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RĀM WA SITĀ

RĀM WA SITĀ, an early 17th-century Persian translation of an ancient Indian love story epic in Vālmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* (ca. the 2nd cent. BCE) that narrates the earthly career of Rām (Skr. Rāma), an incarnation of the god Vishnu, and his wife Sitā. It was translated in the *maṯnawi* genre by Masiḥ Saʿd-Allāh Pānipati and has been considered as the most poetically accomplished Persian translation of this tale.

Almost nothing is known of Saʿd-Allāh Masiḥ other than what may be inferred from his two extant works, his early *Maṯnawi-e Rām wa Sitā* and his unpublished *Paygambar-nāma* (1640), and from the entries on him in biographical compendia. From these sources we gather that he was personally or ancestrally from the North Indian town of Panipat and that his mastery over the poetic style of Speaking Anew (*tāza-guyi*) that was favored in Mughal courts qualified him for the bid he made for imperial patronage by dedicating his *Maṯnawi-e Rām wa Sitā* to the Mughal Emperor Jahāngir. However, he seems not to have succeeded, since no record of Jahāngir's court mentions him as a participant. He died sometime between 1640, when he completed his *Paygambar-nāma*, and 1682, when Moḥammad-Afżal Sarḵoš, a nobleman litterateur in the Emperor Awrangzēb's court, included an entry on him in his biographical compendium, *Kalemāt al-šoʿarā*, an entry that does not mention Masiḥ as being alive. Nevertheless, by the time Sarḵoš came to compose his entry, Masiḥ's *Maṯnawi-e Rām wa Sitā* was famous for his ingenuity in using metaphors. Indeed, as related below, it came to be the most acclaimed source on literary grounds among the approximately fifty-one known Persian

versions of the Rama story (Qāsemi, p. xviii).

The plot of Masiḥ's *Maṯnawi*, composed of 132 chapters, follows that of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, dated to around the 2nd century BCE, even though it is structured, as its title suggests, according to the Persian amorous trope of paired lovers. In keeping with the domesticating vector of the vast majority of Persian translations of Indic language texts, this *maṯnawi* presents its tropes and imagery in terms familiar to the Persian literary tradition. This is central, as explicated below, to how it translates the central theological feature of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely Rāma's mixed human-divine status. There is no evidence that Masiḥ knew Sanskrit, but he knew the vernacular Hendavi and may have heard a vernacular, oral translation of the Sanskrit epic. Also likely is that he had access to a Persian prose translation made at the Emperor Akbar's behest by ʿAbd-al-Qāder Badāʾuni. Although this version is no longer extant, Badāʾuni's private account of Akbar's court recounts this translation project as one that he disapproved of for its risk of heresy. Badāʾuni, however, defended his participation in this project by citing the saying: "The narration of heresy is not heresy." The fact that Masiḥ re-used this very saying within his own defense of his *maṯnawi* suggests that he may have had access to Badāʾuni's translation (Masiḥ, p. 52).

Apart from the chapter on the dedication of the book to the Emperor Jahāngir, the first quarter of Masiḥ's *maṯnawi* comprises chapters that entwine an Ebn al-ʿArabi-derived prophetological metaphysics with illuminationist motifs in justification for the *maṯnawi*. This was in keeping with Mughal political theology that had appropriated illuminationism for its purposes; for instance, Akbar's commissions of Persian translations of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* form elements of this appropriation. Also a noteworthy part of Masiḥ's ambient intellectual milieu is Moḥammad Šarif Neẓām-al-Din Heravi's *Anwāriya*, a commentary on a part of Sohravardi's *Ḥekmat al-ešrāq*, a foundational text of the illuminationist tradition. This commentary assimilates Rāma, among the other avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu, to Sohravardi's "order of angelic lights." Notwithstanding such prestigious courtly precedent, Masiḥ needed to justify his *maṯnawi* because of an unnamed Muslim's charge that he had lapsed into heresy (*kofr)* by its composition (Masiḥ, p. 52). Masiḥ's self-defense equates the accuser's literalism with being Satanic, thus soliciting and sacralizing a figurative interpretation of his work. In a condensed image for this figurative significance, he calls his *maṯnawi* a Muslim prayer mat woven of the

Brahmin's sacred thread (*zonnār*; Masiḥ, p. 52). This anticipates the logic of his presentation of Rām as a metaphor for Prophet Moḥammad and implicitly one of the 124,000 prophets before him.

The metaphorically prophetic status of Masiḥ's Rām is apparent at two levels of analysis, the level of the distich and the level of the plot. Masiḥ's distiches extend the Speaking Anew practice of novel metaphors to explore and intensify the emotional states of Rām, Sitā, Hanumān, Rāvan, and the minor participants in their shared career, while his plot uses the *maṯnawi* technique of prolepsis to replicate Vālmiki's boon-motif that, as explicated below, determines Rām's mixed human-divine character. With respect to his distiches, Masiḥ inherited from Timurid Herat the encyclopedic and synthesizing tendency that characterized the Persian literature of Jāmi's milieu (Losensky, p. 164). However, he used this tendency to extend his explorations of the affective states of his characters. For example, consider the following passage from an early chapter relating the death of Rām's father (Jasrath), entitled "An account of Rājā Jasrath's death in separation [*ferāq*] from Rām":

The gold censer turned to fire, his body to aloe-wood.
Love's nostrils grew fragrant by those fumes.
To those ashes by the heart's fire,
Did those gathered set fire again.
Desolated by love, he grew peopled by flames.
Candle-like, by burning he became all bodied in light.
By that fire that love kindled by its breath,
Would a candle or moth have been charred.
His body, by that fire, burned like his soul.
To the water of the Ganges did they bear his bones.
The rakishly worn crown now turned a bubble.
In place of the Homā the fish finished the bones.
It was as if the king had turned a victorious sword,
That he got caught up in all that fire and water
(Masiḥ, p. 95)

The passage opens by describing miniscule physical transformations in Jasrath's corpse, but it immediately shifts in the second hemistich to a metaphysical level, even while extending the previous hemistich's physical metaphor: "Love's nostrils grew fragrant by those fumes." This adumbrates the entwinement of the literal and figural in the subsequent distiches. What

stands out on both levels is Masiḥ's wondrous preoccupation with the oppositions wrought by the two fires of grieving love and funeral pyre: "Desolated by love, he grew peopled by flames"; the solid crown is now a bubble and, instead of the ever-aloft Homā above, the ever-swimming fish below consume Jasrath's bones. His burning body is borne to water and, as if a sword, gets "caught up in all that fire and water."

The word for water, *āb*, also means "luster" and it is in this punning sense that Masiḥ uses it. Jasrath's burning body on the river is sword-like in its fire and luster. This play on the traditional contrasting pair of fire-and-water puts Masiḥ into relation with early phases of the Persian *qaṣida* and *ḡazal* tradition that, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, copiously exploited this "magnificent structural opposition with inexhaustible opportunities for oxymorons and other rhetorical artifices" (Lewis, pp. 201-2). But this is no mere virtuoso display of a mastery of literary precedent, for these transformations of states into their opposites immediately precede a passage of homily wherein Masiḥ calls his reader's attention to the diminished value for life in this cruel "world's ruin," advising abstinence from its "banquet." Seen framed thus in narrative context, the traditional *qaṣida* and *ḡazal* trope of "fire-and-water" proves to have been put to sententious use in line with a theme in Babylonian, Hebrew, and Indian 'wisdom literature' long inherited by Perso-Arabic literary culture. By such re-use for emotion-evoking purposes of the accumulated connotations of a variety of objects (bows, rings, fire, bridges, the ocean) from the Persian literary tradition, Masiḥ disclosed Rām's susceptibility to emotion and thus his human condition.

It is worth noting that Masiḥ's theologically motivated uses of metaphor as a kind of truth-speaking were in line with the most famous textbook of Arabic rhetoric of his milieu, Jalāl-al-al-Din Ḵaṭib Qazvini's *Talḵiṣ al-meftāḥ* (d. 1338), that considered metaphorical comparison (*tašbih*) as the means for leading the reader through two opposed and simultaneous movements: a movement of discovery from the less familiar to the more familiar and a movement that re-contextualizes the familiar in unfamiliar ways (Harb, p. 126). The familiarizing movement captures the logic of domesticating translation: the emotional states of normatively non-Muslim characters are grasped in the sensory terms of already familiar metaphorical fields. This alerts the reader to a larger structural metaphor at work, namely that Rām is a metaphor for Moḥammad. The estranging movement, on the other hand, dazzles the reader into recognizing the emotional specificity of Rām's tale.

At the level of his plot, however, Masiḥ signaled Rām's divinity by the technique of prolepsis familiar from the *Šāh-nāma* among other works of the Persian *maṯnawi* canon. Such prolepses were translations of an Indic motif of long currency, namely the boon wrung from the gods by asceticism. Vālmiki's Rāvana, the major antagonist in the epic, earns a boon by which he demands comprehensive immunity from a variety of divine, demonic, and serpentine beings (Pollock, p. 520). He does not ask immunity of humans and monkeys, because he considers them unequal to his cosmically effective powers. And so they are, for Rām, who eventually kills Rāvana, who has abducted Sitā, is alerted, as we are, to his simultaneously divine and human status by various other characters. Masiḥ's proleptic signs of Rām's divinity appear at two crucial junctures of the *Maṯnawi*. The first time is in chapter 20, entitled "Rām's asking Besvāmetr on the truth of the Ganges's descent from the sky on to the earth and Besvāmetr's answer" (Masiḥ, pp. 63-73). It is noteworthy that this chapter, a ten-page-long narrative of the god Brahma's bestowal of the Ganges in response to Bhāgirath's austerities and demand for a boon whereby Rām could earn his dead brothers' salvation, contains no mention of Rām's own divinity. However, the reader will recall this tale of the Ganges's salvific descent from the sky on to the earth in chapter 40 on "Rām's meeting with Sohayl when Sohayl returned from the sky to the earth." Here, Sohayl, the Persian name for the star Canopus, which is "Agastya" in the Sanskrit original, implicitly characterizes his own descent to save the sun from darkness as an echo of the truth of the Ganges's descent: "The origin/truth [*aṣl*] of the Ganges's water isn't the sky / For it is for the salvation of this world" (Masiḥ, p. 110). Sohayl's descent to save the sun from darkness also recalls Masiḥ's imagistic allusion in his prefatory chapters to Ebn ʿArabi's idea of the Moḥammadan Light. The account of the Ganges's descent thus proves to have been a proleptic signal of Rām's divinity.

These widely separated prolepses of Rām's divinity, then, work to remind the reader of Rām's prophetic mission in the world even as the chapters' particular metaphorical explorations of Rām's emotional states, in concert with those of others, foreground his humanity. Masiḥ translated Vālmiki's epic by assimilating it into an Ebn al-ʿArabi-derived prophetology already authoritative in Persian literary culture. Central to this prophetology, as also to Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, was the ambivalently human and divine status of Rāma, an ambivalence necessitated in both the Hindu and the Islamic contexts by the theological impetus to disclose the interventions of divinity in human history, and enabled in Masiḥ's poem by the truth-disclosing poetics of

metaphor.

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