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Monty Python and the *Mathnavī*: The Parrot in Indian, Persian and English Humor*

CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF A PARTIALLY NON-LITERATE KIND IS INTRINSICALLY HARD TO demonstrate and document. The poles between which cultural currents flow across geographical space are not the simple loci of “high” and “low” cultures or of superordinate and subordinate civilizations. Aspects of elite culture trickle down, features of vernacular culture bubble up, to confound and subvert the orderly progression of literary and religious history beloved of conventional scholarship. And, of course, the key occasions of transfer are usually absent from the record.

One such current that is, however, sufficiently documented in general and specific terms to be accepted *nem. con.* as truly remarkable in volume, longevity and global efficacy is the overwhelmingly one-way traffic of seminal commodities, artifacts and ideas that flowed westward from the South Asian subcontinent between at least 300 B.C.E. and 1400 C.E. Along this stream, from the Punjab via the Iranian plateau and adjacent waterways to Mesopotamia, Syria, the Mediterranean and western Europe, were borne the Gypsies, the game of chess, the mathematical concept of zero and the notation with which to use it, the literary device of the Frame Story, and a flood of stories to stock it. This East-West deluge superseded a brief but intensive period of West-East influence by Hellenic culture on Iran and India (engendered by Alexander’s conquests, and bearing philosophy such as musical theory and practice), and was ultimately followed by another switch to a West-East polarity with the establishment of an Islamic hegemony over the region (following the Arab and Turco-Iranian conquests) which, in addition to original contributions, brought back much that was of Indian origin in new guise.

But it was this long middle period of East-West transmission (through voluntary commerce without conquest) that arguably supplied the most lasting and globally viable exotic items to the medieval cultures of Persia, Islam, and Europe. As documented in their literatures, this diffusion is most strikingly evident in a body of humorous anecdotes that surfaced in western Asia and Europe, everywhere from Iran and Egypt to Italy and Scotland, between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. All of these offer certain intricacies of plot or peculiarities of characterization that enable us to trace their predecessors among extant Indian “moral fables,” however much they may have been modified in ethical impetus or local color. The popular themes of the clever outwitting the stupid, the too-clever-by-half being hoist by his own petard, sexuality overcoming prudery and patriarchy, were frequently recast as theater, verse, folksong or vaudeville,

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and retained their popularity until more “modern” forms and techniques of humor invaded their cultural milieu—in some cases only in recent decades. Collectively, these anecdotes fall under the rubric “Wiles of Women,” though both the originals and their derivatives range more widely over the field of human foibles than merely the battle of the sexes. Scores of instances may be traced in the standard folkloric taxonomies, often as the original exemplar.¹

A typical example is the “Silence Wager” (Tale Type 1351). A married couple (in another version, a cell of dervishes) seek to resolve a trivial disagreement over a domestic chore by each trying not to be the first to speak; their dogged refusal to respond, even when strangers arrive, subjects them to an increasingly mortifying barrage of insults and injuries, usually culminating in the humiliation of a shaven head. The best-known English-language version of the tale is the Scottish folk ballad “The Barring of the Door.” This gem of psychology and slapstick has also left Persian, Turkish and Italian versions on its way to Britain.²

One of the earliest passengers along this stream of consciousness, as both commodity and concept, was *Psittacus*, the friendly and intelligent green parrot of India (the Greek historian Ctesias described one in the fifth century B.C.E) Probably no other pet has enjoyed in its time such a wide distribution, nor proved such a boon to the matter and manners of the funny story. Tales involving animals and humans often require the animal to speak—which is well enough in folk tales, but unrealistic in more sophisticated genres of wisdom literature such as the Mirrors for Princes or Wiles of Women. The parrot, however (and, in some cultures, the mynah or the magpie) does indeed “talk” in human language, so that verisimilitude is maintained; or at least the tale is transported from the realm of make-believe into the halfway house of magical realism. Once established, the principle of the interactive parrot is expanded *ad lib.*, so that *Psittacus mimus*, a mere copycat who craves a cracker, is promoted to *Psittacus sapiens*, a paragon of motivational psychology and metaphysics, a rhetorical match for most of his or her human antagonists. (Polly’s Indian antecedents are female; Persian parrots, grammatically genderless, are evidently female in most contexts; parrots in English dirty jokes are male.)

The classic talking-parrot tales can be shown to have migrated from India’s celebrated cycles of frame-stories to Iran and beyond during the Islamic period, sometimes in considerably mutated forms. In what follows I shall bring a part of the *tūfī-nāmah* file up to date and into English, analyze some of its humor, and relate this to its serious side. For these purposes, we may break down the pertinent inventory into four groups of Tale Types and Motifs.

1. The [Tale] Types cited in what follows are from Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*, ed. and tr. Stith Thompson, 2nd revision (Helsinki, 1964); the Motifs are from Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind. 1955–58).

2. See Stith Thompson, and also Ulrich Marzolph, *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens* (Beirut/Wiesbaden, 1984); Pers. tr., *Ṭabaqa-bandī-yi qiṣṣa-hā-yi Īrānī* (Tehran 1371/1992), Type 1351.

I. Psittacus rasmus: The Parrot Punished For Talking Out Of Turn

Joke no. 1 was heard in New York in 1953.³ A farmer's parrot has the habit of jumping on the hens; the farmer threatens to pull out every feather in the bird's head if he does it again. The parrot jumps the hens again, and the farmer plucks his head. The farmer's wife, who has bourgeois pretensions, is giving a formal dinner; she appoints the parrot as butler, to tell the guests where to put their hats and coats. "Ladies to the right; gentlemen to the left," directs the parrot, as each group of guests arrives. Two bald men enter. Says the parrot: "You two chicken-fuckers come out in the hen-house with me!"

This not-so-old groaner retains, with remarkable fidelity, the kernel of an ancient joke on the theme of the parrot being punished for revealing an act of adultery. It contains at least two folktale motifs: Q488.2, *Head shaved as punishment*, and J2211.2, which exemplifies the bird's naïve assumption that the men's baldness had the same cause as his own. (A variation on this last theme, Type 237, in which a magpie informs a sow that it must be muddy because it was punished, like the magpie, by being tossed into the mud, is widespread in Latin America—apparently without recruiting the indigenous parrots). The major deviation from type in Joke no. 1 lies in the sexual misdemeanor's being that of the parrot itself.

Joke no. 2, a fourteenth-century French version found in a charming "Mirror for Princesses," was introduced into English by William Caxton in one of the earliest printed books in the language.⁴ The lord of the manor has a talking magpie. While he is away, his wife conspires with the chamberlain (in other versions, the maid) to cook and eat a large eel that her husband keeps in a pond, blaming the theft on otters. On the husband's return, the magpie reports, "Madame has eaten the eel." The wife and the chamberlain later pull out all the magpie's head feathers ("lui plumèrent la tête," as in the French folksong "Alouette"), letting the bird know that this is its punishment for tattling (Motif J551.5). We are told that "Ever after, whanne the pie saw a balled [*sic*] or pillled man or woman with an high forehede, the pie saide to them, 'Ye spake of the ele.'"

The mechanism of the two jokes is essentially the same; we might also suspect that a sexual element in this one, too, has been displaced, concealing a raunchier antecedent wherein milady's ingestion of the eel during her husband's absence is metaphorical. Indeed, the literary context (the Knight is writing to instruct his delicately-reared daughters in the ways of the world) is conducive to bowdlerism. At any rate, this intermediate version sites the story squarely in the "Wiles of Women" tradition.

Version no. 3, recorded a century earlier, is the first of two parrot tales to be found in Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Mathnavī*.⁵ Beginning "būd baqqāl-i va vay-rā tūṭi-i" this anecdote of a dozen lines tells of a greengrocer's pet parrot, who minds the store in his master's absence and chats with the customers. One day she takes flight suddenly, and

3. G. Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke; an analysis of sexual humor* (New York 1968), 1: 202.

4. *Le livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, ed. M. A. de Montaiglon (Paris 1854), 35–36; *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, Early English Text Society (London, 1868), ch. 16; see Legman 1: 85, 201.

5. Ed. R. A. Nicholson, Book 1, lines 248–60.

accidentally knocks over some bottles, spilling rose oil on the bench. Her master returns, sits on the bench, and finds his clothes greasy. Angrily he hits the bird on the head, knocking out her head feathers. The parrot remains speechless for days; the greengrocer, remorseful, prays and gives alms to dervishes in hopes of the parrot's recovery. On the third day, a shaven-headed dervish passes by; the parrot calls out: "Hey, Baldy, how did you lose *your* hair? Did *you* knock over the bottles, too?"

As in the other versions, the humor here resides in the bird's naively generalizing its own experience and alluding baldly to an embarrassing (originally, sexual) episode, for which gaffe it has already been punished— in short, *twice* talking out of turn. That the parrot stands for a human simpleton is made explicit in Rumi's coda to, and commentary on, the tale—the onlookers laugh at the parrot's comparing itself to a dervish, and the (disappointingly elitist) moral is spelled out that one shouldn't measure holy men by one's own human standards: they are a superior breed, as the honeybee to the hornet, the sugarcane to the bulrush, the saint to the sinner. Rumi's version of the joke, redacted as a sermon, does not exploit the parrot's archetypal, folkloric nature, and forfeits most of the humor: the fun is clean (though elsewhere the author of the *Mathnavi* reveals himself as far from prudish), and the parrot is punished for clumsiness, not impudence. This short, self-contained fable appears to be the only Persian literary version of this joke. There is an oral tale collected in Persian, but it has obviously been pirated from the episode in the *Mathnavi*.⁶

In the modern English relic, too, the original point has been lost, or at least reanalyzed—the parrot is punished simply for swearing (which is still "talking out of turn," but with an inappropriate linguistic register substituting for the inappropriate topic). Despite all these mutations there lurks, as Legman points out, an obvious psycho-analytical interpretation of the central motif: the plucking of the parrot's head represents the (threatened) castration of the Son for witnessing the Father's sexual prowess, or challenging the Father as a suitor for the Mother. This Freudian connection becomes more explicit in the frame story of the Forty Viziers cycle, as exemplified under the next heading, in which the ruler's son is threatened with decapitation for allegedly molesting his mother or stepmother.

II. *The Wiles of Women, or "cosí fan tuti"*

No wonder the folkloric parrot is regularly abused by his or her human employers. She is cast in several high-risk professions: sexual counselor, procurer, private detective (in divorce cases), and court eunuch (guardian of the chastity of the harem, or even of that of the husband). The parrot is widely associated with sexual activities, and may be seen almost as a tutelary deity of the bedroom: a Japanese pillow-book (an erotic posture book for newlyweds) of about 1850 shows a parrot framed in the corner of each of the twelve illustrations, as if narrating the text.⁷ In many Wiles-of-Women stories, the parrot is preferred as an incidental vehicle or prop (a talking wooden parrot, in one case) where virtually any other device would do to motivate the action.

6. Arthur Christensen, *Contes persans en langue populaire* (Copenhagen 1918), 63–64; cf. Marzolph, *Typologie*, Type 237.

7. Legman 1: 200–201.

Indeed, the parrot and other birds of a feather are still on the job in the twenty-first century. A housewife in China recently sought a divorce, claiming that the family's talking mynah had dropped clues to the husband's illicit affair, repeating phrases such as "Divorce. . . I love you. . . Be patient," after it overheard the husband's telephone calls with his mistress. She hoped the bird would testify in court, but lawyers were not optimistic.⁸ If this were fiction it would qualify as Tale Type 243B, and should alleviate any doubts about the plausibility of Joke no. 2 in Group I, "Ye spake of the ele."

As a parrot joke in English, the theme of sexual infidelity has furnished at least three types with several recorded examples. All fulfill the basic function of modern parrot jokes, i.e., as a pretext to vent choice obscenities on the basis of a miniature comedy of errors. Joke no. 1 retains the sexual theme: The woman gets up in the morning, raises the window shade, takes the cover off the parrot's cage, makes coffee, sits down and lights a cigarette. The phone rings. Her boy friend is coming over. She stubs out her cigarette, gets up, pulls down the shade, covers the parrot's cage, and gets back into bed. Says the parrot: "Well, that was a short fuckin' day!"⁹

The ultimate source of this reasonable comment on Woman's proactive relation to the Cosmos is the Indian collection, *Seventy Tales of a Parrot* (Sanskrit, *Śukasaptati*) compiled perhaps as early as the sixth century CE), in which a parrot narrates a series of bawdy tales in keeping with the frame story's premises (Type 1352A): A mynah and a parrot are commissioned by a husband to keep an eye on his wife so that she doesn't cuckold him while he is away on business. The parrot, as husband-substitute (the mynah plays a minor and temporary role, as we shall see), diverts the wife with a tale each day until it is too late for her to go out to meet her lover. (This frame is the structural converse of that which motivates the *Thousand and One Nights*, where the wife must tell a tale to the husband each night to postpone her execution.) The same story appears in Serbo-Croatian and, interestingly restructured and re-gendered, in several Italian folktales.¹⁰

The literary *locus classicus* of this genre is the Persian version, the *Ṭūṭī-nāmah* (Parrot Book, containing 83 tales), adapted from an earlier Persian translation in about 1330 by Ziya al-Din Nakhshabi, a Sufi of Central Asia who settled in India. This popular work produced a surge in the now-dwindling westward stream of Indian stories, engendering a seventeenth-century abridgement by the Mughal prince Dara Shikuh "Qadiri" (38 tales), which was translated into Hindi, Bengali, Turkman, Malay, Arabic, and (for the first time in 1792) English. The lost Persian predecessor of Nakhshabi's recension, *Jawāhir al-asmār* ("Jewels of Bedtime Stories," 35 tales), was rediscovered by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and published in Tehran in 1973.¹¹ Meanwhile, a cheap Persian chapbook (lithographed paperback), the *Chihil ṭūṭī* ("Forty Parrots," 13 tales) has been circulating since the early 1800s; this slim work, featured in a Qajar-era bookseller's

8. *Parade Magazine*, 30 December 2001, 5.

9. Legman 1:203.

10. See Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales* (New York, 1980; collected 1956), no. 15.

11. See Ulrich Marzolph, *Die Vierzig Papageien, Cehel Tuti: Das persische Volksbuch* (Waldorf-Hessen, 1979), 4–10, 164.

catalogue of 1865, was reprinted at least four times between 1263/1847 and 1274/1857, and a typographical edition is still available.¹²

Nakhshabi's parrot is a prodigy—Koran reciter, clairvoyant, and futures trader, the principal (if not sole) motivator of the tale: he (or she?) it is who, seeing a big deal in the offing, persuades his merchant master to undertake an ocean voyage, so that he and the mynah must act as chaperones. Nakhshabi's version is also noteworthy for ratcheting up the Islamic Grand Guignol: when the mynah counsels the wife against infidelity, she wrings its neck (Motif 551.1.1), and when the husband returns to learn that his wife considered taking a lover, but was foiled by the parrot, he has her stoned to death anyway (in the Indian original, the mynah escapes, and the wife confesses her temptation and is forgiven).¹³ In the modern Persian chapbook, too, the wife is forgiven her near-slip, but the old procuress sent by her would-be lover is killed in the traditional folktale manner, by being tied to a pair of horses and dragged across the landscape.

The wife in one of the parrot tales embedded in the collection counters the parrot's surveillance, devising a trick to discountenance the chaperone. The mechanism has survived dimly in the introductory joke to this section, and will be recognized clearly in several others below. The story is seen to advantage in a collection of "Turkish Tales" (from a Persian original) written for Sultan Murad II between about 1420 and 1450.¹⁴ In Joke no. 2 of this group, the Second Vezir's Tale, an Indian merchant buys a talking parrot. One night he stays away from home, and his wife brings her young lover over. The parrot reports this to the merchant, and the wife hotly denies it ("Would you take the word of a bird over mine?"). Next time, the wife has her slave girls ready: while wife and lover cavort, the slaves put a bullock-hide over the parrot's cage (which is presumably in the open air), strike it periodically with a stick, flash a mirror before the bars, and sprinkle water through a sieve over the top. Next day, the parrot reports that on the previous night her mistress threw a lascivious party—and that there was a heavy storm, with thunder, lightning, and a downpour of rain. The merchant (who knows that the weather was fine) is convinced that the parrot is lying, leaving the wife free to carry on her affair.

The Forty Vezirs, in a second-tier frame story (a feast for Freudians), tell their tales to the Sultan (of Persia) in order to dissuade him each day from executing his son, who has been wrongly accused (in Yusuf-and-Zulaykha fashion) of sexually harassing his scorned stepmother. The Vezirs' tales (and those of the Lady, in rebuttal) are all carefully crafted pro and contra the Wiles of Women. Under the title "The Seven Viziers," the same multi-story is told as the tenth night of the *Ṭūṭī-nāmah*: here the prince is accused by a slave girl of his father's of actually assaulting *her*, but additionally of planning to molest his *mother* and stepmother (i.e., his father's co-wives).

But to return to our "inside story": discrediting the witness by tricking him/her into talking nonsense is central to a whole group of folktales of the Wiles of Women type,

12. See Ulrich Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature in the Qajar Period," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60 (2001): 227, 231. I am obliged to Mark Luce for lending me a copy of the modern chapbook.

13. See *Shuka Saptati: Seventy Tales of the Parrot*, tr. from the Sanskrit by A. N. D. Haksar (New Delhi, 2000), esp. 5, 222–36.

14. *History of the Forty Vezirs*, tr. E. J. W. Gibb (London, 1886).

well documented in Indian, Italian and Spanish literature (Motif J1154.1). This tale of the fake storm appears also in the Persian collection *Chihil-u shash hikāyat*, also called *Jāmi' al-hikāyat*, where, in a logical conclusion, the parrot is unjustly killed by its owner.¹⁵

The bare residue of this survives in two modern English joke types (besides Joke no. 1 in this group). Joke no. 3: A pet store owner warns a purchaser that the parrot he has bought swears, but can be stopped by swinging it round by the legs. The parrot spits out his food: “Whale shit! Man the life-boats, we must be sinking—shit, shit. . .!” The owner grabs it by the feet and swings it round in a circle, while the parrot protests rhythmically, in time to the swinging, “Awrrk!—What—a—fuckin’—gale!”¹⁶ The reference to whale shit alludes to a vernacular *bon mot* that characterizes that substance as “the lowest thing on earth (it’s at the bottom of the ocean)”; the “gale” is of course an attenuated folk memory of the Indian parrot’s imagined thunderstorm.

Joke no. 4: A husband buys a parrot from a whorehouse, brings it home, and keeps the cage covered for two weeks to make him forget his bawdy language. Suddenly uncovered, the parrot looks round the parlor at the husband and his family: “Awrrk! New house. New madam. New whores. Same old customers. Hello, Charlie!”¹⁷ The implication here (counterposed to the covering of the cage that is supposed to deceive the parrot) is that the bird is morally, if not technically, right; he has thought out the situation, and reveals that the doubly-embarrassed Charlie is indeed an old customer.

In these jokes, as in the original tale, the trick of simulating a storm (in no.3), the cage cover and the owner’s deception (in nos. 1 and 4), are unavailing; though these wiles of the sexually devious superficially fool the parrot, the bird still “talks”—swears, and blows the gaff on its owner’s indiscretions. English parrots are traditionally associated with sailors, which colors their vocabulary (and conveniently re-motivates the storm). Joke no. 4—launched in a brothel, at one remove from a seaport—is at the same time the least implausible (“Hello, Charlie” is typical of the actual phrases taught to parrots) and the truest to the spirit of the Wiles of Women (and Men). In one respect the modern residual jokes, while from a scholarly perspective missing the point, have improved on the originals: whereas the Indo-Persian psittacids are as studiously eloquent as the average *munshī* or *mīrzā*, the Anglo-American birds reproduce the coarse and earthy vernacular of the sailors who brought them from the Indies.

III. Psittacus marhumus: Parrots Playing Possum

In the *Chihil-u shash hikāyat*, Papa Parrot tells his chicks who are caught in the fowler’s cage to play dead; they do, the man is fooled and tosses them out, whereupon they fly away. The same trick is also used in the fifth night of the *Ṭūfī-nāmah*, and in a modern

15. See R. Haag-Higuchi, *Untersuchungen zu einer Sammlung persischer Erzählungen* (Berlin, 1984), 114.

16. Heard at Cambridge, UK, in the 1960s; cf. Legman 1: 203 (heard in New York, 1946).

17. Legman, 1: 203 (heard in Washington D.C., 1945).

Kota folktale from the Nilgiri hills of India.¹⁸ The motif (K522.4) is pressed into service to activate more complex parrot tales, and serves most famously as the nucleus of Rumi's second parrot tale in the *Mathnavī*.¹⁹

This diffuse, delightful and oft-excerpted tale, 300 lines long, interrupted by commentaries and digressions, begins with almost the same words as the Master's first parrot tale ("būd bāzargān va ū-rā tūṭi-ī"), but is altogether different from its predecessor. The gist of the tale is as follows: A Persian merchant keeps a parrot in a cage. About to set off for India, he asks each member of his household what they want him to bring them as a fairing (*sawghātī*)—including the parrot, who asks only that her master convey to the parrots of India her longing, as a captive in exile, to be with them. (This motif occurs elsewhere, notably in the Turco-Persian folktale "The Patient Stone" (*sang-i sabūr*): the least regarded, most oppressed member of the household asks for a small favor that will prove to be her salvation.)²⁰ The parrot digresses into a long complaint—that she is unfairly exiled from her friends, that they should drink to her health and advise her how to cope (a reproach seemingly directed at the other parrots more than at her captor, the merchant). The merchant reaches India, sees a flock of parrots, and delivers the message; whereat one of the parrots drops dead. The merchant is dismayed and remorseful: "Perhaps that parrot was kin to my own parrot, a case of two bodies and one soul!" He returns home and tells his parrot what happened; the parrot drops dead! The merchant laments grievously, and blames himself, cursing his "tongue, both treasure and bane!" (Here we are struck by the transference: the master, not the parrot, is punished—in fact, punishes himself, twice—for talking out of turn. This leads, moreover, into a meditation during which the poet alludes to Mansur al-Hallaj, crucified for apparently declaring "I am God"—surely the *loquax classicus* of those punished for talking out of turn.) The grieving merchant takes the corpse out of the cage—and the parrot is miraculously revived, and flies up into a tree! The merchant assumes it was trick, which the parrot confirms: the Indian parrot had feigned death in order to counsel his soul-mate to stop singing (the cause of her captivity) and feign death (the way to freedom). After dispensing some spiritual counsel, the parrot flies away. The merchant is humbled and grateful, and resolves henceforth to abase his body and elevate his soul.

Rumi's ostensible moral states that the body is a cage, a target for flattery and hypocrisy leading to damnation, and should be renounced for the life of the soul. The emotional force of the tale, however, resides in the "deaths" of the two parrots and the merchant's reaction to them; the true point of the tale is surely the ambivalence of the gift of language. It is not without significance that the parrot's punishment in the first of the *Mathnavī* tales, in addition to the traditional loss of his head feathers—poorly motivated at that, as the accidental consequence of a single blow!—is the temporary loss of the power of speech. Rumi has transferred Motif 551 (the dangers of telling the

18. A. K. Ramanujen, *Folktales from India: a Selection from Twenty-two Languages* (New York 1991), p. 306.

19. Ed. Nicholson, Book I, lines 1546–1848.

20. See, e.g., the version by Sadiq Hidayat as reproduced in H. Kamshad, *A Modern Persian Prose Reader* (London, 1968), 85–91.

truth) from his first parrot story, where it traditionally belongs, to his second, which is of a type involving two quite different motifs (K522, as we have seen; and D150, to be examined in the next group).

As befits its theme, Rumi's longer second tale is told on a larger scale than his first: the bazaar stall-keeper becomes an international merchant, the idle chatter of a pet parrot is replaced by metaphysical debate. Is the parrot's "death" then more than a sham—perhaps a real death, with the logical corollary of a real resurrection? Before looking at the "dead ringer" for a modern English analogue (or antitype) of this tale, let us consider a related cluster of folktale motifs, that of "psittacide and resurrection," or

IV. Psittacus redivivus: Polly Finnegan's Wake

Joke no. 1, the parrot's first tale within the frame of the *Tūfī-nāmah*, occupies a spot halfway between sham death and actual death. The parrot in this tale does *not* report the woman's illicit love affair, but the husband learns of it from another source; the woman nevertheless blames the parrot and beats her against the ground—to death, she thinks—and throws the corpse out, claiming that the cat got her. "All nature mourned," writes Nakhshabi; but the parrot still has a spark of life in her—she crawls to a shrine, and slowly recuperates. The woman, meanwhile, thrown out by her husband, takes refuge at the same shrine. From concealment the parrot instructs her, in sepulchral tones, that in order to gain the saint's intercession she must pluck out (or shave off, in other versions) her head and body hair and mortify herself for forty days and nights. (Thus is our generic parrot avenged for being "plucked as punishment" in the first group of tales.) Once the woman has complied, the parrot reveals herself, intercedes with the husband, and all ends happily.

In two folkloric examples of the actual death of a parrot, death is only real within the matrix of a pop version of Hindu metempsychosis; instead of spouse-swapping, we have body-swapping, or a sort of pre-credit-card theft of identity that is played largely for laughs.

Tale no. 2, a literary version, occupies the Lady's thirtieth story of the Forty Vezirs cycle. A king teaches his vizier a spell by which he can enter and animate a dead body. One day they come upon a dead parrot, and the vizier seizes his chance—when the king accepts his challenge to enter the parrot's body, the vizier quickly zips into the king's body, and has a slave take over his own body (Type K1175). Vizier-as-king tries to cozy up to the queen, who is instinctively suspicious and makes excuses to refuse him. King-as-parrot meanwhile becomes famous for eloquence and good judgment, and is sold—to the queen, of course. Inevitably, the frustrated vizier-as-king boasts to the queen that he can enter and animate any dead body; she tricks him into entering a slaughtered goose (Motif D161), whereupon the king-as-parrot ducks into the king's vacated body, seizes the vizier-as-goose, dashes him against the wall and kills him, ending this polymorphous ballet. The Lady's moral is: Don't believe everything a vizier tells you (much less forty of them). The tale also occurs in the *Chihil Tūfī* or Forty Parrots (evidently the inspiration for the Forty Vezirs cycle), and may exist separately as an orally-transmitted Persian folktale.²¹

21. See Marzolph, *Typologie*, Type 678.

Tale no. 3: In the Indian tribal folktale mentioned under Group II, a sorcerer takes pity on a grieving parrot widow, enters her husband's body, which is thus apparently resurrected, and resumes cohabitation with "his" spouse. It is the sorcerer-soul, not the real parrot, who then counsels all his fellow parrots (1,000 of them!) who are caught in the hunters' nets to play possum; when all have been discarded, they fly to freedom, but the sorcerer-parrot himself is captured. In his subsequent adventures, a village headman's wife whom he has rebuked for immodesty tortures and kills him (Motif 551.1.1 again), but his life is preserved in a single feather he has entrusted to his hunter-owner. However, an old Kota tribesman has a premonitory dream about their inveterate enemy the sorcerer; the hunter is waylaid and the feather burned, and the sorcerer is dead for good (Motif G512.5).

It would appear from the foregoing examples that there are actually *no dead* parrots in the Indo-Persian tradition of parrot stories, nor in those tales of medieval and early modern Europe, nor the English jokes, that are arguably derived from them. (The parrot's corpse encountered by the king and the vizier, or by the sorcerer, doesn't count; it was dead before the story began.) There are only dead mynahs, parrots shamming death, parrots beaten almost to death but recuperating, parrots' bodies borrowed by human rogues in a metempsychotic charade, and parrots dying metaphorically as a Sufi prelude to eternal life. The only real, live, dead Parrot is found in the Monty Python sketch of that name. At the risk of stripping it of humor (at least for those who have not seen it), I begin with the gist, as our last story under both groups III and IV.²²

A customer enters a pet store, complaining that the parrot he has just purchased is dead. No, it's only resting, says the proprietor. I'll wake it, says the customer, and proceeds to shout very loudly in the parrot's face, then dash it repeatedly against the counter. The parrot does not respond. It's stunned, claims the pet store proprietor. Deceased, retorts the customer, and was only upright when he bought it because it had been nailed to the perch. And so on, until the proprietor agrees in principle to an exchange, only to admit, "Sorry, guv, we're right out of parrots."

Now even this sequence, conceived in a Dadaist or surrealist school of humor quite different from either the Indo-Persian misogynistic "sting" or the pre-war British farce of verbal aggression, still exudes a residue of archetypal parrot-tale motifs and techniques. Thus, to consider some of the details:

(a) The pet shop owner claimed (according to the customer) that the bird was immobile because it was "shagged out after a long squawk"—a clear reference to sexual activity and its tendency to be lethal to parrots.

(b) The angry customer demonstrates the parrot's lifelessness by grasping it by the legs, taking it out of the cage and dashing it repeatedly against a hard surface—precisely as we have seen inconvenient mynahs or parrots eliminated in the Wiles of Women stories. Here, ironically, the parrot is "killed" not for talking but for not talking.

(c) "This Parrot is no more, is bereft of life; it has ceased to be, expired, gone to meet its maker, joined the choir invisible; it is a late parrot, an ex-parrot," declares the customer, in a parody of the concatenated synonyms for eloquent, sagacious, sugar-chewing, etc., with which the frame-story author and his characters salute the living *tūīī*.

22. *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Videotape no. 15 (actors, John Cleese and Michael Palin).

This is a Post-Nietzschean Parrot in a nihilistic fable: it hails not from India, but from Norway; it is not green, but blue—not fresh and lively, but cold and sad. If God is dead, so is man's soul. The soul is defective, but is not under warranty—there is no return, no exchange, no resurrection. Each era and each culture invests the parrot with its own symbolism. We await the Postmodern Parrot with trepidation.

It is significant, in any case, that the Dead Parrot sketch, though not the funniest of the Monty Python routines (in my opinion), has for many people become emblematic of the whole ethos of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Just as, for those with a nodding acquaintance with the *Mathnavī*, the merchant and his parrot bear the Master's signature. This is not simply because of the incidental artistry, but is a recognition that the parrot is an indispensable archetype. Neither the Monty Python sketch nor the two parrot tales in the *Mathnavī* exploit the several parrot motifs in their classic context of the Wiles of Women fabliau. But each pays homage, within its own cultural and psychological milieu and in accordance with its author's social-satirical purposes, to one of the most valuable commodities once borne on the stream of commerce and consciousness from India, via Iran, to the West. The talking-parrot tales have held up better than perhaps any other ancient jokes because the parrot is Everyman's alter ego. The same motifs which, in abbreviated or inverted form in modern English humor, are found elaborated in the comedic and cosmic sketches of Nakhshabi, Rumi and their anonymous predecessors, have survived because they address universal issues of human language, sexual insecurity, and the identity of the self.

