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Ulrich Marzolph

## Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia\*

IN 1911, THE CZECH FOLKLORIST ALBERT WESSELSKI PUBLISHED HIS TWO-volume compilation *Der Hodscha Nasreddin*, still considered one of the most comprehensive and reliable collections of anecdotes on Kh<sup>w</sup>aja Nasr al-Din (Turkish: Nasreddin Hoca), the most widely known protagonist of humorous prose narrative in the Near East.<sup>1</sup> Wesselski chose to subtitle his work “Turkish, Arabic, Berber, Maltese, Sicilian, Calabrian, Croatian, Serbian and Greek tales and anecdotes,” thus indicating the main geographical region in which tales on Nasr al-Din are in circulation. On the other hand, the geographical outline does not suggest a lack of awareness on Wesselski’s part of the fact that the Mediterranean cannot be said to monopolize the famous jester. Being familiar with problems touching on the dissemination and spread of popular tales and their protagonists, Wesselski consciously profited from a large number of publications accessible to him in various European languages. His vast readings made him aware of similar anecdotes in the literatures of neighboring regions such as Italy, Spain or France. These he took note of and occasionally quoted in his annotations. However, one has to keep in mind that Wesselski, though obviously on familiar terms with a large number of medieval Near Eastern authors, did not possess any knowledge of their original languages, whether Arabic, Persian or Turkish. Thus, he did not have direct access to the works of Near Eastern authors and had to rely for his evaluations on translations and secondary sources in Western languages. Since the available range of references at Wesselski’s time was—and continues to be—quite limited, it led him, among other things, to underestimate the vital tradition of Nasr al-Din lore in the Persian language, which constitutes the subject of the present study.

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\*This is a revised and considerably enlarged version of a paper originally presented at the First International Hoca Nasreddin Conference in Ankara in 1989 and published in the proceedings, *I. Milletlerarası Nasrettin Hoca Sempozyumu Bildirileri* (Ankara, 1990), 239–47. I would like to thank Abbas Amanat for his valuable comments and suggestions in the preparation of the revised version.

1. Albert Wesselski, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin* (Weimar: Duncker, 1911) contains 555 items, including several anecdotes not belonging to the Nasr al-Din stock. Recent comprehensive collections include M. S. Kharitonov, *Dvattsat’ chetyre Nasreddina* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), containing 1238 items. *Nasreddin Hodscha* (Munich: Beck, forthcoming in 1996), compiled by the present author, contains 666 items presented as a critical edition in a combined chronological-geographical survey encompassing written and oral traditions from more than 25 different indigenous tradition areas.

The *khwāja* is known nationwide in contemporary Iran and elsewhere in the sphere of Iranian cultural influence by the name Molla Nasr al-Din.<sup>2</sup> No thorough discussion of the roots of this extremely popular character has yet been attempted in Iran, owing to the decades-long neglect and disrespect shown to popular traditions.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, only a few articles in Iranian periodicals have been dealing with the subject.<sup>4</sup> Aside from these—and the publications of the Danish Iranist scholar Arthur Christensen,<sup>5</sup> to be discussed below—little attention has been paid to the question of how Molla Nasr al-Din came into being in Iran and what historical factors are responsible for his present-day popularity. Though it may justly be assumed that the overwhelming impact of Turkish tradition played an important role in the process of introducing Nasr al-Din to Iran, this alone cannot account for the favorable response he met with in Persian tradition. Additional factors must have contributed to Molla Nasr al-Din's ultimate triumph in the popular imagination—a development which, to all appearances, began just about a century ago. An examination of the literary sources, however, shows that Nasr al-Din's presence within the Persian tradition is much older, in fact dating from the beginning of the present millennium.

In a short paper published at the turn of the present century Paul Horn pointed out analogues to several Nasr al-Din anecdotes in the work of 'Obayd-e Zakani, the 14th-century Persian satirist (d. 772/1371).<sup>6</sup> Wesselski, while quoting Horn's references in several instances, seems to have overlooked one signifi-

2. The present study focuses on Persian-language compilations in Iran. For literary and oral tradition in other Iranian languages or other languages of the sphere of Iranian cultural influence s.v. *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 1975–): “Hodscha Nasreddin” (Ulrich Marzolph and Ingeborg Baldauf), hereafter *EM*. A large corpus of Molla Nasr al-Din texts in the Mandaean language was recently published in Rudolf Macuch (ed.), *Neuaramäische Texte im Dialekt von Ahwāz* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 330–59.

3. See especially the numerous publications on “popular” narrative literature by Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub and the critique as summarized in Ulrich Marzolph, *Dāstānhā-ye šīrin, Fünzig persische Volksbüchlein aus der zweiten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), 6–11.

4. M. Katirai, “Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn va taḥqīqī dar bāra-ye shakḥīyat va khoṣūṣīyat-e ū,” *Khūsha* 10, no. 14 (1343 Sh./1964): 16–17, cited in *Fehrest-e majallāt-e mardom-shenāsi* 1, no. 2003 (Tehran, 2536 Imp./1977); Manuchehr Mahjubi, “Janāb-e Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn, to ahl-e kojā hasti?” *Sepīd va sīyāh* 17, no. 42 (1349 Sh./1970?), cited in Hosayn Nurbakhsh, *Dalqakhā-ye mashhūr-e darbāri* (Tehran, 4th impr., 1371 Sh./1992), 276, note 4. The two short essays are not indexed in Iraj Afshar, *Fehrest-e maqālāt-e Fārsī dar zamīna-ye taḥqīqāt-e Īrānī* 2 (Tehran, 1348 Sh./1969), 3 (Tehran, 2535 Imp./1976). Neither was available to the present author, nor was the edition of Molla Nasr al-Din stories in the *Ketāb-e tawfīq* series, containing a critical introduction by Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub (personal communication from Mahjub, who did not recollect the booklet's exact date of publication, probably 1968–71).

5. Arthur Christensen, “Jūhī in the Persian Literature,” *A Volume of Oriental Studies, Festschrift Edward Granville Browne* (Cambridge, 1922), 129–36; idem, “Les sots dans la tradition populaire des Persans,” *Acta Orientalia* 1 (1923): 43–75; idem, “Les facettes de 'Ubaid-i-Zākāni,” *Acta Orientalia* 3 (1924): 1–37.

6. Paul Horn, “Zu Hodža Nasreddins Schwänken,” *Keleti Szemle* 1 (1900): 66–72.

cant point: Zakani records several of the anecdotes in the name of Juha.<sup>7</sup> Juha is a legendary Arab character who in subsequent centuries came to intermingle with the later Nasr al-Din—so much so that in the contemporary popular tradition of the Near East neither protagonist can be clearly distinguished from the other and both have to be regarded as constituting one and the same persona.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Horn ought to have drawn attention to the fact that Zakani not only mentions this singular anecdote of Juha but records a total of ten anecdotes in his name, some of which later became part of the traditional stock of Nasr al-Din lore. Though some of Zakani's tales had been accessible to the Western public by way of translation as early as the beginning of the 19th century,<sup>9</sup> it was left to Christensen to scrutinize Zakani on a larger scale almost a quarter of a century after Horn. This he did while supplementing his own previous documentation on "Júhí in the Persian literature," the only major study on the historical roots of Molla Nasr al-Din so far compiled. Here Christensen, while referring to the studies of René Basset<sup>10</sup> and Albert Wesselski, points out: "It has escaped the notice of M. Basset as well as Herr Wesselski that there exists in Persia a series of stories concerning Juḥ'a, whose name is written in Persian Juḥí or Júhí." Subsequently he quotes mentions of Juha in the works of the Persian poets Anvari (d. ca. 586/1190) and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 672/1273), as well as in two publications of the late 19th century, the Persian "chapbooks" *Reyāz al-ḥekāyāt* by Habibollah Kashani (Tehran, 1317/1899) and the anonymous *Laṭā'ef va zará'ef* (Tehran, 1295/1878).<sup>11</sup> Christensen's findings—adapted for an Arabic readership in 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam's summary<sup>12</sup>—add to previous knowledge, yet they are in no way comprehensive. Christensen himself was not aware of a number of other mentions of Juha in Persian literature, such as the ones later pointed out by the erudite references in Dehkhoda's *Loghatnāma* as well as his *Amṣāl va ḥekam*.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, neither Christensen nor any subsequent researcher has yet focused on the connection of Juha, who prevailed in Persian literature until the late 19th century, with Molla Nasr al-Din, the character he was to become from the late 19th century onwards in Persian popular tradition. This process, then, its mechanism and its result are the focus of the present study.

7. Wesselski, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin* 1 (nos 207, 210, 214, 235, 244, 248) and 2 (nos 185, 217), esp. 1:246, no. 160.

8. Cf. Ulrich Marzolph, "Zur Überlieferung der Nasreddin Hoca-Schwänke außerhalb des türkischen Sprachraumes," in Ingeborg Baldauf, Klaus Kreiser and Semih Tezcan, eds., *Türkische Sprachen und Kulturen. Materialien der 1. Deutschen Turkologen-Konferenz* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 275–85.

9. See, for example, Jonathan Scott, *Tales, Anecdotes and Letters* (Shrewsbury, 1800), 308–313.

10. René Basset, *Les fourberies de Si Djeh'a* (Paris, 1892).

11. Christensen, "Júhí in the Persian Literature," 131.

12. 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam, "Juḥā fi'l-adab al-Fārisī," *al-Risāla* 1, no. 20.

13. 'Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, *Loghatnāma* 16:233–34; idem, *Amṣāl va ḥekam*, 4 vols. (Tehran 1352 Sh./1973), see under "Joḥi" and "Naṣr al-Dīn."

According to the previous studies noted, the earliest mention of Juha's name appears in the *divān* of Manūchehri (d. ca. 432/1040) in a poem lamenting the bygone splendor and sincerity of traditional refined verbal expression, culminating in the line:

*andar in ayyām-e mā bāzār-e hazl ast o fosūs  
kār-e Bū Bakr-e robābī dārad o țanz-e Johī*

In our day the market deals in jokes and jests, alas.  
It deals in the deeds of Abu Bakr the *robāb* player and the ridicule of Juha.<sup>14</sup>

While such writers of the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries as Naser-e Khosrow (d. ca. 465/1072), Adib-e Saber (d. ca. 538/1143) and Suzani (d. 569/1173) express their disrespect and negative evaluation of Juha in similar terms, the mystical poet Sana'i (d. 525/1130) is the first to quote the text of one of the relevant anecdotes in his *Ĥadiqat al-ĥaqīqa*. It goes as follows:

*bā Johī goft rūz ĥizī  
kaz 'Alī o 'Omar begū ĥizī  
goft bā vay Johī ke andūh-e ĥāshṭ  
dar delam ĥobb o bogĥz-e kas na-gožāshṭ*

A catamite once said to Juha,  
"Tell me something of 'Ali and 'Umar."  
Juha replied, "Anxiety for food  
"Has left in my heart no (room for) love or hate towards anyone."<sup>15</sup>

This anecdote is adapted from earlier Arabic sources, where it is quoted in an analogous form from the 3rd/9th century onwards. It certainly does not belong to the traditional stock of Juha anecdotes such as those documented in medieval Arabic literature prior to Sana'i.<sup>16</sup> The evasive answer Juha gives in reply to the standard question concerning the superiority of 'Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, or the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab, an early companion, might well be interpreted as *taqiyya*, the legitimate Shi'ite practice of concealing one's true creed in times of imminent danger. It is significant in this context that the earliest Arabic versions of the anecdote lack political implications, simply reporting an unnamed person's confession that his greed did not leave him room to mourn for his deceased son. Later versions, still pre-Sana'i, instead ask the greedy person about his admiration for the *ṣahāba* (more explicitly, Abu Bakr and 'Umar). The latter notion might have inspired Sana'i to further develop the relevant context. However, even if this might be understood as implying Juha's adherence to the Shi'ite creed—probably connected with his alleged qualification as a Shi'ite

14. *Divān-e Manūchehri*, ed. Mohammad Dabir-Siyaqi (Tehran, 1326 Sh./1947), 113.

15. Mohammad Taqi Modarres Razavi, *Ta'liqāt-e ĥadiqat al-ĥaqīqa* (Tehran, 1344 Sh./1965), 514.

16. See Ulrich Marzolph, "Cuha, the Arab Nasreddin in Mediaeval Arabic Literature," *III. Milletlerarası Türk Folklor Kongresi Bildirileri. 2: Halk Edebiyatı* (Ankara, 1986), 251–58. For analogues see idem, *Arabia ridens, die humoristische Kurzprosa*

traditionist—similar tendencies cannot be proven to exist in later authors.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to originally related characters such as Bohlul, who was to develop into a venerated saint in Shi'ite popular tradition in subsequent centuries, it was Juha's fate to remain a fool.<sup>18</sup> Such is the message of the anecdote said to underlie the allusion in Anvari's *divān*:

*hamchū Johī kaz khadūk charkha-ye mādar shekast*

. . . like Juha who, out of anger, broke his mother's spinning wheel.<sup>19</sup>

Christensen supplies the explanation, given in the lexicographical work *Kashf al-lughāt*: "It is related that one day he uttered a witticism in an assembly, but nobody laughing at that, he got vexed and after returning home broke the spinning wheel of his mother."<sup>20</sup>

Aside from a brief mention in *Lobāb al-albāb* by 'Awfi (d. 630/1232),<sup>21</sup> Juha's next appearance, chronologically speaking, occurs in Rumi's celebrated *Maṣnavī-ye ma'navī*. The three anecdotes given there have been discussed by Christensen. It is important to draw attention to the fact that two of them play on sexual themes, while a third later became part of the traditional stock of Nasr al-Din anecdotes. (1) Book 2, verses 3116–3127: Johi overhears mourners lament that the deceased is being brought to a house without furniture, provisions, food or drink, and asks his father whether they are bringing him to their house.<sup>22</sup> (2) Book 5, verses 3325–3336: Some women in the presence of a preacher discuss whether long pubic hair would diminish the value of prayer. Johi, masked with a veil, has another woman examine his body, and she screams in surprise when she touches his penis. (3) Book 6, verses 4449–4537, 4553–4566: Johi and his wife trick the *qāzī* into approaching her as a lover. He is

*der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1992), vol. 2, no. 197.

17. For Juha as a Shi'ite traditionist s.v. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> (London–Leiden, 1960–): "Djuḥā" (Charles Pellat).

18. For Bohlul see Ulrich Marzolph, *Der Weise Narr Buhlul* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983); idem, "Der Weise Narr Buhlul in den modernen Volksliteraturen der islamischen Länder," *Fabula* 28 (1987): 72–89.

19. *Divān-e Anvari*, ed. Mohammad Taqi Modarres Razavi (Tehran, 1340 Sh./1961), 572; *Divān-e Anvari*, ed. Sa'id Nafisi (Tehran, 1337 Sh./1958), 362. See also Abu al-Hasan Farahani Hosayni, *Sharḥ-e moshkelāt-e divān-e Anvari*, ed. Mohammad Taqi Modarres Razavi (Tehran, 1340 Sh./1961), 73–74; Ja'far Shahidi, *Sharḥ-e loghāt va moshkelāt-e divān-e Anvari Abivardī* (Tehran, 1357 Sh./1978), 196–97.

20. Christensen, "Juhī in the Persian Literature," 131.

21. E. G. Browne and Mohammad Qazvini, eds., *Part 1 of the Lubābu'l-albāb of Muhammad Awfi* (London–Leiden, 1906), 55.

22. Cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Copenhagen, 1955–58), J 2483. See also Ulrich Marzolph, "Das Haus ohne Essen und Trinken. Arabische und persische Belege zu Mot. J 2483," *Fabula* 24 (1983): 215–22.

trapped and has to extricate himself for a large sum of money. When they try to repeat the trick later, they are recognized.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to Rumi's acquaintance with Juha (whose name is changed to Johi out of metrical considerations), the contemporary testimony of Rumi's mystical beloved and teacher Shams-e Tabrizi is preserved, mentioning two anecdotes on Juha in his *Maqālāt*.<sup>24</sup> The first, quoted by Wesselski with reference to Greek, Turkish, Hungarian, Serbian and Croatian publications of Nasr al-Din tales, consists of a short verbal repartee:

*Goftand Johī rā ke in sū bengar ke kh' ānchahā mibarand. Johī goft mā rā che? Goftand ke be khāna-ye to mibarand. Goft shomā rā che?*

They said to Juha, "Look this way, they are carrying trays!" Juha replied, "How does that concern me?" They said, "They are carrying them to your house." He said, "How does that concern you?"<sup>25</sup>

While this anecdote is paralleled by a strikingly similar anecdote attributed to the German emperor Frederick the Great, the second item quoted in the *Maqālāt* of Shams-e Tabrizi belongs to the popular subject of the master thieves stealing each other's belongings, which is fairly widespread in Oriental and international folk literature.<sup>26</sup> Here Juha is opposing the jester Abu Bakr, the *robāb* player mentioned above, obviously a popular character in Rumi's time about whom no biographical information is available, but whose name is also quoted in connection with Juha in Rumi's *Divān-e kabīr*.<sup>27</sup>

About a century after Rumi, 'Obayd-e Zakani includes ten anecdotes on Juha in his collection compiled from Arabic and Persian sources, the *Resāla-ye del-goshā* or "Joyous Treatise." Although at least five of them (items 1, 4, 5, 6, 10) are obviously modelled after anecdotes from earlier Arabic literature, only one (no. 10) is known to have been part of the previous Arabic stock of anecdotes on Juha. The following is a short listing of the tales translated or summarized by Christensen in his "Les facéties de 'Ubaïd-i-Zākāni." The page numbers cited refer to Zakani's *Kolleyāt*.<sup>28</sup>

23. Cf. Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktales*, trans. and rev. Stith Thompson (Helsinki, 1961), 1358 B.

24. *Maqālāt-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, ed. Mohammad 'Ali Movahhed, 2 vols. (Tehran, 1369 Sh./1990), 1:121.

25. Wesselski, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin* 2:231, no. 497; Thompson, *Motif-Index*, J 1353.

26. Aarne, *Types of the Folktales*, 1525 sqq. For the parallel with Frederick the Great see Meherjibhai Noosheerwanji Kuka, *The Wit and Humour of the Persians* (Bombay, 1894), 220, no. 171; idem, *Wit, Humour and Fancy of Persia* (Bombay, 1937), 259, no. 102; Sam Kabbani, *Altarabische Eseleien* (Herrenalb, 1965), no. 306.

27. *Kolleyāt-e Shams yā divān-e kabīr*, ed. Badi' al-Zaman Foruzanfar (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1363 Sh./1984), 1:54, line 925; cf. *Maqālāt-e Shams-e Tabrizi* 1:155, 474 f.

28. Ed. P. Atabaki (Tehran, 1331 Sh./1952).



(1) P. 286, Arabic no. 10: Juha refuses to invoke God's assistance when going out to buy a donkey. After his money is stolen, he returns home, adding "God willing" to every factual statement.<sup>29</sup> (2) P. 313, Persian no. 14: Juha steals some sheep and afterwards gives them away for free, thus redeeming his sin by a good deed, while keeping the fat tails as a profit.<sup>30</sup> (3) P. 314, Persian no. 20: Juha eats the honey his master has declared to be poison.<sup>31</sup> (4) P. 314, Persian no. 21: Juha tricks a beautiful woman into granting him her favors in return for two smoked fish. Later, he pretends the fish were taken from him in compensation for a bowl he had broken. The woman's husband restores the fish to him.<sup>32</sup> (5) P. 316, Persian no. 33: The door of Juha's house is stolen. He steals the door of the mosque in town, saying, "God knows the thief and will point him out to me in order to retrieve the door of his own house."<sup>33</sup> (6) P. 320, Persian no. 55: Juha overhears his parents hide the big fish before the meal. He pretends to ask the small fish about the fate of the prophet Jonah. Translating the answer, he has them recommending that he ask the big old fish hidden away.<sup>34</sup> (7) P. 324, Persian no. 76: Juha promises to revive a dead person, but a weaver cannot be revived at all.<sup>35</sup> (8) P. 344, Persian no. 207: Juha promises to cure a sick man, but wants to eat first. When in the meantime the sick man dies, he justifies his action by arguing, "If I had not eaten, we should both have died."<sup>36</sup> (9) P. 345, Persian no. 210: Juha's deceased mother is said to have laughed while her corpse was being washed. (10) P. 348, Persian no. 229: Juha approaches his father's slave girl at night: "Hush, I am my father!"<sup>37</sup>

It is extremely difficult to evaluate the impact Zakani's anecdotes might have had on later tradition. Out of the ten Juha anecdotes, at least four (nos 1, 6, 7, 8) are given in Jean-Adolphe Decourdemanche's *Sottisier de Nasr-Eddin-Hodja*, at least six (nos 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7) in Mohammad Ramazani's *Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn*; both publications, though compiled under different conditions, are alike in that the sources are not precisely disclosed.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the anecdotes they have in

29. Cf. Aarne, *Types of the Folktales*, 830 C; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 481. Also s.v. *EM*: "Gottes Segen" (Uku Masing); Mahmoud Omidisalar, "Molāḥaḏātī dar bāra-ye 'Obayd-e Zākāni,'" *Iran Nameh* 6, no. 2 (1988): 228–47, esp. 232.

30. Cf. Thompson, *Motif-Index*, J 1605; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, 2, no. 92.

31. Cf. Aarne, *Types of the Folktales*, 1313.

32. Cf. *ibid.*, 1420 A; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 1166; *idem*, *Der Weise Narr Buhlul*, 50, no. 87. Juha was already appearing as protagonist in the 12th-century Arabic paroemiological work *Nuzhat al-anfus*. See Rudolf Sellheim, "Eine unbeachtet gebliebene Sprichwörtersammlung," *Oriens* 31 (1988): 82–94.

33. Cf. Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 1217.

34. Cf. Aarne, *Types of the Folktales*, 1567 C; Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 401; Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden, 1956), 121, no. 134; s.v. *EM*: "Fisch: Den großen F. befragen" (Elfriede Moser-Rath).

35. See Scott, *Tales, Anecdotes and Letters*, 312–13.

36. *Ibid.*, 308–312.

37. Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 577.

38. Jean-Adolphe Decourdemanche, *Sottisier de Nasr-Eddin-Hodja, bouffon de Tam-erlan, suivi d'autres facéties turques* (Brussels, 1878); Mohammad Ramazani, *Mollā*



common with Zakani might well be taken from the *Resāla-ye delgoshā*, either directly or by way of some intermediary.

The next occurrence of Juha in chronological order is an anecdote in *Bahārestān* by ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 898/1492), a work that Reynold Nicholson had pointed out to Christensen.<sup>39</sup> Here Juha wants to let another person swear an oath in his place, since he himself is not deemed trustworthy.<sup>40</sup> Aside from this, only one other instance of a small, though important, corpus of Nasr al-Din lore in Persian literature remains to be discussed—one which, incidentally, has so far not been taken account of in Western scholarship. This is the group of Juha anecdotes incorporated in *Latā’ef al-tavā’ef*, a collection of anecdotes by ‘Ali b. Hosayn Va‘ez Kashefi, commonly known as Safi (d. 939/1532).<sup>41</sup> Here again we find eleven different anecdotes on Juha, only two of them having occurred in previous Persian sources (nos 1, 11). (1) Juha wants to let a trustworthy person swear an oath in his place (two versions).<sup>42</sup> (2) Juha leads ten blind men across a river, one of whom drowns. He says, “Don’t worry, you only have to pay for nine!”<sup>43</sup> (3) Juha’s donkey does not want to go home because of the miserable rations there.<sup>44</sup> (4) Juha claims he and his mother are soothsayers who never fail: they merely state the exact opposite of what is to be. (5) Juha is first when leaving the mosque, last when entering. (6) A woman looks at Juha’s ugly face to do penance for a sin committed with her eyes.<sup>45</sup> (7) An extremely ugly man, Juha is led by a woman to a sculptor to serve as a model for a statue of the devil.<sup>46</sup> (8) As a child Juha wishes that his sick mother might not rise the next morning. (9) Juha wants his father not to die a natural death but to be killed. That way, in addition to his inheritance he can profit from the blood-money.<sup>47</sup> (10) Juha’s son says, “My father is in the house lying to God. While contemplating his ugly face in the mirror, he is praising God for having created such a beautiful thing.”<sup>48</sup> (11) The story about the house without food or drink.<sup>49</sup>

The sources of ‘Ali Safi’s book have not yet been scrutinized on a general level. As for the Juha anecdotes, a majority, again, are taken from the vast stock

*Nasr al-Din* (Tehran, 1315 Sh./1936), nos 104 (308), 355, 359, 364, 365, 371. See also Wesselski, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin*, vol. 1, nos. 154, 155, 158, 160.

39. Christensen, “Jūhī in the Persian Literature,” 136, note 1.

40. ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Bahārestān*, ed. Esmā’il Hakemi (Tehran, 1367 Sh./1988), 84.

41. Fakhr al-Din ‘Ali Safi, *Latā’ef al-tavā’ef*, ed. Ahmad Golchin-Ma’ani (Tehran, 1336 Sh./1957), 153, 299, 300, 324, 327–28, 337, 390.

42. Cf. Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 302.

43. Cf. Thompson, *Motif-Index*, J 2566.

44. Cf. Marzolph, *Arabia ridens*, vol. 2, no. 770.

45. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 828.

46. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 1133.

47. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 581.

48. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 899.

49. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 340; Thompson, *Motif-Index*, J 2483.

of Arabic humorous prose, the process of adaption consisting of translating them and transplanting Juha as protagonist. Seven anecdotes are documented in previous Arabic sources (nos 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11). Only two of these had been quoted by earlier Persian authors, namely, the anecdote about swearing an oath (no. 1) by Jami, and the one about the house without food or drink (no. 11) by Rumi. Apparently, though 'Ali Safi must have known the *Maṣnavī*, he did not reproduce the version of the latter anecdote given there, rather choosing to introduce Juha's daughter—a singular turn of events not picked up by later tradition. The occurrence of yet another anecdote in the *Laṭā'ef al-ṭavā'ef* is of special importance. The story of Juha leading the blind men is the only one this corpus has in common with the early Turkish tradition of Hoca Nasreddin anecdotes such as documented in one of the earliest manuscripts preserved, dating from about the second half of the 16th century.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it represents a rare first instance in the merging of tales from the Turkish and Persian traditions.

Subsequent centuries leave us at a loss concerning the further development of the Nasr al-Din tradition in Persian literature. Aside from a retelling in *Majma' al-amṣāl* by Hablerudi (d. 1049/1639) of an anecdote given by Zakani (no. 7), no further mention could be traced by the present author.<sup>51</sup> The very lack of such materials testifies to the fact that Juha apparently never was fully integrated into the Persian-language tradition, at least not into that represented in literary sources. All we know for certain is that his name in Persian, much the same as in Arabic, must have been associated with a specific notion of foolishness. Yet the raw materials to fill this framework were mostly imported from foreign—in this case Arabic—sources. In contrast to Bohlul, Juha never was accepted as a character of Persian national interest, nor did his anecdotes give rise to independent manuscript collections such as exist in Arabic literature from the 10th century onwards.

Even as late as the 19th century, the Persian compilations quoted by Christensen did not draw upon an independent indigenous Persian tradition, but rather compiled their tales from previous literary works, notably 'Ali Safi's *Laṭā'ef al-ṭavā'ef* (see the above list). In its fourteenth chapter devoted exclusively to Juha, *Reyāz al-ḥekāyāt* by Habibollah Kashani (late 19th century) quotes four of the anecdotes given by Safi.<sup>52</sup> *Laṭā'ef va zarā'ef*, the anonymous compilation dating from early in the last quarter of the 19th century, includes three of Safi's anecdotes on Juha.<sup>53</sup> Another, earlier, popular Persian "chapbook,"

50. Kathleen R. F. Burill, "The Nasreddin Hoca Stories. 1: An Early Ottoman Manuscript at the University of Groningen," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 2 (1970): 7–114, esp. 38, no. 32. See also Günay Kut, "Nasreddin Hoca hikâyeleri yazmalarının kolları üzerine bir deneme," *IV. Milletlerarası Türk Halk Kültürü Kongresi Bildirileri. 2: Halk Edebiyatı* (Ankara 1992), 147–200, esp. no. 14.

51. See Mohammad 'Ali Hablerudi, *Majma' al-amṣāl*, ed. Sadeq Kiya (Tehran, 1344 Sh./1965), 231, no. 1611; cf. 52, no. 572.

52. Christensen, "Jūhī in the Persian Literature," quotes from an early edition (Tehran, 1317/1899). A modern printed edition (Tehran: 'Elmi, 1333 Sh./1954) includes the relevant chapter, pp. 129–40: no. 1 = Safi, *Laṭā'ef*, no. 7; no. 2 = Safi, no. 2; no. 3 = Safi, no. 3; no. 4 = Safi, no. 1.

53. Christensen, "Jūhī in the Persian Literature," quotes from an early edition (Tehran, 1295/1878), 23, 25–26. The text appears to be identical in an available litho-

*Laṭā'ef-e 'ajība*, compiled by the Indian resident Mohammad Mostafa late in the first half of the 19th century, draws on the materials presented by Safi.<sup>54</sup>

How then did Juha finally gain broad access to Persian traditional jokelore? To answer this question one has to turn towards the historical development of Turkish Hoca Nasreddin anecdotes. This should not be done without bearing constantly in mind that preserved written documents might well be presumed only to represent the peak of a popular tradition circulating in the oral. On the other hand, any statement about Turkish literary texts does not necessarily imply the existence of a similarly accented oral tradition. The delicate communication between the literary and the oral can in most cases only be guessed at.

After at least three centuries of manuscript tradition, the first Turkish-language collection was published in 1253/1837.<sup>55</sup> While the exact relationship of its contents to previous collections of Hoca Nasreddin anecdotes still remains to be scrutinized, comparison with some of the earlier as well as later collections makes it obvious that a canonical corpus of Hoca Nasreddin anecdotes never existed. Even though the printed booklet of 1837, being more easily available and certainly cheaper than previous manuscript collections, helped to spread Hoca Nasreddin's fame across the language borders, it obviously did not result in any fixed set of anecdotes which, in a strict sense, might have been regarded as constituting a canonical collection. To the contrary, the translations soon afterwards prepared in a multitude of neighboring languages give us to understand that Hoca Nasreddin, in any given language of his sphere of influence, could count on being popular enough to integrate jokes or anecdotes from no matter what sources, provided they fitted in with the general outlines of his character. Thus, it is not surprising to find one of the first Arabic translations of the *Laṭā'if-i Khwāja Naṣr al-Dīn Afandī*, published in Cairo in 1278/1862, to include much more than a simple rendering of the Turkish original.<sup>56</sup> Out of 233 anecdotes in the Arabic text just 100 have been adopted from the total of 133 in the Turkish booklet.<sup>57</sup> The majority of the remainder is taken from Arabic literary collec-

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graph edition dated 1298/1880, though no exact page references are possible, since an unidentified number of leaves is missing at the beginning: p. 23, no. 1 = Safi, *Laṭā'ef*, no. 1; p. 25, no. 2 = Safi, no. 2; p. 26, no. 3 = Safi, no. 4.

54. Mohammad Mostafa, *Laṭā'ef-e 'ajība* (Lucknow, 1258/1842), 31 = (Lucknow, 1262/1846), 21, no. 101 = Safi, *Laṭā'ef*, no. 10. On the earliest specimen of Persian "chapbooks" see Ulrich Marzolph, "Pleasant Stories in an Easy Style: Francis Gladwin's Grammar of the Persian Language as an Intermediary between Classical and Popular Literature," in *Proceedings of the 2nd Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea, Bamberg, 1991* (forthcoming).

55. See A. Esat Bozyiğit, *Nasreddin Hoca Bibliografyası Üzerine Bir Deneme* (Ankara, 1987), 20–21, nos. 128–44, which lists 17 Ottoman Turkish lithograph editions between 1253/1837 and 1342/1926.

56. A copy of *Laṭā'if Khwāja Naṣr al-Dīn* can be found in Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, Germany, shelfmark Ci IX 582; the British Library possesses a copy dated 1280/1864, shelfmark 14582.c.26 (see A. G. Ellis, *Arabic Books in the British Museum*, 3 vols. [London, 1894–1935], 2:426).

57. This and the following statements are based partly on Kerstin Biniakowski and Betina Schünemann, "Die Schwanksammlungen um Hoca Nasrettin bzw. Juha in den

tions of anecdotes, to some extent maybe also from oral tradition. The translator does not give much of a clue as to the sources exploited, and introduces the Arabic text with the following few words: "Here are some anecdotes about Hoca Nasreddin (*al-Khujah Naṣr al-Din*), called Juha, upon him be mercy."<sup>58</sup> From a present-day point of view it is especially remarkable to see that no effort was undertaken to incorporate tales from the classical Arabic stock of Juha anecdotes, such as would have been available through works like al-Milawi's 17th-century *Irshād man nahā ilā nawādir Juḥā*.<sup>59</sup>

Presupposing that Nasr al-Din tales in the 19th century did not have to cope with any claims of being genuine, we shall now return to the next step in the development of Juha/Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia. The invention of lithograph printing techniques and their adaptation in Persia and by the Persian community in India from the 1840s onwards inter alia resulted in the production of an unprecedented kind of popular literature.<sup>60</sup> Aside from the publication of numerous editions of highly esteemed literary works, such as Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāma*, Nezami's *Khamsa* or Sa'di's *Būstān* and *Golestān*, lithography made it possible to produce in large quantities booklets of purely entertaining value, such as popular romances of the *Hamza-nāma* or *Eskandar-nāma* variety.<sup>61</sup> Besides, popular literature of a basic standard, such as the reduced version of the classical *Tūṭi-nāma*, the *Chehel tūṭi*, was distributed.<sup>62</sup>

In this context emerged what appears to be the first Persian-language collection of anecdotes on Juha/Molla Nasr al-Din, a lithograph booklet published towards the end of the 1870s and subsequently reproduced in various editions.<sup>63</sup> Aside from short mentions in bibliographical documentation, this publication has drawn little attention in previous scholarship.<sup>64</sup> In none of the editions

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jeweils ersten Druckausgaben auf Osmanisch, Arabisch und Persisch" (unpublished ms, Cologne, 1986).

58. *Hādīhī nawādir al-Khujah Naṣr al-Dīn Afandī Juḥā al-Rūmī* (Cairo, 1280/1864), 2 (British Museum 14582.c.26).

59. S.v. *EM*: "Hodscha Nasreddin" (Marzolph and Baldauf).

60. Marzolph, *Dāstānhā-ye šīrīn*, Introduction.

61. Basil W. Robinson, "The Tehran Nizami of 1848 & Other Qajar Lithographed Books," in J. M. Scarce, ed., *Islam in the Balkans: Persian Art and Culture in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Edinburgh: The Royal Scottish Museum, 1979).

62. Ulrich Marzolph, *Die Vierzig Papageien, Chehel Tuti, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Papageienbuches* (Walldorf: Vorndran, 1979), 13–15.

63. The British Library possesses a dated edition of 1299/1881 (shelfmark 14783.a.6; see Edward Edwards, *A Catalogue of Persian Printed Books in the British Library* [London, 1922]). This is not identical with another edition dated the same year in the author's private possession, which according to external evidence predates the former. See also O. P. Shcheglova, *Katalog litografirovannykh knig na persidskom jazyke v sobranii Leningradskogo otdelenija Instituta vostokovedenija AN SSSR* (Moscow, 1975), 2: no. 1687 (published Bombay, 1298/1880).

64. It is mentioned in passing in Agha Bozorg al-Tehrani, *al-Ḍari'a ilā taṣānīf al-shī'a* (Najaf–Tehran, 1392/1972), 21:147, no. 4354. However, no mention of the publication is found in the entry for Molla Nasr al-Din in Mohammad 'Ali Modarres,

available does the booklet of 88 numbered pages bear a title, though running headers on the opposing pages in the two 1299/1881 editions identify it as *Moṭāyebāt-e Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn*; accordingly, the anecdotes included are most often introduced as *moṭāyeba* (less frequently as *nādera*). As is the case with others—in fact, with most lithograph prints of popular literature—nothing is known about the author, compiler or translator. The editor and copyist of the *Moṭāyebāt* are only mentioned in another undated lithograph edition, probably also from the 1880s. There the copyist gives his name as Mohammad Hasan Kh<sup>w</sup>ansari, with his son, Mohammad Esma‘il Kh<sup>w</sup>ansari, mentioned as editor. Thus, the *editio princeps* of the Persian Molla Nasr al-Din is devoid of any connection to the personal background of the individual responsible for its existence. The anonymous translator starts his short preface by mentioning that he managed to get hold of an Arabic book (*noskha*) of anecdotes on Juha and goes on:

*pas az moṭāla‘a ma‘lūm shod ke šāheb-e aqvāl-e mazkūr hamān Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn ast ke nām-e nāmi va esm-e gerāmī-ye ū bayn al-khavāṣṣ va al-‘avāmm mashhūr ast*

After their perusal, it became obvious that the protagonist of the aforementioned accounts is the very same Molla Nasr al-Din, whose well-known name and cherished fame are renowned among high and low alike.<sup>65</sup>

For this reason he undertook to prepare a Persian translation of the Arabic work. The translator goes on to quote items of biographical information on Juha from the zoological dictionary *Hayāt al-ḥayawān* by al-Damiri (d. 808/1405).<sup>66</sup> While aware of the fact, already hinted at in the 12th century by the Arabic author Ibn al-Jawzi (597/1201),<sup>67</sup> that many anecdotes attributed to Juha originate in periods later than his actual lifetime, the Persian translator explicitly rules out any doubts as to the identical nature of Juha and Molla Nasr al-Din. For him, they are one and the same person:

*hekāyāt-e ‘ajiba ke az ū be yādgar bāqīst aghlab az ānhā darin ‘aṣr mansūb be ghayr gardāda vali shobha nīst ke Mollā Naṣr al-Dīn-e ma‘rūf hamīn Johā mibāshad*

Most of the wondrous anecdotes that remain as his legacy are attributed nowadays to others. But there is no doubt that the well-known Molla Nasr al-Din is none other than this Joha.

These statements indicate clearly that Nasr al-Din must have been known in Persian-speaking Iran in the second half of the 19th century. The only probable way he could have been introduced there is by way of contact with the (oral or

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*Rayḥānat al-adab fī tarājīm al-ma‘rūfīn bi‘l-kunya aw al-laḡab* (Tabriz, 2nd impr., 1349 Sh./1970), 6:189–91.

65. Copy dated 1299 in the author’s private possession, first page of text.

66. Kamal al-din al-Damiri, *Hayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā* (Beirut, ca. 1975; repr. of Bulaq ed., 1313?/1895?), 1:325, lines 12 ff.

67. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Akhbār al-ḥamqā wa‘l-mughaffalīn*, ed. Kazim al-Muzaffar (Najaf, 1386/1966), 30.

written) tradition of Turkish-language communities such as the Azeri, Turkmen or Khalaj minorities.<sup>68</sup> While being adapted to the demands of a different language, Nasr al-Din's actual name did not pose any problems—Nasr al-Din and its kindred forms Naser al-Din and Nasir al-Din being familiar Persian names. The Turkish designation *hoca*, characterizing a minor religious authority, was rendered by its Persian equivalent of *mollā*, thus creating the Molla Nasr al-Din of Persian tradition.

When specifying his familiarity with Juha, the Persian translator does not draw a clear line of distinction between the character and the narrative material. While Juha the character might have been unknown to him previously, the anecdotes attributed to him within the Arabic booklet had long been popular in Persian literature. Thus, it is not at all surprising for the translator to notice a certain similarity in the anecdotes of Juha and Molla Nasr al-Din respectively, leading him to suspect that they were one and the same person. In fact, the anecdotes in the Arabic as well as the Persian booklet are derived from common sources. It is significant in this context that the Persian booklet once again contains an altered set of (now more than 200) tales, having dropped some of the tales of the Arabic original and having added a large number of new ones, mostly adapted as before from medieval Arabic literature. Whether these changes derive from an active interference on the part of the Persian translator or whether he might have faithfully translated an Arabic booklet other than the one published in 1862 is quite irrelevant. The major point is that obviously by the end of the 19th century Molla Nasr al-Din had gained a reputation for being a standard joker in Iran. On another level, it is quite revealing for Near Eastern inter-cultural contacts in the 19th century that the Persian translator does not include the least mention of the Ottoman Turkish Hoca Nasreddin and the extensive tradition focusing on him. Not even the designation of *hoca* (derived from the Persian *kh<sup>w</sup>āja*) is mentioned, let alone any of the pseudo-historical facts connected with the character. The Persian translator derives his secondary knowledge exclusively from Arabic works.

To sum up, in retrospect the factors responsible for the development of Molla Nasr al-Din in Persia can be sketched as follows: (1) since its beginnings, classical Persian literature had been familiar with the Arabic character of Juha; (2) moreover, classical Persian literature had always shown a liberal tendency as regards the genuineness of Juha anecdotes, the main way of adaptation and enlargement of the narrative repertoire of Juha anecdotes mostly profiting from the introduction of Juha as protagonist into anecdotes of Arabic origin; (3) Nasr al-Din, by way of a process of oral or written transmission originating in Turkish literature, had become known to Persian tradition; (4) taking advantage of the acquaintance of Persian tradition with Juha, the contemporary popularity of Nasr al-Din and the general familiarity of Persian tradition with the content of Nasr al-Din anecdotes contained in the printed Arabic booklet, the latter by way of its revised Persian translation could claim to represent the Persian Molla Nasr al-Din. Readers of the book would see their expectations fulfilled and would easily be able to supply other, previously unknown, tales of Nasr al-Din from their

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68. See the recent publication of Nasr al-Din texts in Gerhard Doerfer and Semih Tezcan, *Folklore-Texte der Chaladsch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994).



own imagination. Thus the way was prepared for a general identification of humorous narrative with the character of Nasr al-Din. Everybody “knew” who he was and nobody would object to anecdotes from various sources being attached to his name. These preliminaries given, it is surprising that the 1881 Persian edition remained unchallenged for quite some time. Except for a number of later editions (Bombay, 1312/1895; Tehran, 1317/1899; Isfahan, 1327/1909) one cannot trace much of a productive reception of Molla Nasr al-Din.<sup>69</sup> Oral tradition might have flourished, but except for the testimonies accessible through proverbs and popular sayings of recent times, there are few clues at hand as to what it might have been like.<sup>70</sup>

With the turn of the century and the vigorous orientation towards Western intellectual trends, literary criticism in Iran began to develop. Sadeq Hedayat’s dynamic plea for an awareness of the nation’s folkloristic heritage, which would have to be collected and documented, might have been one of the major impulses for Mohammad Ramazani’s collection of Nasr al-Din tales (1315 Sh./1936), again opening new horizons.<sup>71</sup> As for the criteria of this publication, containing 593 anecdotes on Molla Nasr al-Din and thus representing one of the largest collections available, the salient passages of Ramazani’s introduction deserve to be quoted in full:

For many centuries there have been numerous anecdotes and stories current in oral tradition (*alsena va afvâh*) in Iran, Turkey and the Arab countries, whose protagonist in Iran is called Molla Nasr al-Din, in Turkey Hoca Nasreddin (Kh<sup>w</sup>aja Nasr al-Din) and in the Arab countries Juha. . . . Since most of the anecdotes and stories in these three languages are similar to one another, it is impossible to find out exactly in which of these languages they originated and to which country the person about whom these strange and distinct actions are told belongs. . . . The only fact that can be stated with confidence is that the recollection of this wonderful and strange being has been passed on in the countries of the east for several hundred years.

Ramazani, proprietor of the publishing house Kolala-ye Khavar, highly influential in literary development in the mid-20th century, goes on to lament the fact that nothing on that score had been printed in Persian “except for a totally unmethodical small booklet translated from the Arabic” (obviously referring to one of 19th-century editions discussed above), and stresses his own efforts in collecting “from various old and new Persian books as well as Turkish and Arabic manuscripts almost 600 anecdotes and stories on Molla.” Ramazani’s efforts

69. For the various editions see Shcheglova, *Katalog litografirovannykh knig*, nos 1688 f.; Ellis, *Arabic Books in the British Museum*. A pre-1313/1896 Tehran edition which makes reference to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar is in the author’s private possession.

70. See, for example, the entries under Molla Nasr al-Din in Ja’far Shahri, *Qand va namak: zarb al-maṣālḥ-ye Tehrāni be zabān-e moḥāvera* (Tehran, 1370 Sh./1991) and Ebrahim Shokurzada, *Dah hezār meṣal-e Fārsī* (Mashhad, 1372 Sh./1993).

71. See Sadeq Hedayat, *Neyrangestān* (Tehran, 1312 Sh./1933; 1334 Sh./1956; 1342 Sh./1963); idem, “Folklor yā farhang-e tūda (1323–24 Sh./1944–45),” *Maj-mū’a-ye neveshtahā-ye parākanda* (Tehran, 1344 Sh./1966), 447–83.



were rewarded by a rising demand for his book, resulting in several new editions: 1316 Sh./1937, 1329 Sh./1950, 1333 Sh./1954, 1339 Sh./1960. This success must have encouraged him to “inform the respected readers [of the fourth edition onwards] that another 600 anecdotes on Molla have been collected from the old books”; the envisaged second volume of his compilation, however, was never published.

Considering that the largest available collection of Nasr al-Din lore at present contains no more than 1,238 texts,<sup>72</sup> it is quite remarkable that Ramazani should have known a similar number of anecdotes on Molla. Moreover, he points out in his preface that “many additional anecdotes on Molla Nasr al-Din are existing in oral and written tradition.” In keeping with the folkloristic trends of his days, such as Fazlollah Sobhi’s broadcast programs,<sup>73</sup> Ramazani asks “the respected readers . . . to take the trouble of collecting and sending them to me. They shall be printed with perfect gratefulness, together with the name of the writer.” Thus, the reader of Ramazani’s publication is inclined to acknowledge quite dumbfoundedly the tremendous proportions of the traditional narratives on Nasr al-Din, testifying to his obviously unsurpassable popularity in the literatures of the Near East.

By no means, however, does Ramazani’s publication stand up to critical examination, and his efforts can easily be stripped of their cosmetic disguise. Though he did, of course, utilize the Turkish collection of Hoca Nasreddin anecdotes, though he did include at least some of the Juha anecdotes current in classical Persian literature, still the bulk of Ramazani’s material is taken from the major collections of humorous prose narrative originating in medieval Arabic literature, much the same as had been practiced in previous Persian literary works. Thus, the major point his compilation has in common with the previous stock of anecdotes is not the content but rather the way in which it was compiled.

Ramazani’s collection had a tremendous—and in fact devastating—impact on the further development of the printed Nasr al-Din tradition in Iran. In the preface to the fourth edition, Ramazani himself complained that unscrupulous publishers had exploited his efforts by printing anecdotes extracted from his book in their name and thus consciously violating the restrictions of his copyright: “Not one of them has collected even half the materials of any book in one place.” This holds true even today, forty years after Ramazani’s fourth edition. Most of the small and cheap prints of Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes available in recent years appear to profit from his collection. Moreover, Ramazani’s book in itself, as documented by its numerous reprints, must have exercised quite a strong influence on the development of subsequent tradition. By way of a Russian translation published in 1970, Ramazani’s compilation even became one of the stan-

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72. Kharitonov, *Dvattsat’ chetyre Nasreddina*.

73. Cf. Ulrich Marzolph, *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1984), 4. On Sobhi see Reza Rahgozar, *Fazl[Allāh] Mohtadī (Šobhī)* (Tehran, 1373 Sh./1994).

dard works of reference for Russian folklorists looking for reliable information on Persian Nasr al-Din tales.<sup>74</sup>

While it is obvious that Ramazani's collection does not comply with critical standards, it would be quite unfair to condemn his attitude. What he did was simply to follow the traditionally practiced methods of compilation. These were guided by the general maxim of submitting not necessarily to exactness or historical reliability but rather to likeness and credibility. For the oriental literatures under consideration here it has never been a major criterion whether tales on Nasr al-Din could claim a certain age or closeness to the original protagonist's lifetime; rather, it was decisive whether they would fit into the current or contemporary frame of interpreting such a character. This attitude in the course of time was subject to changes, in the same way that morals and other means of interpretation adjusted in accordance with changing standards. The way such interpretation has influenced the development of the Nasr al-Din tradition is clearly exemplified by the perpetual decrease of sexual and/or scatological anecdotes.

Contacts with Western approaches in literary interpretation have resulted in the Eastern attempt to profit from the text of certain Nasr al-Din anecdotes in order to attempt a reconstruction of historical facts. While considering the aforementioned points of criticism in the formation of the corpus of Nasr al-Din lore, it becomes obvious that any such attempt most likely will be futile and will only have a chance to lead to reliable results when preceded by a scrutiny of the historical sources. Taking anecdotes of the contemporary Nasr al-Din corpus at their face value easily runs the risk of leading to far-fetched conclusions and should be regarded as the continuation, on a so-called scientific level, of the very attitude practiced in the formation of present-day Nasr al-Din tradition.

The last aspect to be discussed is the development of Persian Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes in oral tradition. It is here where we meet with a still less concerned attitude than the one regarding literary narrative tradition. On the one hand, printed collections of Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes in the Persian language abound, leading the researcher to conclude that their protagonist was immensely popular; on the other, reliable documentation of Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes from oral tradition is extremely scarce. Rare instances include one anecdote in modern standard Persian in Wilhelm Eilers's presentation of dialect texts.<sup>75</sup> Four anecdotes supposedly originally told in the Lor dialect, though published in a standard Persian version, are included in Manuchehr Lame'a's survey of the popular culture of the Boyer Ahmadi tribes.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, two publications drawing upon materials from one of the largest collections of Persian folklore accumulated in a single place, the Center for Popular Culture in Tehran, may lead to a just evaluation of Molla Nasr al-Din's present popularity. The two volumes of *Tamşil va meşâl* published by Sayyid Abu al-Qasem Enjavi

74. In addition to Kharitonov, *Dvattsat' chetyre Nasreddina*, see, for example, G. L. Permjakov, *Prodelki khitretsov* (Moscow, 1972), 554, no. 94. The Russian translation, *Molla Nasreddin*, was by Nurî Osmanov (Moscow, 1970).

75. Wilhelm Eilers, *Die Mundart von Gâz* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), 2:306, no. 13.

76. Manuchehr Lame'a, *Farhang-e 'âmmiyâna-ye 'ashâyer-e Boyer Ahmadi va Kohgilûya* (Tehran, 1349 Sh./1970), 125–27.

Shirazi and Sayyid Ahmad Vakiliyan contain very few items explicitly naming Molla Nasr al-Din as protagonist.<sup>77</sup> However, the archive these texts are excerpted from includes a collection of several hundred Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes supplied by contributors from all over Iran within a two-decade period starting with the early 1960s. These materials form part of the archive of Persian popular tales, very few of whose holdings have so far been published.<sup>78</sup> While the texts cannot be taken to precisely reflect oral tradition, since they were usually sent in to the collectors in a (hand-) written form, they do represent the only available larger corpus of Nasr al-Din lore in the Persian language with a claim to reliability. Their analysis, which has not yet been attempted, constitutes one of the few promising opportunities to arrive at a just evaluation of the role and importance of Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes in contemporary Persian society.

Persistent rumors had it in the past few years that due to political changes since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the telling of Molla Nasr al-Din anecdotes had been prohibited in Iran. Even though these rumors so far have proven to be without foundation, further research will have to show whether Molla Nasr al-Din has been subjected to similar changes such as those affecting the character of Bohlul. In recent publications Bohlul has evolved from a harsh critic of political and social conditions into a rather mild mystical admonisher against worldly vanity.<sup>79</sup> His alleged closeness to the Shi'ite Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq even connects him to the very roots of the Islamic religion, since the venerated Imam's birthday is celebrated on the same date as the prophet Muhammad's. As for Molla Nasr al-Din, recent field work has shown that at least the publication of booklets has been substantially influenced by the recent turn of events. Today, Molla is to be regarded as a member of the ruling clerical establishment which, by law (and censorship), is exempt from criticism. The small booklets previously abounding in sidewalk bookstalls and the assortment of peddlers and traveling salesmen have virtually disappeared. Moreover, those books available on the Tehran market in the 1993–95 period for the most part did not bear the publisher's name, a measure indicative of the sensitivity in dealing with current regulations. It is too early to conjecture what this might imply for oral tradition. The narrators of Nasr al-Din anecdotes have been wise not to allow him too deep an involvement in the questions of the day, rather portraying him as an amiable fool with an inclination towards absurd philosophy.<sup>80</sup> This fascinating ability of adaptation has enabled the character to gain the almost unchallenged position

77. *Tamšil va mešāl*, vol. 1, ed. Abu al-Qasem Enjavi Shirazi (Tehran, 2537 Imp./1978), 68–69, 133, 147–48; vol. 2, ed. Ahmad Vakiliyan (Tehran, 1366 Sh./1987), 210.

78. Ulrich Marzolph, "Seyyid Abolqāsem Enḡavi Širāzi (1921–1993) und das iranische Volkskundearchiv," *Fabula* 35 (1994): 118–24; idem, "Enjavi Shirāzi va ganjina-ye farhang-e mardom-e Īrān," *Kelk* 54 (1373 Sh./1994): 305–311.

79. 'Abd al-Karim Manzuri Khamena, trans., *Laṭifahā-ye Bohlūl-e dānanda* (Tehran, 1363 Sh./1984), translation of Nur al-Din Sayyidzada, *Behlūl dananda letifeleri* (Tehran, 1362 Sh./1983); Mansur Khanlu, *Bohlūl mīkhandad* (Tabriz, 1363 Sh./1984); Mahmud Motadayyen, *Majmū'a-ye dāstānhā-ye Bohlūl-e 'āqel* (Tehran, 1342 Sh./1953; 1364 Sh./1985); Reza Ma'sumi, *Bohlūl-e 'āqel* (Tehran, ca. 1993); Mohammad Shabzendadar, *Qeṣṣahā-ye Bohlūl* (Tehran, ca. 1993).

80. Marzolph, *Dāstānhā-ye širin*, 12–13.

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in Near Eastern humor he has occupied for several centuries. Time will tell whether Molla Nasr al-Din will endure in Iran and, if so, how he will develop further in narrative tradition.

Ulrich Marzolph, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Göttingen