LISTEN
COMMENTSARY ON THE SPIRITUAL
COUPLETS OF MEVLANA RUMI

by
Kenan Rifai

Translated by Victoria Holbrook

FONS VITAE
Preface

It is remarkable that the Persian poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) has emerged as one of the most popular literary successes of recent years. To be sure, scholars of Middle Eastern and Islamic culture have recognized the central importance of Rumi’s literary work for a long time. Rumi is the author of one of the largest collections of mystical lyrics in the history of Persian poetry (the Divan-i Shams, some 35,000 lines), as well as the great epic of the Masnavi-i Ma'navi (or Spiritual Couplets, in 27,000 lines). It is universally acknowledged among specialists in Islamic mysticism that Rumi is one of the most important figures in this tradition. In particular, Rumi’s six-volume Masnavi is recognized as a classic of the mystical epic, which employs narratives in verse form to convey the terms of spiritual experience. But early scholarly treatments of Rumi’s poetry, such as R. A. Nicholson’s edition and translation of the Masnavi, were not user-friendly; in fact, for non-specialists they were nearly unreadable.1 Although some scholars such as A. J. Arberry produced versions that were somewhat more accessible, it was not until the 1990s that popular audiences began to respond to Rumi’s verse, primarily through literary adaptations made by contemporary poets like Coleman Barks.2 As publicized by TV journalist Bill Moyers, Rumi was recognized as the best-selling poet in America.

While it was doubtless a considerable accomplishment to bring the Persian poetry of the 13th-century Sufi to the attention of contemporary readers, critics have been made about the popularization of this dense mystical poetry in terms of New Age spirituality. Rumi has frequently been treated as a unique figure who was unassociated with any particular religious tradition; from some of these presentations, one would be surprised to learn that Rumi was actually a Muslim. A number of scholars have pointed out that these literary versions of Rumi’s poetry employ a selective approach that leaves out much of the religious and philosophical context that makes it so rich.3 Fortunately, new translations of his works, made in 2009, published in the Rumi Review.4 Nevertheless, translation is not easy; for example, he wrote in a medium of a considerable range of commentaries (ta’liq, or Urdu).5 As is typical of the grammatical structure of the Islamic tradition, Rumi seeks a deeper approach. Nicholson’s two-volume translation and quite inaccurate translation of the Masnavi is available.

The present edition of the Masnavi, translated with the help of a new and modern figure in late Ottoman literature, is available through the Reproduction and Translation of Islamic and Persian text project, which offers a new and modern edition of his work. The Masnavi was published in the Masnavi (A Shower of Roses), complete with accompanying illustrations and study, and with century Sufi mysticism, Sufi mysticism, and thought and ethics.

Like a number of the best-quality translations, Barks’s lengthy epic, Horsemanship and the Sufi, is still the most useful of Rumi’s works written for the Ottomans that the

1. The Mathnawi of Jalalu’ddin Rumi, edited from the oldest manuscripts available, with critical notes, translation and commentary by Reynold A. Nicholson (8 volumes, London: Luzac & Co., 1925–1940). Nicholson made it clear that his painfully literal translation was intended only for students of the Persian text.


new translations of Rumi’s works by accomplished scholars have begun to appear. And in 2009, publication began of a new academic journal devoted to Rumi, the Mawlana Rumi Review.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Rumi’s poetry, particularly in the Masnavi, is not easy; for this reason, over the centuries it has been typically read through the medium of a commentary. As Franklin Lewis has pointed out, there is a long history of commentary on the Masnavi in multiple languages (Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Urdu). As is typical in commentary literature, it is designed to explain to the reader not only the grammatical and narrative structure of the text, but also literary references to the Islamic texts and mystical teachings of Sufism that Rumi had in mind. Readers who seek a deeper appreciation of Rumi’s Masnavi, still have only one resource at this point: Nicholson’s two volumes of commentary, a good deal of which is in Persian and Arabic and quite inaccessible to the general reader. No other English commentary on Rumi’s Masnavi is available in print.

The present volume is a late Ottoman commentary on the Persian text of the Masnavi, translated into fluent English. The author, Kenan Rifai (1867-1950), was a major figure in late Ottoman Sufism who navigated the transition from the Ottoman caliphate through the Republican period into the era of Turkish secularism. He can be viewed as a traditionally educated but modernizing figure, who combined an expertise in Arabic and Persian texts with an interest in modern French literature. He supervised the transformation of his branch of the Rifai order into a spiritually oriented civil society movement that includes prominent women leaders. His Turkish commentary on the Masnavi was published posthumously in 1973. His other writings include essays on the Masnavi (Mesnevi hatiralari, 1952), lectures (Sohbetler, 1992), collected poems with accompanying musical score (Ilahiyyat-i Kenan, 1974), a biography of the twelfth-century Sufi master Sayyid Ahmad al-Rifai’i (1924), and several other volumes on Sufi thought and ethics.

Like a number of earlier commentators on the Masnavi, Kenan Rifai covers only the first volume of the text, which is certainly the most frequently read portion of this lengthy epic. He follows to a certain extent in the footsteps of the great Ottoman commentator, Ismail Ankaravi (d. 1631), whose work was considered by Nicholson to be the most useful of all the commentaries. It is interesting to observe that it was among the Ottomans that the commentary tradition on Rumi was most highly developed; it is for

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5. For details on this periodical, see <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/iais/research/centres/cpis/rumireview/>.
7. Information on the biography of Kenan Rifai is available on the website of one of his successors, Cemalnur Sargut <http://cemalnur.org/content/view/19/42/lang,en/>.
that reason that Ankaravi’s Turkish commentary has been translated into Persian. Kenan Rifai’s approach is not, however, dependent on Ankaravi’s sometimes overzealous application of the metaphysical theories of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) to the understanding of Rumi. He clarifies the narrative line, comments on symbolic implications, and connects Rumi’s verse to passages from the Qur’an, the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, and the sayings and poems of Sufi masters in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. It is this rich multilingual texture that gives Kenan Rifai’s commentary its particular flavor. That is, his explanation conveys the multiple levels of reference and allusion that were typically brought to bear in the study circles where Rumi’s verses were recited and discussed. Indeed, there is a certain informality in the style of this commentary that distinguishes it from the more scholastic of its predecessors. It is not so much a technical demonstration for scholars as it is a close transcription of how a learned Ottoman Sufi would have explained the significance of the Masnavi to an audience of students in oral conversation. Kenan Rifai had a particular interest in those passages of the Masnavi where Rumi is interacting on a personal level with his spiritual comrade, Shams-i Tabriz, and his leading disciple, Husam al-Din; these sections would have resonated vividly for his students.

Probably the most important contribution of this volume will be to offer a window on how Rumi’s poetry was read in the land where he composed it. While we know that Rumi’s poetic works were widely appreciated from the Balkans to Iran, Central Asia, Bengal, and southern India, it was in the Anatolian heartland of the Ottoman Empire that the Sufi tradition most associated with him took root (the Mevlevi order, the so-called “whirling dervishes”). In addition to the Mevlevis, members of other Ottoman Sufi orders such as the Malamatis and the Rifa’is held the Masnavi in special reverence. In view of the controversy over the “New Age” versions of Rumi, it is important to understand the role of this kind of mystical poetry in its own cultural and religious context. Rather than treating Rumi as an isolated figure who transcends all cultural and religious identities, this commentary situates him in terms of the main Sufi traditions, and it presents him as his principal heirs understood him.

This English translation of Kenan Rifai’s commentary on the Masnavi has been prepared by Dr. Victoria Holbrook, a distinguished scholar specializing in Ottoman studies. As one of the most experienced and sophisticated English-speaking experts on Ottoman Sufi culture today, she is the ideal translator for this work; her grasp of the original Persian of Rumi’s text is complemented by her thorough expertise in Arabic as well as the full range of Turkish from Ottoman times until today. Dr. Holbrook has translated not only the entire Ottoman Turkish text of the commentary, but also the original Persian of Rumi, resulting in an independent translation of the original text. It is necessary for her to translate the Persian base text separately from the Ottoman commentary, both in order to avoid the problem of double translation, and because existing English translations of the Masnavi (even when they are readable) would not be consistent with the vocabulary in a way that would match this particular commentary. The result is an exceptionally valuable scholarly contribution. The annotation is relatively light, chiefly clarifying the quotations from the Qur’an that may not be obvious to English-speaking readers. The translation is, moreover, extremely readable in a way that only a skilled and experienced translator can produce. In short, this volume is an exceptional contri-

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bution to the understanding of a key figure in Islamic mysticism, Jalal al-Din Rumi, as seen in the Ottoman Sufi legacy culminating in Kenan Rifai. Both the translator and the publisher are to be congratulated for making this important book available to the public. In addition, thanks are due to Cemalur Sargut, President of the Istanbul branch of the Turkish Women’s Cultural Association, whose tireless efforts to support this project were essential to its completion.

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