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Phallogocentric Esotericism in a Tale from Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi-yi Ma'navi*

The *Masnavi-yi Ma'navi*, the Mystical Epic of the great thirteenth century Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), contains explicit sexual images and bawdy tales that seem to have posed a problem for readers, commentators, and interpreters alike.¹ When these “pornographic” tales are not completely overlooked, scholars view them as lacking mystical significance and as disrupting the mystical flow of the text. This paper is an assessment of Rumi's modes of communicating esoteric secrets in a virtually unexplored bawdy tale in the *Masnavi*, the Tale of the Prankster who Donned the Veil and Sat among the Women during a Religious Gathering (5:3325–3350). I will begin with a survey of the established readings of the *Masnavi* in which the presence of the bawdy tales has been noted. In order to situate Rumi's bawdy tales in their historical context, a discussion of the instances and purposes of bawdy material in medieval Persian literature will follow.

It is my contention that this tale is an example of phallogocentric esotericism, that is, the phallus functioning as an esoteric symbol, and Rumi is the only mystic of medieval Persia whose work includes representation of the phallus as an esoteric symbol. I will use relevant features of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theories as strategic conceptual tools to substantiate the esoteric significance of this tale. The subjects of Rumi's mystical discourse and Lacan's psychoanalytical concepts are worlds apart. Thus, a portion of this paper is dedicated to providing justification for the methodology of this paper. It is hoped that an examination of the function of the phallus for the system of signification that is operative in this tale will help to unravel the dichotomy between the mystical and that which canonical appraisals of the *Masnavi* have deemed “obscene” and “non-mystical.”

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¹Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, ed. and trans. with critical notes and commentary R. A. Nicholson (London, 1925–40). All references to the *Masnavi* are indicated in the text by book number followed by line number; all of the translations are mine.

Interpretations of Bawdy Passages in the Masnavi

Medieval commentators of the *Masnavi* have simply bypassed the bawdy tales. For example, in his abridged anthology of the *Masnavi* entitled *Lubb-i Lubab-i Masnavi*, the fifteenth century Persian preacher and polymath, Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi (d. 1504–05), does not include the *Masnavi*'s bawdy tales and sexual imagery.² In the recent studies and anthologies of medieval Persian literature, the presence of explicit sexual imagery and bawdy material in the *Masnavi* has not gone unnoticed. Some studies have situated the *Masnavi*'s sexual imagery in the general category of metaphors for mystical love.³ Others like J. Christoph Bürgel have viewed the function of the bawdy tales and vulgar words in the *Masnavi* as symbolic opposites of the sublime.⁴ Annemarie Schimmel views the bawdy tales of the *Masnavi* as a literary device exploited by a master storyteller to create “a very fascinating way of getting the audience’s interest.”⁵ Reynold Nicholson attributes these tales to “the failing power” of an aging mystic, and in his monumental English translation of the *Masnavi*, he translates the sexual references into Latin.⁶ Nicholson seems to view Rumi’s *Masnavi* as somewhat inferior to the supreme mystical quality of the *Divan*. He writes that in the *Divan*, Rumi “soars higher; yet we must read the *Mathnavi* in order to appreciate all the range and variety of his genius.”⁷

Thus, the contemporary commentators of the *Masnavi* have generally dismissed the esoteric significance of its explicit sexual imagery. For example, in his anthology of obscene tales in Persian literature, Paul Sprachman categorizes these tales among the “forbidden” and “obscene” works of Persian literature.⁸ Muhammad Isti’lami, a contemporary scholar of medieval Persian literature, notes that the bawdy tales in the *Masnavi* are platforms for deeper discussions and the more “refined” didactic lessons that follow them.⁹ Another contemporary scholar, Abdulhusain Zarrinkub, very briefly notes that these few “distasteful/vulgar”

²Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi, *Lubb-i Lubab-i Masnavi* (Tehran, 1341/1940).

³Examples of these include William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, 1983) 163–170 and 286–310 and Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relations in Islamic Thought* (Albany, 1992), 14.

⁴J. Christoph Bürgel, “‘Speech is a Ship and Meaning the Sea’: Some Formal Aspects of the Ghazal Poetry of Rumi,” *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. A. Banani, R. Hovannisian and G. Sabagh (Cambridge, 1994), 46.

⁵Annemarie Schimmel *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany, 1993), 51.

⁶Nicholson, *Mathnavi*, 6:vii. Rumi was around seventy years of age when most of these tales in Book 5 were composed. The historical reason for Nicholson’s decision is perhaps found in the Victorian prudishness of his time. However, translating them into Latin in effect renders these tales obscure to modern English readers.

⁷Nicholson, *Mathnavi*, 6:ix.

⁸Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology of Forbidden Literature* (Costa Mesa, California, 1995), 26–7.

⁹Muhammad Isti’lami, *Masnavi: Muqaddima va Tablil* (Tehran, 1370/1991), 5:281–284, 5:371–2.

tales are from the bawdy tales of the common people and are indicative of the “violence of their taste.”¹⁰ These statements, which are characteristic of most commentaries on the *Masnavi* that mention the bawdy tales, admit a dichotomy between the didactic message and the explicit sexual imagery of the tales. There is no attempt to identify an esoteric dimension in the bawdy tales and in their explicit sexual imagery.¹¹

Bawdy Tales in Medieval Persian Literature

Annemarie Schimmel notes that *bazl* poems (bawdy, facetiae) with their coarse satire and vulgar language have been “a source of great chagrin” to historians of Persian literature.¹² The compiler of one anthology of obscene tales and anecdotes of medieval Persian literature has felt compelled to point out that these tales and images have nothing to do with the refined character of the Iranian nation and Persian culture.¹³ The development of obscene literature in Persian followed the literary convention of bawdy (*bazl*) in Arabic, itself a progression out of the tradition of satire (*hajv*, verbal aggression) going back to pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁴ Some panegyrist-satirist poets, like Shams al-Din Muhammad Suzani (d. 1166), are mainly known for their bawdy tales and obscene verses.¹⁵ Bawdy and obscene material is found in the works of some Sufi authors of medieval Persia, like Sa’di of Shiraz (d. ca. 1292), Sana’i of Ghazna (d. 1131), and ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492).¹⁶ However, their use of such material for mystical ends is hardly accompanied by vulgar words.

Sa’di’s obscene material has been viewed as spurious, and when not entirely omitted, it has been relegated to the end of edited collections of his work

¹⁰Abdulhusain Zarrinkub, *Sirr-i Nay: Naqd va Sharh-i Tablili va Tatbiqi-i Masnavi* (Tehran, 1364/1985), 1:298.

¹¹With the popularity of Rumi in the West, the “commercialized” productions of translated bawdy tales strip them even from the meaning of the non-pornographic passages that precede or follow them. Coleman Barks’ translations are good examples; see his *Delicious Laughter: Rambunctious Teaching Stories from the Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Athens, 1990).

¹²Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 23.

¹³Robert Surieu, *Sarv-e Naz: An Essay on Love and the Representation of Erotic Themes in Ancient Iran*, trans. J. Hogarth (Geneva, 1967).

¹⁴Aziz Allah Kasib describes *hajv* in classical Persian poetry as the “ugly legacy” of Arabs. See his *Chashmandaz-i Tarikhi-i Hajv: Zaminaba-yi Tanz va Hija dar Shīr-i Farsi* (Tehran, 1366/1987), 45; for the use of worldly imagery such as wine, youthful beauty, and profane love in the early Arabic poetry for expressions of factionalism, parody, satirical panegyrics, or mystical concepts, see, J. W. Wright Jr., “Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire in Early ‘Abbasid Poetry,” *Homeropticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright Jr. and E. K. Rowson (New York, 1992), 1–23.

¹⁵For Suzani, see Edward G. Brown, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge, 1964), 2:342–343.

¹⁶For some examples of the use of erotic material or entertainment to lighten the seriousness of mystical quest, see Fritz Meier, *Abu Sa’id-i Abu’l Hayr* (Tehran, 1976), 205–6.

under the title “*Khubsīyyat va Majālis al-Hazl*” (*Coarse Things and Facetiae*).¹⁷ In Muhammad ‘Ali Furughi’s 1961 edition, that contains this section, begging for forgiveness from God, Sa’di apologetically notes that he was obliged to write a book of bawdy tales, the way Suzani has done, otherwise he would be killed.¹⁸ A careful reading of this section indicates that, as stated in the preface, Sa’di has no intention of conveying any secrets or esoteric knowledge.

Despite the mixture of religious and profane in Sana’i’s poetry, he does not use vulgar words or sexual imagery for esoteric purposes. He uses obscene and vulgar words in his *hajn* (verbal aggression) verses, which have no mystical goal.¹⁹ Even the *hajn* verses in his mystical *Hadiqa al-Haqiqā* (“*The Enclosed Garden of Truth*”) are no doubt non-mystical.²⁰ Aside from *hajn* verses, there are some tales in the *Hadiqa* that contain obscene imagery. These tales could be considered under the general category of mysticism. For example, there is the story of Khvaja of Herat, whose sexual intercourse with a boy in the mosque is interrupted by an ascetic who severely rebukes him for this shameful act. As the Khvaja turns away in shame to leave the mosque he notices the pious man himself engaging in the sexual act with the same young boy. There are no vulgar words used and the orientation of the tale leads to the conclusion that the hypocrisy of the self-righteous man is worse than the shameful act of the Khvaja inside the mosque. Other than pointing out the hypocrisy of the pious pretender that makes his moral authority questionable, Sana’i is not engaged in the disclosure of esoteric secrets. Hence, de Bruijn is correct in his assessment of Sana’i as a homiletic poet whose poetry served the preaching of Muslim piety.²¹

A comparison might sooner be made between Rumi’s bawdy tales in the *Masnavi* and Jami’s mystical work, the *Haft Awrang* (*The Seven Thrones*), which consists of seven books written in the *masnavi* style.²² Two of the books take sexual passion between a man and a woman as their theme, but no vulgar words are used. The sexual intercourse between the two lovers in *Salaman va*

¹⁷See Shaykh Mushrif al-Din Sa’di, *Kullīyyat-i Sa’di Shirāzi*, ed. M. ‘A. Furughi, intro. ‘Abbas Iqbal (Tehran, 1340/1960); reprint, without Iqbal’s introduction and “*Khubsīyyat va Majālis al-Hazl*” (Tehran, 1369/1990), 1–36—all references are to the 1340/1960 print.

¹⁸Sa’di, *Kullīyyat*, “*Khubsīyyat va Majālis al-Hazl*,” 1.

¹⁹One line from his *Divan* should suffice to show how vulgar (and non-mystical) Sana’i’s *hajn* could be. Taking someone as the target of his *hajn*, he writes: “May your beard be in the vagina of a menstruating woman/May a donkey’s penis be in the vagina of your father’s wife.” See Abu al-Majd Majdud Ibn Adam Sana’i Ghaznavi, *Divan*, ed. M. T. Mudarris Razavi (Tehran, 1341/1962) 1052.

²⁰Abu al-Majd Majdud Ibn Adam Sana’i Ghaznavi, *Hadiqa al-Haqiqā wa Shari’a al-Tariqa*, ed. M. T. Mudarris Razavi (Tehran, 1359/1980). The first book of *Hadiqa* is translated by Major J. Stephenson as *Hadiqatun’l Haqiqat, or The Enclosed Garden of the Truth* (Calcutta, 1910); see also *The Walled Garden of Truth*, trans. D. Pendlebury (London, 1974).

²¹De Bruijn, *Of Piety and Poetry*, 169–170. This is not to diminish his importance to the later development of Sufi poetry. Certainly the beginnings of mystical contemplation in the *ghazal* and the *masnavi* of medieval Persian poetry can be traced to Sana’i.

²²Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Masnavi-i Haft Awrang*, ed. M. M. Gilani (Tehran, 1337/1958).

Absal, for example, is described with a poetical grace that is typical of Persian mystical poetry.²³ The passages dealing with an intimate sexual encounter between the two lovers in *Yusuf va Zulaykha* are devoid of vulgar words or coarse imagery.²⁴ Even the story of a desperate man who commits bestiality and is berated by Satan in the *Silsila al-Dhabab* (*Chains of Gold*), the first book of the *Haft Awrang*, is told without the use of any vulgar words.²⁵ The tale is presented as a parable with the moral inference that even Satan has not thought of this vile act before. Chapter Six of Jami's *Babaristan* (*Abode of Spring*), which is devoted to bawdy tales, is devoid of any mystical import.²⁶ This could be clearly discerned from the tales and anecdotes of this chapter. One short example should suffice to illustrate the point. A "smart" guy tells a child, happy at his father's return from a long journey, that the happiest is "your mother's vagina."²⁷

As the examples of Sa'di, Sana'i and Jami show, mystical inferences are conveyed through worldly imagery, but not by obscene or vulgar words. Their bawdy tales and obscenities are collected in a separate section or a different book, usually with introductions that include justifications and apologies in defense of composing such material. Vulgar words and crude pornographic imagery are not used primarily for mystical purposes. Thus the ambivalence toward Rumi's bawdy tales and obscene imagery is understandable. The worldly imagery of Persian mystical poetry remained limited to wine, intoxication, and the erotic and homoerotic motifs of youthful love, legitimized by theoretical works of Sufis like 'Ali Hujwiri (d. 1073).²⁸ However, there is no evidence that any mystic perceived esoteric significance in the phallus (penis). It is possible to detect a phallocentric orientation in the sword and the pen imagery of the panegyric poems, as the pioneering study of Michael Glünz using psychoanalysis demonstrates.²⁹ However, there is no evidence of phallocentric

²³ Jami, *Haft Awrang*, *Salaman va Absal*, 342.

²⁴ Jami, *Haft Awrang*, *Yusuf va Zulaykha*, 683. The account of the same sexual encounter in Sa'di's *Bustan* is even more austere in describing the situation, see Sa'di, *Kulliyat*, 236–237.

²⁵ Jami, *Haft Awrang*, *Silsila al-Dhabab*, 109.

²⁶ Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Babaristan* (Tehran, 1340/1960); also see *The Beharistan: Abode of Spring*, no trans. (Benares, 1887); surprisingly, Jami is completely absent in Sprachman's anthology. After 'Ubaid Zakani (d. ca. 1370), Sprachman makes a leap of several centuries to Iraj Mirza (1874–1924)—see Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, 76. Elsewhere Sprachman writes: "A jump from the fourteenth century to modern times will perhaps seem somewhat precipitous, and one may ask what happened in the intervening six centuries. For our purposes, the answer is, 'Very little.'" See his "Persian Satire, Parody and Burlesque," *Persian Literature*, ed. E. Yarshater (Albany, 1988), 238.

²⁷ "kuss-i madarat," Jami, *Babaristan*, 77.

²⁸ See 'Ali B. 'Uthmani al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (1911; reprint, England, 1970), 393–420; for an historical overview of the legitimacy of the use of worldly imagery in poetry and preaching, see Franklin Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Oxford, 2000), 309–313.

²⁹ 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): 223–243.

esotericism in Persian Sufi literature. It is my contention that Rumi's tale of the prankster and the preacher is an exception. This tale, like other bawdy material of medieval Persian literature, contains a cultural component of humor or a social aspect of satire and moral and ethical teachings.³⁰ However, the primary function of vulgar words used in this tale is for mystical purposes. It would be a mistake to view bawdy material in the *Masnavi* as a "mixture" of sacred and profane.³¹ For Rumi there is nothing "profane" about the coarse imagery and vulgar words he uses. In the *Masnavi* he writes: "*Haẓl* (bawdy) is instruction, listen to it in seriousness/Do not be taken up with its exterior jest (*baẓl*)" (4:3558). In other words, these bawdy tales do not serve the purpose of satirizing a rival, or entertaining a patron. Rumi is the only medieval Perso-Islamic mystic whose work includes phallogocentric esotericism.

The intricacies of Rumi's ingenious strategy of using pornographic tales have never been explored. The question remains: how may the lofty goals of conveying mystical knowledge and unveiling esoteric secrets be reconciled with the use of vulgar words and crude sexual imagery? One strategy for investigating the esoteric significance of the tale of prankster and the preacher is to think outside the field of Persian studies and explore other venues of inquiry, which offer new possibilities for examining the text.

The Methodology: The Relevance of Lacan's Theory of Signification

Particularly relevant to an analysis of the phallogocentric esotericism in the tale of the prankster and the preacher (5:3325–3350) are the works of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's inquiry into the religious dimensions of subjectivity and his theory of signification offer great potential for interpreting the esoteric significance of this tale. The question may be asked, why Lacan and his psychoanalytical theories?

It is specifically Lacan's notion of the phallus as the signifier of desire that makes it most relevant for elucidating the phallogocentric orientation operative in this tale in the *Masnavi*. In a mystical context, the phallus can be viewed as the signifier of esoteric secrets.³² The question may be asked: On what basis can the signifier of desire, the phallus, be taken to be the signifier of esoteric knowledge? It is evident that the transition from proposing the phallus as "the signifier of desire" to "the signifier of esoteric secrets" is not a simple substitution of one term (desire) with another (esoteric secrets). There are certain theoretical

³⁰For a general discussion of humor in the socio-political satire of classical Persian literature, see Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (London, 1988), 99–135; also see 'Ali Asghar Halabi, *Mughaddima-i bar Tanẓ va Shukh-Tab'i dar Iran* (Tehran, 1364/1985), 45–96.

³¹Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, 26.

³²For a similar use of Lacan's concept of the phallus, see Elliott R. Wolfson's interpretations of medieval Jewish kabbalistic texts in his "Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah," *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. E. R. Wolfson (New York, 1999), 113–154; also see his *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, 1995).

underpinnings that uphold the articulation of the latter formula in psychoanalytical terms. It is particularly important to unpack Lacan's concept of the phallus and his definition of desire in order to understand the epistemological shift of the subject of signification from desire to esoteric secrets.

Whereas Freud's work abounds with references to the penis, Lacan prefers to use the term phallus in order to emphasize its symbolic reality. Lacan identifies the phallus as a signifier "because it is the most tangible element in the realm of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term."³³ The phallus is the signifier of desire because it actively determines desire in the signifiable.³⁴ In other words, the presence of the phallus as signifier conditions the effects in the signifiable.³⁵ The phallus is not fantasy or imaginary effect, nor is it an object: "it is even less the organ, penis or clitoris that it symbolizes."³⁶ It is the privileged signifier, the signifier which has no signified.³⁷

It is important to understand the link between desire and that which psychoanalysis designates as "the drives." The drives could appear as demand or as need.³⁸ Demand is the articulation of need; however, unsatisfied need that emerges through demand turns into desire. Lacan points out that desires are unfulfilled, hence alienated needs (i.e., alienated from the subject because they submit to the exigencies of language when they are articulated, or turned into "signifying forms").³⁹ Thus, the drives are variably organized, not according to an opposition between different kinds of drives, but in terms of a distinction between their symbolic or their imaginary (illusory) orientations. The variable mode of organizing the drives makes them symbolic or imaginary constructs that are contingent upon the intersubjective and intrasubjective life history of the subject (i.e., the internal representation of interpersonal relations).⁴⁰ The drives are variable and can never be satisfied because their purpose is not to reach a goal or to be focused on an object. The drives continually circle around their goal or object, taking the repetitive movement of their closed circuit as the real source of enjoyment.⁴¹

³³Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, 1977), 287.

³⁴Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 263.

³⁵Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 284.

³⁶Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 285.

³⁷Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1996), 143.

³⁸This is related to Lacan's argument that the human subject is constituted by three modes of psychical organizations, or "registers." These three are the register of the Symbolic (the order of language), the Imaginary (the order of the visual), and the Real (the order not captured or controlled by the Symbolic or the Imaginary). The drives appear in each register as desire, demand, and need. See Mark Bracher, "Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Postmodernism," *Psychoanalysis at Its Limits: Navigating the Postmodern Turn*, ed. A. Elliott and C. Spezzano (London, 2000), 149.

³⁹Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 286.

⁴⁰DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 45.

⁴¹Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 46–47.

Desire requires recognition and originates from its “object,” which implies that desire requires the full participation of at least one other person.⁴² This highlights the importance of the communicative resources of the relevant culture, including speech. In fact, Lacan characterizes the postponed presence of desire in speech by the linguistic process of continual deferral that describes the action of metonymy. He writes: “. . . desire *is* metonymy.”⁴³ Metonymy defines the relation of signifiers based on a combination of “word-to-word,” that is, a word displacing another in a signifying chain.⁴⁴ Desire is recognized only through symbolization, which means it must be articulated, and hence it must submit to the exigencies of language.⁴⁵ However, there is a fundamental incompatibility between desire and speech because desire cannot be fully captured (i.e., articulated) in speech. The subject’s desire is thus forever afterwards bound up with the play of symbols or the laws of language. Put differently, the realization of desire is continually deferred, for there is always something of desire that eludes articulation in speech.⁴⁶ Thus, there is always a gap between desire and its symbolic representation, which leads Lacan to conclude that desire is not a relation to an object, but a relation to a lack. In other words, desire is not something to be fulfilled or satisfied. Desire, in Lacan’s words, is always “desire for something else.”⁴⁷ The object of desire, then, is not that which can be attained, but it is that “something else.” The “lack,” in relation to which desire is situated, is located in the subject. If lack is positioned within the subject, desire must necessarily originate from without. Desire, hence, is not desire of the subject, in Lacan’s words: “desire is the desire of the Other.”⁴⁸

The complexity of Lacan’s notion of the phallus and the “hermeneutical obscurity” of his writing have led to different reactions among theorists.⁴⁹ It is precisely these differences that must be highlighted, for they characterize the points of relevance of Lacan’s theory to the interpretation of mystical texts. Lacan has been viewed both as a model and as an opponent of postmodernism.⁵⁰

⁴²DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 45.

⁴³Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 175, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader’s Guide to Écrits* (New York, 1982), 12–13; Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 113–114.

⁴⁵Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 275.

⁴⁶Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 36.

⁴⁷Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 167.

⁴⁸Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 264. Commentators on Lacan, like Muller and Richardson, have noted that it is not quite clear how Lacan arrives at this conclusion. Muller and Richardson also note that the “Other” in this conclusion is not necessarily “someone” of whom a demand is made, hence they write: “We are left to our own resources here to understand how the subject’s desire is ‘desire of the other.’” See their *Lacan and Language*, 281–282; Evans also explains several complementary ways that his oft-repeated formula can be understood. See his *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 37–39.

⁴⁹Muller and Richardson, for example, find this hermeneutical obscurity as being “all the more infuriating for being so deliberate.” See their *Lacan and Language*, 3.

⁵⁰For a discussion of why Lacan has been variably identified as a product of Enlightenment and a modernist or postmodernist, see Bracher, “Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Postmodernism,” 145–172.

Some feminist writers have objected that Lacan's privileging of the phallus favors the upholding of the patriarchal order.⁵¹ Others have identified an advantage in the symbolic phallus, clearly distinguished from the biological penis in Lacanian theory, for accounting for the gender differences that are not reducible to biology.⁵² The French post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida proposes another major objection to Lacan's concept of the phallus. Derrida argues that Lacan's privileging of the phallus as a transcendental signifier is incongruent with his stance that signifiers have meaning only in relation to one another (i.e., by their differences from other signifiers).⁵³ Evans sums up Derrida's objection as: "The phallus . . . reintroduces the metaphysics of presence which Derrida denominates as logocentrism, and thus Derrida concludes that by articulating this with phallogocentrism, Lacan has created a phallogocentric system of thought."⁵⁴ In Derrida's works, "metaphysics" and "presence" are used in a pejorative sense, which combined with "logocentrism" denotes the privileging of a closed or totalized mode of interpretation that excludes alternative perspectives.⁵⁵ The complexity of Lacan's concept of the phallus contributes to the validity of all these objections and arguments.

Lacan and Derrida share an interest in the Freudian method of dream analysis that can be applied to the interpretation of texts.⁵⁶ The productive mechanisms that are operative in both "dream work" and symptom formation have been shown by a number of theorists to parallel linguistic or quasi-linguistic processes.⁵⁷ Freud identifies four features of these productive mechanisms as condensation, displacement, representation or symbolization, and secondary revision.⁵⁸ Condensation and displacement correspond to the linguistic processes of metaphor and metonymy. Representation or symbolization is a process in which "forbidden" dream-thoughts are refracted and distorted so that they can be presented as images; secondary revision resolves contradictions and creates an

⁵¹For example, Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, 1990).

⁵²For example, Juliet Mitchell, and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (London, 1982).

⁵³Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago, 1987), 413–96. For a detailed analysis of the encounter between Lacan and Derrida, see Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida And Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. J. P. Muller and W. J. Richardson (Baltimore, 1988), 213–251.

⁵⁴Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 143–144.

⁵⁵For example, in *of Grammatology*, Derrida describes "the final intention" of his book as: "To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy,' 'presence.'" See his *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 70.

⁵⁶Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, 1989), 45–49.

⁵⁷For example, Paul Ricoeur, Julia Kristeva and Kaja Silverman; discussed in DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 54, 72, 129–133.

⁵⁸Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J. Strachey (London, 1953–74), 4:277–338, 5:339–508.

apparent connectedness. These processes indicate that dreams or texts are constituted by concealment as much as by revelation.

Both Lacan and Derrida extend the range of Freud's theories of the unconscious and "dream as a text" into the realm of the complex signifying processes of language. However, important substantial differences set Lacan's psychoanalytic theory apart from a post-structuralist thinker like Derrida. Derrida's critique of Lacan's elevating the phallus to the status of the transcendental signifier was noted above. Another pertinent concept in Lacan's theory, for which he has been criticized, is his idea of the register of the Real. As a mode of psychical organization, the Real is located outside of language and is inassimilable to any process of symbolization. Lacan does not define the exact nature of the order of the Real, which makes it "the site of a radical indeterminacy."⁵⁹

Interestingly, the objections and arguments are actually suggestive of the relevance of Lacan's theory for a reflective engagement with interpretive possibilities of this bawdy tale in the *Mashnavi*. To the medieval mystical hermeneutics of the Islamic tradition, patriarchy (or more correctly, androcentric postures), symbolic interpretive modality, and most importantly, logocentrism, are not alien concepts. More importantly for the goal of this paper, it is the subtle operations of desire as conceptualized by Lacan that make it an apt symbolic analogy for esoteric secrets. Like desire, esoteric secrets cannot be represented directly; they can only be recognized when articulated, i.e., symbolized as they enter into a system of signification. The symbolic representations of the secrets are, like drives, only partial manifestations, a compromise between two conflicting impulses to reveal and to conceal. Therefore, mystical language does not aim at actually capturing, i.e., revealing secrets in a concluding moment. Language is a veil that reveals and conceals, mystical language conceals even as it reveals. Thus, every symbolic presentation of secrets is a re-presentation, and every interpretation of these symbols is a re-interpretation. The operative word here is "symbolic," which distinguishes the symbolically-oriented process of signification from an illusionary one. Each interpretation displaced by a reinterpretation repeats the symbolic representation of that which cannot be directly and fully represented (i.e., secrets) with a difference. This displacement of one interpretation by another, aiming at the disclosure of secrets in their concealment, is analogous to the circling motion of the drives around their goal. In a mystical context, the repetition of the symbolic representation of secrets becomes the goal of interpretation. Repetition, in the form of the intricate verses of Persian mystical poetry for example, becomes a source of enjoyment and a cause for celebration. The irreducibility of secrets to their representational forms only intensifies the mystic's yearning.

The fundamental incompatibility of desire and speech is even more relevant to the articulation of esoteric secrets through speech. Secrets can never be fully present in speech, for they constantly elude articulation. Even if secrets could be faithfully manifested in speech, the mystic would not have taken advantage

⁵⁹Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 160.

of this possibility. The secret that is openly divulged is no secret at all. Since there is no direct access to secrets, allusion, hint and paradox become important features of mystical language.⁶⁰ Thus, there is always a radical break, i.e., an irreducible gap, between secrets and their symbolic representation. However, this radical break does not entail an absolute discontinuity between the two. To use Lacanian parlance, that which cannot be directly and fully represented (i.e., secrets) has the active role of conditioning the effects of signification in the signifiable. The impulse behind the signifying process thus comes from secrets, making the production of meaning a process, not an event. Here, production does not imply constructing new and original interpretations, only a reinterpretation of the origin. Hence, the displacement of one interpretation by another is not about venturing into new terrains of signification, but returning to that which has already been inscribed. The tradition of cumulative imagery in Persian lyrical poetry adopted by the Sufis is an apt literary instance of this. If the process of signification can be compared to a journey, the itinerary of signifying processes will lead to a “place” where one has already been. In Persianate Sufism this “place” transcends physical dimensions and is designated by paradoxical terms like *la-makan*, “no-place,” and *na-kuja-abad*, the “land of no-where.”⁶¹ In this context, following the Qur’anic paradigm, Muslim mystics often speak of the call of “Return.”⁶²

In mystical discourse, Lacan’s order of the Real, located beyond the Symbolic and inaccessible in itself, parallels the unrepresentable dimension of the Divine, an ontic reality which cannot be conclusively disclosed in any relationship of signification. The phallus, which in Lacanian theory is the signifier of desire, can also be viewed as the signifier of esoteric secrets in a mystical context. In this respect, esoteric secrets function in the same way as desire in the Symbolic order, they require the participation of others. This requirement foregrounds the issues of intersubjective relationships and communicative modalities. Secrets cannot be held back absolutely, nor can they be divulged openly. Like the productive mechanisms of dream work or the psychological formations of symptoms, secrets are revealed in their concealment through linguistic strategies such as metonymy. Not unlike taboo or forbidden desires that are suppressed, secrets are communicated through representational strategies that reveal them under the disguise of symbols. Thus, the symbolic representation of secrets requires recognition. This highlights the function of an esoteric master who can decipher (and encode) the inner meaning of secrets in the external forms of their expression. With this theoretical

⁶⁰For a treatment of the use of paradox in Persian mystical poetry, see Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia, 1998), 31–48.

⁶¹The former term is Rumi’s, see his *Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz*, ed. B. Furuzanfar (Tehran, 1336–46/1957–67), 6:2897. For the latter term, which is Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi’s (d. 1234), see Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. P. Sherrard and L. Sherrard (London, 1986), 264–5.

⁶²The call of “Return” is a reference to the Qur’anic verses: “O soul in tranquility. Return to your Lord well-pleased and well-pleasing” (Qur’an 89:27–28). For some instances of Rumi’s use of the call of “Return,” see the *Masnavi* II:1161, 1169.

framework of inquiry we can proceed to examine the esoteric significance of the tale of the prankster and the preacher.

*Summary of the Tale of the Prankster who Donned the Veil and Sat among the Women during a Religious Gathering (Masnavi 5:3325–3350)*⁶³

A prankster named Juha disguised himself with a woman's veil and sat among a group of women at a religious gathering.⁶⁴ Someone asked the preacher whether the presence of pubic hair would invalidate the ritual prayer. He replied that long pubic hair is objectionable during prayer and that anything longer than a grain of barley had to be removed for the daily ritual prayer to be perfected. The prankster turned to the woman next to him and said: "O sister, would you for God's sake bring your hand forward and check the length of my pubic hair?" (5:3333–3334). The woman put her hand in the prankster's trousers and it collided with his penis. She screamed loudly, which caused the preacher to say: "My preaching touched her heart!" (5:3335). The prankster corrected him saying: "No, it did not touch her heart, it touched her hand. Woe to her if it had touched her heart, o wise one!" (5:3336). In the next line, Rumi goes on to give an example of the kind of transformation that could change the heart: "A bit [of it] touched the hearts of [Pharaoh's] magicians/[when Moses'] staff and hand became as one before them (5:3337)."⁶⁵

The Phallus as the Signifier of Esoteric Secrets

Even without recourse to psychoanalysis, the connection between staff and phallus in this tale is clear. The "it," which touched the magicians' hearts (5:3337), may be understood as a reference to the phallus as the signifier of esoteric secrets. Only "something of it," that is, the phallus as signifier, touched the hearts of Pharaoh's magicians, causing them to have a change of heart. The imagery of Moses' staff with its miraculous qualities is repeated several times

⁶³For a full translation of this tale, see Nicholson, *Mathnawi*, 6:200–201.

⁶⁴*Juba* or *Jubi* is the Arabic name for Khvaja Nasr al-Din, a legendary figure known for his satirical anecdotes. In the context of this story the translation of this word as "prankster" best conveys the mischievous character of this literary figure playing a practical joke; for a survey of the presence of this figure in Persian literature, see Ulrich Marzolph, "Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia," *Iranian Studies*, 28.3–4 (1995): 157–174; for bibliographical references to this figure in early Arabic literature see Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Philadelphia, 1956), 9–10 n. 4.

⁶⁵The transformation of the hearts of the magicians is a reference to the well-known Qur'anic tale (which would have been familiar to Rumi's readers) of the encounter of Moses with Pharaoh's magicians. In this encounter, the magicians defeated by Moses acknowledge the greatness of his God. Pharaoh becomes angry and orders their hands and feet to be cut off alternately and that they be crucified. They say: "There is no harm (*la dāy*), indeed to our Lord we return" (Qur'an 26:50). In the tale of the prankster Rumi incorporates this utterance of the magicians into the text: "Their cry of 'There is no harm' reached the heavens/[they said to Pharaoh]: 'lo, cut [them off], for the soul is liberated by such pain'" (5:3339).

in the *Masnavi*.⁶⁶ In one passage, Rumi establishes a direct link between Moses' staff and the penis in the context of explaining how Moses' staff miraculously turned into a serpent. He writes: "When, instead of (casting down) the staff, you threw (ejaculated) semen/that (semen) became a human being" (3:3454). The main point of this long passage is that one should not be surprised at the difference between a phenomenon and the effects produced by it. Interestingly, Rumi connects the flowing rivers of paradise promised to the believer (Rumi presumes it to be a male believer) to the control of the flow of semen: "The water (semen) of your patience became a river of water in paradise/your love and affection (for God) is a river of milk in paradise" (3:3461).

In the context of medieval Persian literature, the analogy between staff and penis is not unfamiliar. For example, in his collection of didactic tales in prose and poetry, Sa'di uses the term staff as a reference to penis.⁶⁷ In the tale of the prankster and the preacher, the loud scream of both the woman and the magicians (5:3335, and 3339) at the moment of contact, and the use of the same word *na'ra* to describe their cry further supports that a link can be established between staff and phallus, as the words *na'ra* (Arabic) meaning "scream" and *nara* (Persian) meaning "maleness/penis," may be vocalized the same in Persian. The magicians cried out when, by observing the incredible power of Moses' staff, the truth of his God was revealed to them. Likewise, the woman screamed when the concealed penis touched her hand.

It must be remembered that the phallus is not the organ, i.e. the penis or clitoris, nor is it an imaginary effect, but it does symbolize the penis or clitoris.⁶⁸ In its erection, penetration, ejaculation, even its physical shape, the penis provides an apt analogy for the symbolizing function of the phallus. In its imaginary (illusory) signifying function, the penis can be referred to as an imaginary phallus. The imaginary phallus is the "image of the penis" or the penis imagined as the privileged signifier.⁶⁹ The phallus, however, can also be a symbolic configuration. The symbolic phallus cannot be possessed by anyone; neither man nor woman can have the symbolic phallus.

Rumi links the preacher's self-aggrandizing identity structure to the penis of the prankster. First, he notes that the preacher presents his hegemonic discourse as mystical insight. This is evident in his self-gratifying declaration upon hearing the woman's scream that his discourse touched her heart. Then, in the next line

⁶⁶For example, in 4:1069–73.

⁶⁷He relates the story of an old man who married a beautiful young woman, but on the wedding night his "staff" slept and would not become erect. See Sa'di, *Kulliyat*, 152. For a study of Sufism of Sa'di, see Homa Katouzian, "Sufism in Sa'di, Sa'di on Sufism," *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 2, *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, ed. L. Lewisohn (Oxford, 1999), 191–201.

⁶⁸Lacan, *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 a discussion of the implications of this negative signification see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), 263 n. 30.

⁶⁹Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 315–19.

the prankster states: “It did not touch her heart, it touched her hand” (5:3336). This line makes one wonder what this “it” is that touched her hand and not her heart? Obviously the penis touched the woman’s hand, so “it” is the penis. But in this verse the prankster is replying to the preacher’s statement, so “it” also refers to the preacher’s discourse that could not have touched the woman’s heart. It is therefore clear that Rumi is equating the preacher’s discourse with the prankster’s penis, an apt comparison since the penis as the actual male organ signifies the imaginary literalization of symbols divorced from their inner meaning.

The most important point about the concept of the phallus is that it must be veiled. Neither a total disclosure of the phallus nor its absence is conducive to its function as a signifier.⁷⁰ The symbolic phallus then cannot be revealed, for that would amount to an illusory effect. Put differently, that which can be plainly “seen,” i.e., the penis, is an imaginary phallus, a deceptive and static fixation on literalized symbols and ideals. It is only when veiled that the phallus can perform its symbolic function. The difference between the penis and the phallus is expressive of the difference between the preacher’s self-aggrandizing discourse of autonomy and control and the transformative possibilities offered by a de-literalized symbolic reading of this tale.

Having or Being the Phallus, Divergent Positions within Signifying Processes

In line 3335 of this tale, the preacher declares: “My discourse has touched her heart!” The preacher, who is the speaking subject in this phrase, is posturing a self-grounded autonomy. This posturing is a claim of having the power of signification. According to Lacan’s theory of signification, having the power to signify is a claim to “have” the phallus, which is a masculine position. However, no one (man or woman) can have the phallus, which means, in the continuous process of signification, that no subjective self can claim to be the originator of meaning. Articulated differently, no one can claim to be the signifier of esoteric secrets—certainly not when this claim is centered on literalized symbols, like the preacher’s narcissistic identity structure. Lacan explains the relationship between “having the phallus” and “being the phallus” as divergent positions related to the relationship between the sexes within signifying processes, that is, within language; he holds that “being” the phallus is a feminine position.⁷¹

The preacher’s assertion of being the initiating source of signification may be understood as a claim of having the phallus; however, it does not follow that having the phallus would grant the possessor the power of signification. The reason that “having” the phallus does not yield the power of signification is related to the persistent confusion of the phallus with the penis. The phallus may refer to the male organ and having the organ may lead the subject to

⁷⁰Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 288.

⁷¹Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 289–90.

assume he has the phallus. This power, according to Lacan, is wielded by “being” the phallus, which is a feminine position that reflects the power of the phallus as the privileged signifier.⁷² By not having the phallus, that is, not having the male organ that is continually confused with the phallus, the female subject is better positioned to be the phallus. This suitability, according to Lacan, is further related to the fact that the woman rejects “an essential part of femininity.”⁷³ Articulated differently, she relinquishes her own power to signify, and hence becomes “not all”⁷⁴ or “not-whole”⁷⁵ as various translations read. Hence Lacan’s controversial statement: “The woman” does not exist.⁷⁶ By her non-existence, the woman affirms the oneness of the phallus as the privileged signifier on the one hand and reflects its signifying power on the other. She reflects the signifying power of it by being the phallus. It should be noted that being the phallus and not existing do not signify contradictory positions, because being the phallus (as well as having the phallus) are symbolic positions, merely “ontological gestures” (to use Judith Butler’s words) that are assumed only in “token form.”⁷⁷

The important point about the division between the two divergent positions of having and being the phallus corresponding to the masculine and feminine is that they do not precede the process of signification; they emerge as a result of it. In Lacanian terms, the divide between being and having the phallus is the *effect* of the fundamental principles underlying all relations of signification, which the subject accepts upon entering the Symbolic order (synonymous with language). This formulation has two important implications for an analysis of the tale of the preacher and the prankster. The first implication is related to the repudiation of the preacher’s posture of autonomy and completeness. Precisely because the subject is not a preexisting given that somehow conditions the process of signification, there cannot be a self-grounded subject. The subject is constructed through the process of signification, that is, the subject is represented through the interplay of signifiers. The process of signification takes place within the Symbolic, and the Symbolic is marked by an inherent lack. The concept of lack, which is central to Lacanian thinking, entails the deferral of a closure in the signifying process.⁷⁸ The construction of the

⁷²Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 289–90.

⁷³Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 289–90.

⁷⁴Jacques Lacan, “God and the Jouissance of The Woman, a Love Letter,” trans. J. Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. J. Mitchell and J. Rose (New York, 1985), 144.

⁷⁵Jacques Lacan, “God and The Woman’s Jouissance,” trans. B. Fink, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Encore 1972–1973*, ed. J. A. Miller (New York, 1998), 73.

⁷⁶Lacan writes: “*The* woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. There is no such thing as *The* woman, where the definite article stands for the universal.” See his “God and the Jouissance of The Woman,” 144.

⁷⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1999), 56, 58.

⁷⁸See Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 22; Alan Sheridan in *Écrits: A Selection*, xi.

subject, therefore, is not an event but a process in which the eventual contours of subjectivity are always anticipated by the communicative interplay of signifiers. Thus, any imaginary claims of self-grounding, coherence, or completion of subjectivity, like that of the preacher, are covering over the inherent lack in the Symbolic.

The second implication of situating having and being the phallus within the Symbolic is that, as an entity constructed through the process of signification, the subject may be reconstructed in a number of ways. This reconstruction of the subject is effected through the intervention of linguistic resources, like metonymy, on the process of signification. It is through linguistic resources that the decentering of subjectivity from the imaginary oriented claims of autonomy is effected. The preacher purports to effect signification, whereas his subjective self is an *effect* of signification. If the subject is an effect of signification, then it must be possible to produce alternative effects by altering the relationship between signifiers. The process of producing alternative subjectivities subverts the claims of coherence and autonomy by exposing the mechanism through which originality itself is fabricated.⁷⁹ By concealing the fact that his subjective position is constructed through the process of signification, the preacher negates his dependence upon the signifying positions that present the very real possibility of disputing his claims.

The prankster demonstrates that rearranging the purposive combination of signifiers can produce new arrangements of signification. The character of the prankster functions like a signifier that metonymically intervenes on the level of binary significations that distinguish men from women, and the preacher from his audience. Assembling men and women in a gender binary is part of the regulatory discourse that contributes to the preacher's hegemonic claim. The very first line of the tale clearly refers to this constructed binary: "There was a preacher, well versed in speech/under whose pulpit men and women assembled" (5:3325). By strategically deploying a gender identity that is excluded from this binary scheme of signification, the prankster disrupts the naturalness of this assembly, which supports the posture of autonomy and superiority of the preacher. The fact that the prankster is a socially marginalized character adds to the force of rupture that he introduces into the neatly organized body of the assembly. By impersonating a woman, the prankster subverts the suggestions of the essentiality and originality of binaries constructed by the preacher. His impersonation indicates that originality itself is fabricated through the interactions of the signifiers that produce meaning only because they are copresent with one another. The prankster demonstrates this by putting on a woman's veil, which becomes a signifier that fabricates a gender identity that is different from the one performed without it.

⁷⁹In formulating this sentence, I have benefited from Butler's discussions in her *Gender Trouble*, 163–180.

Knowledge of the Subject and the Subjectivity of Knowledge

Detached from their symbolic significance, imaginary oriented formations of subjectivity can be “pathologized,” to use psychoanalytical parlance. The self-referential identity of the preacher is an example of such closed identity formation. The Lacanian position of being the phallus can inform an understanding of the mystic as the intermediary between cultural and symbolic formations, who undermines the totalized models of subjectivity. This understanding is predicated on the argument that in the mystical economy of the hermeneutics of forms, the mystic’s symbolic position parallels that of being the phallus.

As the symbolic position of effecting the hermeneutics of forms, being the phallus is at least partly about effecting subjective transformation through the recognition of the subject’s locatedness. In the tale of the prankster and the preacher, Rumi makes a direct reference to the transformation of subjectivity by praising self-knowledge: “We have come to know that we are not this body/it is beyond the (physical) body that we touch God” (5:3340). That which lies beyond the body follows in the next line: “Happy is he who has recognized his [true] essence (*dbat*)” (5:3341). This line is a reiteration of the saying: “Whosoever knows himself/herself (*nafs*) knows his/her Lord.”⁸⁰ It is significant that in Rumi’s rendition of this saying, the term *dbat*, meaning “essence,” has displaced *nafs*, meaning “self,” in the usual reading of this favorite maxim of Sufism. Rumi could have used the word *nafs* (self) instead of *dbat* (essence), especially since both words scan the same, and the meter of the verse would not have been affected. The choice of the term *dbat* instead of *nafs* indicates that knowledge of one’s true essence goes beyond knowledge of one’s self.

The choice of the term “essence” instead of “soul” is Rumi’s countermeasure against the solipsistic orientation that self-knowledge can take. Self-knowledge is the recognition of the locatedness and embodiment of subjectivity, i.e., its variability and contingency. Therefore, there can be no closure in the process of self-knowledge as the subject remains gendered and embodied, hence located, unfinished and partial. However, the term *dbat* (“essence”) links the process of constructing a knowledge of the self to an epistemological dimension that is apprehensible only in symbolic form. The content of one’s essence, or its “whatness” can never be known.⁸¹ If a complete knowledge of the essence (or the inner meaning/secrets) were possible, it would have caused the conceptual closure of the process of meaning-production and symbolic activity. The inaccessibility of the “whatness” of the essence perpetuates the mobilization of symbols, ideas,

⁸⁰For a study of the sources and variations of this saying, see Alexander Altmann, “The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism,” *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 196–232.

⁸¹As William C. Chittick notes: “The whatness of that which the veils veil can never be known.” See his “The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism,” *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. E. R. Wolfson (New York, 1999), 85.

and ideals. In a semiotic sense, the essence is like the Signified, which, inaccessible in itself, nevertheless is privileged with the activation of the process of signification and designation of certain aspects of the Symbolic as the site of its self-disclosure. In order to prevent solipsistic tendencies that would take the symbolic disclosure of the Signified as its true and only manifestation, this self-disclosure takes place under the veil of symbols. Therefore, every (self-)disclosure is a (self-)concealment, which in terms of the signifying function of the phallus means: the phallus is “veiled” and “veiling.”⁸² The phallus is veiled, otherwise it cannot fulfill its signifying operation, but even when it signifies (unveils), it does so through the veil of signifiers (veiling).

One particularly important symbol of Sufism, repeated three times in the tale of the prankster, and linked to the term “essence,” is the “heart” (5:3335, 36, 37). Being touched in the heart, as in the case of Pharaoh’s magicians (5:3337), is associated with an intimation of the essence. According to Sufis, it is through the intermediary function of the symbolic imagination located in the heart that the hermeneutics of symbols are effected.⁸³ Hence, in regard to deciphering the inner meaning of symbols, we may correctly speak of the hermeneutics of imagination. To be precise, it is the mystic’s imagination that fulfills this intermediary function. In this context, the mystic who reflects the signifying power of the privileged signifier is viewed as the intermediary through whom Divine creative power is expressed and manifested.

The “essence” or the inner meaning that Rumi speaks of is like the Signified, which cannot be known directly. Only under the veil of signifiers can the Signified be the subject of knowledge. The function of signifiers in the production of knowledge of the self leads to the link between the categories of language (through which the process of signification takes place) and subjectivity. The knowledge of one’s self (or secrets) is subject to the semiotic possibilities and restrictions of language because the human subject knows him/herself and the world only through language. As Kaja Silverman writes: “We are cognitively available to ourselves and others only in the guise of signifiers.”⁸⁴

Herein lies the strength of Lacan’s theory of signification that renders it most relevant to the project of reinterpreting this bawdy tale in the *Masnavi*. This particularity of Lacanian thinking is his insight that the “subject” is a semiotic

⁸²My formulation of the phallus as both veiled and veiling is based on Butler’s question: “If Lacan claimed that the phallus only operates as ‘veiled,’ we might ask in return what kind of ‘veiling’ the phallus invariably performs.” Butler suggests the “lesbian phallus” as an answer to this question, which she argues, in its imitative function can subvert the privilege of the phallus by recirculating it as a “transferable” phantasm. See her *Bodies that Matter*, 57–92.

⁸³Hence the term “Active Imagination” that Henry Corbin explains as the Divine element of the soul corresponding to the primordial imagination that transmutes sensory data or rational concepts into symbols that correspond to the images within the heart. It is by recognizing these symbols that the symbolic imagination can intimate the realm of incorporeality. See his *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, 1969), 187–189.

⁸⁴Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, 1983), 18.

construct that cannot be understood apart from signification, discourse and the Symbolic order. In linguistic terms this formulation does not seem to be a radical insight—the subject is not a pre-existing given, obviously its significance is asserted when it is articulated in a linguistic arrangement. However, Lacan argues that “the unconscious,” which governs all aspects of human existence, “is structured like a language.”⁸⁵ Hence, language, itself structured symbolically, becomes “the single paradigm of all structures.”⁸⁶ Language is composed of signifiers, which represent a subject for other signifiers.⁸⁷ A signifier thus could be a word, or units of language smaller than words (like morphemes and phonemes) or larger than words (like phrases and sentences, or even non-linguistic things such as objects and relationships).⁸⁸

Indeed the notion of subjectivity is a product and phenomenon of modernity tied to particular epistemological underpinnings and historical developments that cannot be straightforwardly mapped onto the pre-modern conceptions operating in medieval Iran (or the pre-modern West for that matter). However, the Lacanian subject is a *semiotic formation*, re/constructed through the process of signification, i.e. the process of meaning-production. It is the recognition of the semiotic nature of this process that informs effective strategies of intervention (such as metonymy), which can result in the decentering of an imaginary oriented subjectivity. Here we may cautiously draw a parallel between Rumi's stance and postmodern theories that reject the subject as a coherent autonomous center and the originator of meaning. In respect to their goal of decentering subjectivities that are “located” within closed culturally produced norms and fixed practices, Rumi and Lacan are compatible figures. Not surprisingly, Lacan considers himself something of a mystic and his *Écrits* as “the same order” as a mystical testimony;⁸⁹ his resistance to the reductive literalization of symbolic forms has been noted as having “something of an *iconoclastic* quality.”⁹⁰

However, the lines that define the narrow parameters of this particular case of compatibility must be drawn ever so tactfully, lest we forget that vastly different epistemologies inform their approaches to subjective transformation and knowledge-production. In spite of the “contiguity” of Lacan's critical interrogation of the attributes and function of the ego with religious thinking, Lacan's approach “has no definite metaphysical underpinning.”⁹¹ In the most general sense, Lacan is a postmodern thinker who, as DiCenso puts it, like Derrida, “often seems to take pleasure in simply undermining traditional, totalized

⁸⁵Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar*, Book XI: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan (London, 1977), 20.

⁸⁶Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 97.

⁸⁷Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 207.

⁸⁸Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 187.

⁸⁹Lacan, “God and the Jouissance of The Woman,” 147.

⁹⁰DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 44, emphasis in the original.

⁹¹DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 123.

notions of subjectivity.”⁹² For example, he views the relative and stable meaning conveyed by language to be a result of the reference of displaced signifiers to earlier ones that tend to sustain the effect of reference.⁹³ Hence, Lacan may be rightly criticized for being overly concerned with signifiers, overlooking the significance of the Signified.⁹⁴ Rumi, on the other hand, has a greater interest in the Signified. From Rumi’s viewpoint, it is the Signified (i.e., the essence), which is the impulse behind the process of meaning-production. Hence, the meaning that *insists* in the interplay of signifiers is the result of the effects of the subject of knowledge (i.e., the essence/inner meaning/Signified), which transcends particular subjectivities.⁹⁵

The primacy assigned to the Signified (the essence/inner meaning/secrets) in Rumi’s mystical discourse has important implications for his concept of knowledge of the self, in sharp contrast to Lacan’s. Lacan is primarily concerned with the knowledge of the self, which is mediated through communicative interplay of signifiers. For Rumi, however, it is the Signified (the essence) that is the subject of knowledge. The human subject’s knowledge, mediated through the veil of signifiers, is unstable and shifting. However, the subject of knowledge (the essence/Signified) is stable and constant. The signifiers are only veils through which the disclosive character of the hermeneutics of symbols is expressed. This can be articulated as: it is through the signifiers (i.e., language) that the subject of knowledge (i.e., the essence/Signified/one’s Lord) is represented to another signifier (i.e., the human subject). In this case, stability and constancy are the concomitants of the subject of knowledge because the subject of knowledge (i.e., the essence/inner meaning/Signified) is irreducible to cultural significations. To borrow from Silverman, the subject of knowledge is never “spoken.”⁹⁶ As the subject of knowledge, the essence/Signified is not reducible to the constitutive elements of subjectivity (such as language, desire, identity

⁹²DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 6. To Lacan’s credit, DiCenso continues: “Overall, however, I believe that Lacan’s work transcends the playful, if sometimes irresponsible, *dissolution* of the subject” emphasis in the original. The dissolution of the subject can certainly be attributed to Derrida’s philosophy, but so can a vision of unrestrained subjective freedom. For a discussion of the former and the latter positions respectively, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 489 and Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1988), 50. In this context, the comments of Vincent Descombes may be noted, that the dissolution of the subject has actually fostered the proliferation of new subjectivities. See his *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge, 1980), 77, 186–190.

⁹³Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 152–54.

⁹⁴DiCenso, *The Other Freud*, 146.

⁹⁵This vision of transcendental Signifier, which is the prime cause of the interpretive possibilities, can be contrasted with “the absence of the transcendental signified,” as Derrida puts it, that permits the “*play*” of the signifiers. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 50.

⁹⁶Being “spoken” for Silverman means being constituted by all that constitutes the subject and exist prior to the existence of the subject, such as language, desire, and history. See her *The Subject of Semiotics*, 198–9. Hence, the essence/Signified can never be literalized because it transcends any particular construct of subjectivity.

and history). Rather, the subject of knowledge conditions all aspects of subjectivity, including the subject's efforts to construct self-knowledge.

Knowledge of the self is variable and contingent, because, further to being constructed through the process of signification, knowledge is not of a coherent autonomous self. It is in this respect that the importance of the hermeneutics of symbols, as a cognitive process of meaning-production in its broadest sense, including memory and history, is to be noted.⁹⁷ The hermeneutics of symbols may then be defined as the realization that signifiers as well as the knowledge of them are, to use Sufi terminology, so many veils. The transformation of subjectivity, that is, liberation from the strictures of subjectivity, entails the recognition of the veils as veils, or of the locatedness of subjectivity. The veils will never be lifted, only replaced with near or far ones.⁹⁸ Therefore the construction of the knowledge of self is not an event, but a process that finds no closure. Every construction of knowledge is a re-construction and every act of cognition is a recognition. It is in reference to self-knowledge as a process that in the prankster's tales Rumi states: "We have *come to know* that we are not this body" (5:3340). In fact the last few lines of the tale of the prankster and the preacher are sprinkled with terms evocative of a journey (process), like leader (5:3346, 3349), guide (5:3349, 3350), path (5:3348), road (5:3350), and destination (5:3349, 3350).⁹⁹ The journey should not give the impression of a progressive movement from one point to another. In its mystical significance, the journey is from a subjective position returning to a "place" one has already been or constructing knowledge of the self that one already (potentially) has. In Subtelny's words, this is "a journey that starts in a place and that returns to No-place."¹⁰⁰ The "No-place" is, of course, continually present in this world, as Rumi points out: "No-place continually comes into this place (this world)."¹⁰¹ Rumi's favorite image for the illustration of this journey is the "royal falcon," who upon hearing the falcon-drum returns to his heavenly origins: "I am a falcon, . . . My falcon-drum is the [Divine's] call of 'Return'" (2:1161, 1169).¹⁰²

⁹⁷For an in-depth analysis of the hermeneutics of Rumi's poetry see Mahdi Tourage, "The Hermeneutics of Eroticism in the Poetry of Rumi," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.3 (2005): 600–616.

⁹⁸Chittick, "The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism," 81.

⁹⁹Traditionally, the mystical discourse of Sufis speaks of a journey. However, it is more beneficial to view self-knowledge as a "process" as opposed to a journey, because in the context of Muslim societies, journey and traveling is generally a male privilege. The term "process" is devoid of the cultural and social connotations of the term journey. For example, a Muslim woman requires the permission of her male guardian or husband to embark on a journey. For a discussion of this issue in the context of contemporary Iran, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, 1999), 66–7.

¹⁰⁰Maria E. Subtelny, *Le monde est un jardin: Aspects de l'histoire culturelle de l'Iran médiéval*, Cahiers de Studia Iranica 28 (Paris, 2002), 154.

¹⁰¹Rumi, *Divan*, 6:2897.

¹⁰²The call of "Return" is a reference to Qur'an 89:27–28: "O soul in tranquility. Return to your Lord well-pleased and well-pleasing."

The goal of the mystic's intervention on a subjective level is to dislodge the imaginary perception of the subject and to free it from the bondage of subjectivity. In the tale of the prankster, Rumi links the liberation from the "anxiety" or "confusion" of subjectivity (5:3348) to "serenity" and "security of eternity" (5:3341). He writes: "Choose this path and leave the beard aside/leave aside this 'we' and 'I' and this confusion" (5:3348). Rumi continues: "Fortunate is he who knows his own essence/he has built [for himself] a palace in the security of eternity" (5:3341). An instance of liberation from the anxiety of subjectivity—which Rumi calls: "The confusion of 'we' and 'I' is noted when, upon seeing Moses' miracles, the magicians had a change of heart and said to Pharaoh: "Lo, cut [our hands and feet off], for the soul became *liberated* as a result of such pain" (5:3339). The liberation from the constraints of subjectivity within the Symbolic order is achieved through the resources of the Symbolic itself, most notably through the veil of language.

In Sufi discourse, transcending subjectivity through a knowledge of the self that is anchored in the "essence" can be viewed as a state of "annulment of the self" (*fana*).¹⁰³ The "annulment of the self" does not result in the destruction of the mystic's attributes, nor does it annul his individuality. His individuality and attributes are veils that, like all other veils, are transmuted into symbols by the mystic's imagination through the function of the hermeneutics of imagination.¹⁰⁴ The annulment of the self may be understood then as the annulment of the illusory significance of the veils of the subjective self. That is not to say that the veils have an intrinsic significance that is somehow annulled; the veils, like signifiers, are only the effects of a signification that is initiated and sustained by the Signified. It is this realization that Rumi alludes to in the tale of the prankster where he states: "We have come to know that we are not our body/it is beyond the body that we touch God" (5:3340). In the same tale, Rumi gives an example: "A child cries for treats/but for the one with intellect these are but trifles" (5:3342). Connecting the intellect with the heart, he continues: "For the heart, the body is just like these treats/[but] how can a child attain the knowledge possessed by [spiritual] men?" (5:3343). Rumi lists a primary signifier of male gender, testicles, and a secondary one, the beard, as signifiers that are only the effects of signification: "If a man is defined (only) by beard and testicles/then every goat has beard and hair aplenty" (5:3345). In other words, there is no intrinsic significance in beard or testicles; not even having a penis would make someone masculine: "[True] masculinity does not result from every penis" (6:1430).

Paradoxically, the annulment of the self, or the state of dispossession, is a state of empowerment, because the Creator needs creation for his manifestation; or, the Signified requires signifiers for the actualization of its signifying actions (i.e., its effects). In other words, the annulment of the mystic's imaginary perceptions of

¹⁰³William Chittick translates *fana* as "passing away from self." See his *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), 93, 207.

¹⁰⁴Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 187–189.

significance and self-grounding allows for the emergence of the Divine signifying power. The mystic becomes the locus of the manifestation of Divine creative power. The mystic, *symbolically* relegated to a feminine position, becomes the site of the Divine's self-elaboration, or the Phallus in its "extended" sense," to borrow from Butler.¹⁰⁵ The mystic reflects the signifying power of the true signifier, i.e., the Divine, and the Divine reflects back the true self (the "essence") of the mystic. In Sufism, this intermediary function of the mystic is explained as the "double-mirroring" function of the heart; in Subtelny's formulation: "The visionary capacity of the heart was best captured in the metaphor of the mirror, which depicted the heart of the mystic as a mirror in which the divine Glory is reflected, and conversely, the divine Glory as a mirror in which the mystic sees his own self reflected."¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

In Sufi ontology, creation in its entirety is an arena of the self-disclosure/elaboration of the Divine through symbols that can be perceived by the intermediary function of the imagination, symbolically located in the heart. In performing this function, the imagination may proceed in ways that are gendered according to the hermeneutics of imagination. In certain instances, as in the tale of the prankster and the preacher, these hermeneutics are expressed in phallogentric terms, whereby a phallic motif is used for the communication of esoteric secrets and to effect a transformation of subjectivity. The (feminine) position of "being the phallus," as postulated by Lacan, may be applied to the symbolic position of the mystic in relation to the (masculine) phallus as the signifier of esoteric secrets. We may draw a parallel between the Divine creative power and the phallus. However, since this is only an analogy, not all the implications of the Lacanian notion of being the phallus necessarily dovetail with Rumi's understanding of the mystic's relationship to the Divine creative power.

The semiotic basis of Lacanian thought outweighs oppositional arguments against applying modern theories to medieval concerns. Lacan's concept of the subject as a semiotic construct allows the interchangeable use of the term subject to signify either a human being, a linguistic construct and subject of a text, or esoteric secrets. Hence the Lacanian subject can exceed the reductive levels of analysis that characterize historical development and the epistemological shift that has produced the range of modern or postmodern theories of subjectivity. Despite the signficatory efficacy of Lacanian concepts, they must be selectively and judiciously applied to Rumi's vastly different mystical discourse.

¹⁰⁵This is related to the non-existence of the feminine. According to Butler, the implication of the non-existence of the feminine for gender relations is that the woman embodies the phallus and becomes the site into which it penetrates; she becomes the site of "masculine self-elaboration." See her *Gender Trouble*, 56.

¹⁰⁶Subtelny, *Le monde est un jardin*, 152.

For example, a significant difference is found in Rumi's foregrounding of the essence (the Signified) as a constant and stable subject of knowledge, indicating that the process of knowledge-production is rooted in the essence/Signified, not in the human subject.

The Lacanian concept of the phallus is an effective conceptual tool for understanding Rumi's strategy of intervening on the subjective level of the culturally-constructed self. In the tale of the preacher and the prankster the phallus—symbolically analogized as Moses' staff—functions as the signifier of esoteric secrets with an off-centering effect on the subjective level. The presence of the phallus can only be intimated through the symbolic analogy of Moses' miracles; its detotalizing effect, however, is substantiated by the essential change in the magicians' subjective selves.

Categorizing the tale of the prankster and the preacher as a negative bawdy tale denoting a deviation from a norm or convention (which then is contrasted with the *Masnavi's* sublime message as a positive category of conformation) would be too reductive. No norm, convention, or context can utterly deplete the interpretive possibilities of a mystical text such as the *Masnavi*, arguably the most sophisticated poetical expression of medieval Islamic theosophical thought. The symbolic matrix of the *Masnavi* remains an open-ended system of signification that cannot be reduced to a single mode of interpretation or a particular convention of signification. In the context of the intricate symbolic system of Persian mystical poetry, in which the signifying operations of the "mystical" are taken for granted, it is interesting to observe how the "obscene" and "non-mystical" function in esoteric terms.