Women worship color and perfume (5:2466,

4082). They use crying as a snare to trap their husbands (1:2394). Their dream is less than that of a man on account of their deficient intellect and physical weakness (6:4320). Their bodies, like their cunningness and their sexual urges, are presented as uncontrollable. When menstruating, women are like infants who have no control over their bodily discharge; just like the “vile” and “polluted” persons, they may soil the ground on which men pray (2:3424). A man cursing in anger calls another man dog, woman, whore (or a “worthless bitch”) (1:3380). A cunning woman convinces her husband that the sexual intercourse between her and her lover that he is witnessing, is in fact an optical illusion (4:3544–57). A great mystic who has tamed a wild lion, which he rides while using a snake as a whip, is unable to tame his own wife. Power over the wild is granted to him for his forbearance of his wife's unruly and cruel behavior (6:2115–57). Juha's cunning wife lures the notable men of the city into her house with the promise of sexual favors, then extorts money from them (6:4475–4537).⁵³ In addition to viewing women as inherently deficient, the representations of women in the *Masnavi* reflect their negative contribution to the historical narrative of humanity. Rumi writes that it was the mother's sexual urges that caused the descent of man from the high heavens, from being a pure soul to a body (6:2796, 2799). It was a woman who caused Joseph to fall from grace and go to prison, just as a woman caused man to fall from paradise (6:2801). The deception of Satan was unable to work against Adam, but Eve's deceptions succeeded in doing so. The very first blood shed by a human, Cain killing Abel, was for the sake of a woman. Noah, hurt because of his unruly wife, sent a message to his menfolk admonishing them to preserve their religion from the misguided ones (women). According to Rumi, “The deception of women has no end” (6:4470–75).

51. For a pioneering Lacanian study of the phallus as a metaphor of male creativity in medieval Persian panegyric poetry, see Michael Glünz, “The Sword, the Pen, and the Phallus: Metaphors and Metonymies of Male Power and Creativity in Medieval Persian Poetry,” *Edebiyat* 6 (1995): 223–43.

52. For a survey of negative representations of women in Sufism, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 426–35.

53. For a discussion of the literary figure of Juha or Juhi (the Arabic name for Khvaja Nasr al-Din) known for his satirical anecdotes, see Ulrich Marzolph, “Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia,” *Iranian Studies* 28 (1995): 157–74.

These representations of women as unruly, cunning, and desirous physical creatures point to the view of the female body and sexuality as the site of generating chaos and multiplicity. This is in contrast to the male body and sexuality, which are localized in the penis and viewed as the unifying force of law and order. In the context of our contemporary Western feminist discourse of gender and sex, the same plurality and multiplicity of female genitals, desires, and sexuality have been argued to be a strength.⁵⁴ In the androcentric cultural context of Rumi, the multiplicity of the female sex and sexuality is viewed as a liability that along with any other cultural or symbolic plurality and diffusion (like giving in to one's carnal soul for which women's sexuality provides the metaphor in mystical literature) must be contained and subordinated to a phallic primacy (the analogy of which is found in the genitals of the male body). Borrowing from Gallop, we may call this androcentric view of the male anatomy "the unicity of phallogomorphic logic."⁵⁵

The penis plays an important organizing and controlling function in many of the tales in the *Masnavi*, proving that as much as the penis is not the phallus, it is the privileged organ signified by the symbolizing operations of the phallus. Hence, the relationship of negation and identity between the penis and the phallus continues to exert a structuring influence on the androcentric relations of signification. This structuring influence of the penis is particularly evident in its function of organizing relationships. For example, in one tale a woman who satisfies her intense sexual urges with a donkey, dies when the donkey fully inserts his penis into her vagina (5:1333–1429). The donkey's penis functions as the instrument through which the penalty for the woman's transgression is meted out. The tale is premised on a conflictive situation brought about by the unbridled sexual urges of women; also, the possibility of successfully satisfying this unrestrained sexuality through a displacement of the penis of the male body is rehearsed. The penis (of the donkey) is a fetish that disunites and divides, sug-

gesting that the "real" organ, that is, the one symbolized by the phallus, organizes and unites. In this tale the (donkey's) penis regulates the androcentric normality by intervening in a situation that can potentially subvert the interests of the heterosexual economy. The heterosexual economy is regulated through a signifying process based on phallic supremacy in which the penis (of the male body) is signified as the privileged referent. The disruption of the relations of heterosexuality entails the subversion of the organizing function of the penis and the supremacy of its signifier, the phallus. Surely the donkey's penis is not the penis of a man's body, and surely a man's penis is not the phallus, but in that tale the penis takes on the required actions of regulating and controlling. Hence, the penis in the tale functions as a signifier that, in its metonymic contiguity, displaces the human penis.

Another example from the *Masnavi* provides an instance where the penis is mobilized to control and regulate the sexual and class transgression of a Hindu slave. A Hindu slave named Faraj ("Happiness," literally "opening," but also "vagina" if vocalized "Farj") divulges his hope of marrying the daughter of his master (6:249–321). The master arranges for a fake wedding between the slave boy and his daughter, but on the wedding night, he replaces the bride with a coarse beardless man disguised as the bride. In the darkness of the night the boorish man rapes Faraj until daybreak. The next morning, as is the tradition, Faraj is taken to the bath "with his ass torn like a beggar's cloak" (6:310). After the bath the newlyweds are seated beside each other before the whole family, with the daughter of the family now replacing the boorish man. Staring at the bride in disgust, Faraj says, "May no one unite / with such a dreadful evildoer bride as you." And he continues, "During the day your face is fresh like that of young women / at night your horrible penis is worse than a donkey's penis" (6:315).

In this tale, the transgression of the slave is related to his inferior social status as an outsider, signified by such diminutive terms applied to

54. For example, Luce Irigaray argues that female genitals have always been perceived according to male criteria, that is, according to "the sex which is one." See her *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine

Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34–36, 69.

55. Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, 94.

him as “the little slave boy” (6:272) and “the little Hindu” (6:306–8). In anticipation of his transgression of the boundaries of the social body, in an act of racial and sexual violence his own body is violated. The violation of the slave’s body is an act of signifying that his body is different. The slave’s body, then, emerges as a medium that is signified, or “inscribed” with difference and otherness. The inscription is effected through a signifying process that is localized in the penis. The technical device of inscription, the penis, thus retains the significance.⁵⁶ The penis fulfills the same organizational function in this tale as it did in the tale of the woman who had an improper relationship with her donkey—it regulates and controls the limits of sexual and social relations. The penis then is the privileged referent of a signifying process in which the phallus *insists* as the privileged signifier.

It is evident that the hermaphrodite body is an anomaly that cannot fit within this phallogomorphic logic. It neither has a functional penis that can affirm the primacy of the phallus through a determinate negation (“phallicsame,” to borrow from Gallop), nor does it embody the female genitals, the vagina (“phallic-opposite, receptacle, castrated hole”).⁵⁷ The textual evidence that Rumi provides indicates that it is precisely the hermaphrodite’s dysfunctional penis which is evidence of the deceitfulness of his claim (5:2510). In other words, the penis of the hermaphrodite that cannot become erect is the cause of the rejection of the hermaphrodite body. The rejection of the hermaphrodite body is indicative of the privileged position of the male body, particularly the penis, as the privileged referent in all relations of symbolization that originate from the phallus.

It is safe to assume that, when speaking of the phallus, it is only of an erect “organ” that we speak; unless otherwise noted, every mention of the penis in the *Masnavi* is of an erect

penis.⁵⁸ In the tale of the woman who had intercourse with her donkey, the term “prancing about” is used to note that the donkey’s penis is erect (5:3715). The hermaphrodite body (or the impotent man) does not possess the corporeal penis that in its biological functioning (such as erection or penetration) could serve as the analogy of the phallus and its signifying function. Not surprisingly, Rumi calls the hermaphrodite’s penis a *khurtum*, an Arabic term that in Persian denotes both “penis” and “proboscis” or “trunk of an elephant.” In this context, the pliancy of the elephant’s trunk seems to be the point, so *khurtum* can be translated as the “supple penis” or the “penis that cannot stand erect” (6:1428). This is supported by the Arabic term *mukhannas* used by Rumi to designate the category of hermaphrodite or effeminate male (6:1425). As Everett Rowson points out, “The Arabic term *mukhannath* is derived from a root signifying ‘bending, flexibility, languor.’”⁵⁹ The term *mukhannas*, derived from the verb *khanasa* in the first form, indicates pliability, flexibility, and suppleness.⁶⁰

Rumi’s denunciation of the hermaphrodite body or of the impotent man negates the multiplicity of the lived bodies but confirms the phallogocentric orientation that is operative in the *Masnavi*. The hermaphrodite body remains an anomaly that must be rejected and excised from the phallogocentric process of signification. The question that arises is, what is the function of the hermaphrodite body in a phallogocentric system of signification that takes the (erect) penis as the privileged referent? To pose the question differently, what is the function of the hermaphrodite body in a system of signification predicated on the analogy of clearly defined and predictable dualities such as masculine-feminine or active-receptive? Rumi points out that God created hermaphrodite genitals as a kind of reproaching example: “[In regard to the hermaphrodite] God has said: ‘from that hidden vagina of his / We will create a *shullah*

56. In this formulation I am indebted to Paul Conner-ton’s discussion in his *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72–104.

57. Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, 94.

58. For example, there are instances that the penis is noted for its erectile dysfunction (5:3945, 6:4425–26).

59. Rowson, “Medieval Arabic Vice Lists,” 70.

60. Rowson provides a survey of early Muslim lexicographers such as al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad (d. ca. 786), who on the basis of parallel gender ambiguity viewed

mukhannas as a derivative of *khunsa*, meaning hermaphrodite. Later Muslim lexicographers defined the *mukhannas* as an effeminate on the basis of his resemblance to women (e.g., the softness of his voice) or his imitation of women’s behavior. See Rowson, “The Effeminates of Early Medina,” 672–73.

[a vagina or a menstrual cloth] on his [unerec-table] penis [*khurtum*]" (6:1428). The phrase "God has said" is an indication of the Koranic source of Rumi's imagery of *khurtum* in this line.⁶¹ The Koran 68:16 contains the only instance that the term *khurtum* is mentioned. In that chapter, after exposing an unidentified enemy of Muhammad with epithets like "transgressor," "defamer," "base-born" (*zanim*, i.e., born out of wedlock), God tells Muhammad: "We will brand him on the nose."⁶² It is interesting that Rumi uses the term *khurtum* from this verse as a satirical reference to the penis of the hermaphrodite.⁶³ This is another example of reading a sexual meaning into a Koranic verse that originally had no apparent sexual content. It seems that Rumi interprets the verse as, "We will brand him [the enemy of Muhammad] on the penis"; that is, the penis will bear the mark of being a *zanim* (one born out of wedlock), presumably on the Day of Judgment.

The significance of the use of the term *khurtum* in the line from the *Masnavi* lies in the metonymic relationship that is established between penis and nose. In this instance, the nose (likened to the trunk of an elephant) is substituted for the penis. What permits this substitution seems to be the genital ambiguity attributed to the hermaphrodite body, more precisely the ambiguity caused by the biologically nonfunctional penis.⁶⁴ That is to say, the penis of the hermaphrodite must perform its expected function in order to produce effects, and it can perform only when it is erect. In the same vein, the function of the hermaphrodite body in the *Masnavi* is to demonstrate the negative effects and lack of order caused by the confusion of the symbolic analogies of sexed bodies that must remain clearly differentiated. This confirms the privileged position of the penis and the signifying power of the phallus. Not surprisingly, in the case of hermaphrodite, the "dif-

ference" is "inscribed" on his body, more precisely on his unerec-table penis, which is likened to the clearly visible supple trunk of an elephant. This inscription is effected through insertion of the hermaphrodite body into a signifying process that marks it with difference and incongruity. Whether any particular physical aspect attributed to the hermaphrodite (such as unerec-table penis) is real or imagined is irrelevant, because all aspects of the hermaphrodite body are the locus of difference. Rumi mentions the penis, beard, moustache, and "heart filled with unmanliness" (5:2510–11). Other physical aspects of the hermaphrodite body are provided by earlier Muslim lexicographers: languidness of limbs, tenderness, delicacy, and softness of the voice.⁶⁵

Gender of Memory, Body of Secrecy

Privileging the penis in the context of the decidedly androcentric cultural norms in the *Masnavi* would appear to be essentializing the attributes of biological sex and body. Certainly this cannot be the case, because according to Rumi the primary signifiers of the masculine gender, like the penis, do not have an intrinsic predetermined significance in themselves. Nor is it the case that the constructive nature of subjectivity entails voluntarism and freedom of choice. A subject, for example, cannot construct his or her sexuality at will. The complexity of the relationship of symbolization between penis and phallus exceeds the oppositional debates of constructivism versus essentialism. The relationship of signification between the phallus and the penis revolves around the signifying processes of veiling and unveiling of esoteric secrets. The penis in this case is chosen because it is "the most tangible" and "the most symbolic" element in the realm of sexual copulation, as Lacan points out.⁶⁶ The penis, of course, lacks a fixed and intrinsic significance. In fact, as

61. In a footnote to this line, Nicholson confirms the Koranic source of the imagery of *khurtum*. See Nicholson, *Mathnawi*, 6:337 n. 9. In his dictionary of the words and phrases of the *Masnavi*, Sayyid Sadiq Gawharin, too, confirms that this line is an allusion to Koran 68:16; see his *Farhang-i Lughat va Ta'birat-i Masnavi* (*Lexicon of the Words and Interpretations of the Masnavi*) (Tehran: Danishgah Tehran, AH 1337–53/1958–75), 6:72.

62. Koran 68:16.

63. For an instance of the use of this Koranic verse in a satirical—but not sexual—context by the Hanbalite theologian Ibn al-Jawzi (d. ca. 1116), see Ulrich Marzolph, "The Qoran and Jocular Literature," *Arabica* 47 (2000): 478–87.

64. This can be supported by a recent study of a particular group of hermaphrodites in Oman. They are

not considered to be "men," but if they marry and succeed in "perform[ing] intercourse in the male role," and give the traditional proof of defloration of the bride, they can "become" men. See Unni Wikan, *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 168–86.

65. Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," 672–73.

66. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 287.

discussed earlier, any perceived or real significance of the penis as an organ must be negated in order for it to be the privileged referent and to be symbolized by the privileged signifier, the phallus. Thus, it is not the penis as the physical organ, nor the sexuality associated with the physical body, that is at issue here. In psychoanalytic terms, the material properties of sexuality and body are “sublimated” (i.e., they are repositioned as the objects of symbolizing arrangements of signification) into what should be called eroticism.⁶⁷

Phallogocentric esotericism then uses the significatory efficacy of eroticism as a communicative mode of the symbolization of esoteric secrets in such ways that the secretive nature of esotericism is not betrayed. That is to say, the secrets can be neither absolutely hidden nor openly divulged; they must be communicated (for otherwise the secrets might as well not exist) under the veil of signifiers. As Wolfson in the context of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, writes, “The secret is a secret only to the extent that it is concealed in its disclosure, but it may be concealed in its disclosure only if it is disclosed in its concealment.”⁶⁸ Relationships of symbolization, structured along the lines of the erotic relationality of an embodied and gendered subject, mimetically repeat the process of the disclosure of secrets in their very concealment. Eroticism is a mode of relation predicated on the indefinite deferral of consummation. In esoteric terms, this means that the communication of secrets is not an event, but an ongoing process, a structure of differential signification in which the ultimate disclosure of the secrets (or consummation in erotic terms) is always deferred—one that is similar to the symbolizing function of the phallus. The claim of an open and definitive disclosure of secrets is an illusory conceit that amounts to a closure in the process of symbolization.

It is evident that a crude understanding of sexuality as an urge that is resolved and fulfilled in consummative intercourse holds no sway in esoteric concerns. Sexuality as an intense uncontrollable urge, an example of which is given in the tale of the slave girl who engaged in sexual intercourse with a donkey (5:1333–1429), may as well be fetishistically satisfied with the penis of a donkey. In that tale, Rumi gives the practical advice that to satisfy sexual urges one must eat less or get married (5:1373). Just as desire for the imaginary occasion of a full disclosure of secrets may as well be fulfilled through a closed literal interpretation. This is not to discount or negate the role of sexed and gendered bodies as the bearers of cultural signification, but to highlight the function of the bodies as arenas of “intractability” and “contestability” that offer the very condition of a disclosure of secrets.⁶⁹ The viability of the modes of disclosure of secrets in their concealment is posited on the irreconcilability and insurmountable differences of the bodies and their sexualities.

The body is not merely a passive recipient, a tabula rasa; it can display resistance at the level of signification and be a signifying body, even as it is being signified. The hermaphrodite body is one example of a body that resists assimilation into a phallogocentric process of signification. However, the resistance of the hermaphrodite body does not disrupt the signifying operations of the phallus. As an anomaly and a reproaching example, the hermaphrodite body is cited as a support for a signifying system organized around the privileged function of the phallus. Resistance can also be discerned in the *Masnavi*'s composition, where the strict rules of meter and prosody that were imported into Persian from Arabic are occasionally overlooked.⁷⁰ It is as if in this orderly celebration of disorder, the *Masnavi* celebrated the materiality and variability of the contested category of the body (of the

67. Whereas Freud viewed sublimation as the re-channeling of suppressed sexual drives into socially acceptable objects or activities, Lacan argues that sublimation is a change, linguistic in nature, in the position of the object in the arrangements of signification. See Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), 69–70; and Jacques Lacan,

The Seminar, bk. 7, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 293.

68. Wolfson, “Occultation of the Feminine,” 119.

69. These two terms are used by Butler in her discussion of the constraints put on the symbolic limits of sexuality and performativity of gender. See her *Bodies That Matter*, 93–95.

70. In her study of the mystical lyrics of Rumi's *Divan*, Fatemeh Keshavarz identifies many instances of overlooking principles of literary decorum that give the appearance of chaos to many poems of the *Divan*; she calls these poems “celebrations of disorderliness.” See her *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 98.

text), in which the ultimate matter of secrecy remains permanently suspended. Even incorporating vulgar words and pornographic tales into one of the most celebrated Persian mystical texts may be viewed as a form of resistance against literary decorum and the conventions of mystical poetry. It is as if Rumi intended to subvert the totalizing operations of a signifying system that has a vested interest in erasing the words that are deemed nonmystical. This subversion is effected through intentionally introducing a tension in the mystical flow of the text, which upsets the rigid boundaries that set apart the categories of mystical and nonmystical. Hence, the significance of that which has been neglected is inscribed into the texture of resistance.⁷¹ The text becomes a site of pluralized meaning-production resisting the potential closure in the process of interpretation. Symbolically, the *Masnavi* has no end—after more than twenty-five thousand lines of poetic interpretation it ends abruptly in the middle of an unfinished story.

As expected, the resisting bodies may be marginalized or erased, as in the case of the hermaphrodite or the vulgar words used in the *Masnavi*, or punished, as in the case of the body of the “little Hindu slave.”⁷² The totalized models of subjectivity produce reductionist mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. Through this selective process, that which upholds the status of a particular subject as complete and originary is memorialized. By staging bodies that are contested and variable, Rumi demonstrates that memory is variable and contested.⁷³ Hence, the process of knowledge-production can be linked to the ways of remembering, when memory is defined as the subjective reconstruction (remembrance) of knowledge in unimpeded ways that sustains the open-endedness of signification.

Through an open system of interplay of remembering and forgetting, the material categories of the body can become vehicles for the transmission of secrets. Since these categories are variable and lack inherent significance, knowledge of them (constructed through the process of signification) is variable and contingent, which means memory itself is selective and variable. Put in the context of communication, that is, the veiling and unveiling of the secrets, the knowledge of secrets is always contingent and variable. No single signifying configuration can fully capture the secrets. Hence, remembrance is a process of recovering secrets, but only if this recovery is understood to be a re-covering. Since memory is selective and variable, and that which is to be remembered is inassimilable into a unified and autonomous symbolic form, memory is a symbolic configuration at best. Here the importance of the hermeneutics of symbols (in this context, remembering that cultural configurations, through which the recollection of the secrets is effected, are veils), and the role of an esoteric master in giving a symbolic direction to the interplay of remembering and forgetting, can be highlighted.

It is significant that Rumi makes a linguistic connection between remembrance (*zīkr*) and the penis (*zakar*), which, except for the unwritten vowels, are spelled exactly the same way. In one tale, the intention of a man for intercourse with a woman is described as, “He remembered her and his penis became erect” (5:3943).⁷⁴ In another passage Rumi notes that a hermaphrodite was delighted to see a penis, because “his religion and his spiritual chant [*zīkr*, literally “remembrance”] is not but for the penis [*zakar*]” (2:3151). In these examples, Rumi draws attention to the etymological link between remembrance (*zīkr*) and penis (*zakar*).

71. This significance does not lie in the crudity of these words, which is to negate the centrality of a social-egalitarian dimension to Rumi's act of resistance. The significance of the bawdy passages lie in their symbolic function for unsettling the exclusionary discourses of control and domination that bring about imaginary closure in the process of signification.

72. *Masnavi* 6:249–321, discussed above.

73. In respect to the same phenomena of memory and forgetfulness in the context of the *Zohar*, Wolfson remarks, “Collective memory, no less than individual memory, is shaped as much by what is forgotten as by what is remembered.” See his “Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the *Zohar*,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron,

and David N. Myers (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 214–48. In addition to Wolfson's “Re/membering the Covenant,” I have benefited from his discussions in his *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 49–52.

74. “*Zīkr-i u kard-u zakar bar pay kard.*”

Technically, Rumi is employing the rhetorical figure of *tajnis* (homonymic pun), which is frequently used in medieval Persian poetry.⁷⁵ More specifically, the link between remembrance (*zīkr*) and penis (*zakar*) is demonstrated in a *tajnis-i naqis*, “defective homonymy,” in which two identically spelled terms are distinguished only by their vowels. It is important to keep in mind that in Persian texts the vowels are omitted. Hence, on the surface, the term denoting penis and memory look exactly the same; they are both spelled *z-k-r*. However, the “defective” link that is established between the two can be interpreted as a critique of the mode of perception that is based on the external forms, or on that which can be seen by the external eyes only. This is in keeping with Rumi’s usual rejection of the deficiency of the “external eyes.” For example, the introductory lines of the tale of the slave girl and the donkey (5:1333–1429) announce that this tale is an exposition of the disastrous consequences of deficiency in respect to vision and an exegetical approach to the Koran 24:61 and 48:17: “There is no blame on the blind.” Rumi notes that those who are deficient (*naqis*) in their external eye are forgiven by God, but that “every deficient person is cursed; which means every deeper insight and understanding which is deficient is cursed.”

The deficiency that is established through the rhetorical figure of *tajnis-i naqis* between remembrance and penis suggests that the deficient ways of remembering are always related to external forms. If one adds that the *Masnavi*’s general view of women as deficient creatures in respect to their bodies and their insight and understanding, it is not far-fetched to claim a feminine gender for forgetfulness. Women are commonly viewed as infants with deficient intellect and associated with the carnal soul (1:2618; 2:2270–73, 3061, 3425). The difference between men and women is not physical strength, or the power and opportunity to earn a living

(otherwise lions and elephants would be superior to humans), but that men are more mindful of the end (4:1618–19). Women are also associated with the material world (4:3196) or the earth (3:885). This adds a spatial dimension to remembrance and forgetting. The material world, characterized as feminine, becomes the locus of forgetfulness.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The bodies and sexualities in the *Masnavi* are not denaturalized or essentialized in a single transcendental androgynous configuration. Neither does the contestability of the body equal its abandonment—just as the primacy of the inner meaning does not entail discarding the literal sense, that is, the “body” of the text. Rather, in the *Masnavi* the agency of the body is affirmed and mobilized for the purpose of revealing esoteric secrets under the veil of the materiality and contestability of the body. In the continuous process of the disclosure of secrets in their concealment, the contours of the body may control and compel the “shape” of the secret; that is, traces of its movement may be intimated now and then in certain relations of symbolization. However, the hidden content of secrecy cannot be determined with certainty, for it eludes apprehension permanently.

The secret is ceaselessly bound to the symbolic systems of signification that in their differential modes of relationality reveal the secret in its concealment. Among the multiplicity of symbolic systems operative in the *Masnavi* is a phallogocentric mode of signification, where the phallus functions as an esoteric symbol. Lacan’s theory of signification, which foregrounds the phallus as the privileged signifier, is a relevant conceptual tool for understanding the structuring influence of the phallus in certain passages in the *Masnavi*. The signifying operations within any configuration that is structured by the phallus are dependent on the

75. For the rhetorical figure of *tajnis*, see Jalal al-Din Huma’i, *Funun-i Balaghat va Sana’at-i Adabi (Sciences of Eloquence and Literary Craft)* (Tehran: Huma, AH 1374/1993), 50.

76. In regard to a corresponding dimension in the *Zohar*, Wolfson argues: “In the place of the masculine, which is the supernal covenant or the phallus, there is no forgetfulness, for this gradation is the ontological locus of memory. Beneath this gradation, however, there is a place [which corresponds to the feminine presence] wherein forgetfulness is operative.” See his “Re/membering the Covenant,” 225.

communicative interplay between interrelated symbolic levels of significance (like “masculine and feminine” or “active and receptive”). The dynamic interplay of aversion and inclination, repulsion and attraction, cruelty and mercy, sublimation and literalization, or remembering and forgetting, points to the interplay of the concealment and disclosure of esoteric secrets that links esotericism with eroticism.

In some passages in the *Masnavi* the mystic’s creative impulse is analogized by certain characteristics commonly ascribed to the male gender, such as the ability to engage in physical combat. These “masculine” characteristics correlate to sexual prowess and potency, exemplified by the function of the penis. The mystic’s act of divinely inspired creativity (e.g., in the form of his literary output) is analogized as the biological function of birthing in the female body. The symbolic value of manliness is thus related to gendered and embodied constructions, but it is not reducible to them. It may be argued then, in the androcentric context of the *Masnavi*, where male experience is privileged and prioritized, that memory is viewed as a masculine phenomenon. It may even be argued that, in instances where the phallus functions as an esoteric symbol, meaning-production (the revealing and concealing of secrets), framed as a process of remembering, is analogized as a phallic act. The validity of these suppositions depends on the possibility of considering “masculine” in its symbolic significance as a hermeneutical category stripped of its cultural residue and contextual sediment. Rumi is relentless in his constant emphasis on the irreducibility of inner meanings to their contextual and relational representations. However, whether he himself is entirely successful in always transcending his cultural context is a matter of debate. S