“When a Lion is Chided by an Ant”: Everyday Saints and the Making of Sufi Kings in ‘Attâr’s Elâhi-nâma

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Abstract

This paper addresses Farid al-Din ‘Attâr's views on social and kingly ethics as espoused in the Elâhi-nâma. It offers a holistic reading of its stories, which are suffused with the tenets of Sufism, to illustrate the myriad ways that the Elâhi-nâma adopts and adapts the characteristics and tropes of practical ethics and Sufi hagiographies to advance its views. Indeed, the Elâhi-nâma promotes the ideal Sufi king and society by encouraging its members—saints, kings, and common folk—to be responsible, as individuals, for nurturing their souls, each other, and a love for the divine. It accomplishes this through a number of tale types, such as the saint or ruler who stumbles his or her way into self-awareness, the Sufi master or ruler who falters and is in need of guidance, or the hagiographical portraits of kings-as-Sufi lovers. In order to provide the appropriate context for the arguments herein, the paper explores several prominent themes and tropes from practical ethics and hagiographies and discusses Ebn ‘Arabi’s al-Tadbirāt al-elâhiyya fi eslāh al-mamlaka al-ensânîyya for current notions on the responsibility of individuals and kings.

Keywords


When the king and his army heard the words [of the woman who was disguised as a male youth] and beheld her miraculous powers and eminence, they wholeheartedly believed her [story] and immediately did as she commanded. They built her a place of worship, which rivaled the
Ka’ba [so she could spend her days and nights in prayer] ... Soon after, the king fell gravely ill. He summoned his viziers and statesmen and said, “since I am not long for this world, it seems appropriate to me that the youth should be king and commander.” When the king had passed and was buried, all the statesmen gathered together to inform the youth that she had been elected king ... The youth demurred and refused the kingship ... and revealed that she was a woman. The statesmen, amazed, implored her to rule as king as a man, or to appoint someone to rule in her stead.

ʿATTĀR 2013, 138–140, ll. 666–693

The passage cited above is an excerpt taken from the first story in the Elāhi-nāma (Book of the Divine; henceforth EN) by the prodigious Sufi hagiographer Farid al-Din ʿAttār (d. c. 1221). The “Tale of the Virtuous Woman” is certainly unique for a number of reasons. It is one of the EN’s two longest tales, both of which center on women. While the other tale focuses on a princess’s love for a servant and takes place in her own realm, the “Tale of the Virtuous Woman” centers on the power, authority, forgiveness, and faith of an anonymous woman who becomes king-maker and spiritual ruler of a kingdom not her own.

Briefly, I would like to draw attention to the peculiarities of the men in this tale. (Elsewhere, I have delineated ʿAttār’s attitudes toward female spiritual and civic leadership with regards to this specific tale [Dabiri forthcoming].) The king, his army, and his ministers immediately recognize the power and authority of a stranger. In recognizing that power, they elect the stranger as heir-apparent (vali ʿahd). When the stranger reveals herself to be a woman in a bid to deter them, the men nevertheless remain adamant. They ask her to rule (pādeshāhi kon) as a man (presumably since she has been living as one already) or be a king-maker. She opts for the latter course. She duly appoints

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1 All translations from the Elāhi-nāma are mine, with reference to Boyle’s 1976 translation, except when otherwise noted. All stories from the Elāhi-nāma are drawn from Shafi’i-Kadkani’s 2013 edition.
2 After receiving their confessions, she miraculously heals those men, who, starting with her perfidious brother-in-law, were maimed after trying unsuccessfully to sexually assault her.
3 I have discussed this tale in greater depth elsewhere; see Dabiri 2018.
someone to rule⁴ and, thus, “lays the happy foundations” of society (ʿAttār 2013, 144, l. 792). To put it succinctly, for the king and his men, it is her spiritual authority and miraculous powers that trump all other usual considerations, such as gender, social class, denizenship, or the right of the (male) heir, in their choice of ruler. The community⁵ places its trust in an individual imbued with spiritual authority, who embodies many of the characteristics of medieval Sufi saints (Dabiri 2018, 47–48).

The story of the virtuous woman, while unique on its own terms, has various analogues in other tales of kings in the EN. Indeed, as the first tale in the collection and one of the lengthiest, this story not only sets the tone for the EN, but also establishes from the outset a standard for ideal kingship. It also runs contrary to the largely-held notion that ʿAttār’s view on kings is fairly negative.⁶ Many of these assessments have been made by viewing ʿAttār’s works

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⁴ First, she appoints someone from among them and later appoints her husband after they are reunited.

⁵ The women of the community play a more passive role in this account, as they only appear at the woman’s request. The virtuous woman summons the women in order to reveal herself to them. Commoner men, of her new community, by contrast, do not appear at all.

⁶ Ritter, in his masterful and detailed study of ʿAttār’s worldview, is one of the few scholars who have offered more than just a cursory note about tales of kings, though much of the prevailing scholarly opinion about the oppressive nature of kings in ʿAttār’s works derives from Ritter’s study. According to Ritter, ʿAttār tells tales of kings for the pleasure of storytelling, but never gives in to flights of fancy about them, since they are “real human despots with their virtues and weaknesses” (308). The view of kings as despots, whatever their traits, places Ritter, an early twentieth-century German scholar, firmly among his peers. Ritter remarks further that ʿAttār shows no qualms regarding the despotic character of kings, because “he [ʿAttār] knows that is simply the way rulers are” (ibid.). Accordingly, kings also have a “magical image” due to Iranian lore (1356) and, consequently, they are not subject to criticism from the ordinary folk; at the same time, the bad in kings does not cast an especially dark shadow. It should be noted, here, that a large share of the stories that Ritter cites as illustrations of kings’ weaknesses as men of power, the extreme example of worldly men, are drawn from the Mosibat-nāma (ibid., chs. 6–7). I argue that the narratives drawn from the EN illustrate a critique of kingship as a social institution, rather than a commentary on the king as an individual. Furthermore, these two modes of criticism should be distinguished, as I intend to do in this paper. The depiction of the more “humane” side of kings in ʿAttār’s work, according to Ritter, is due to the real-life examples of kings such as Soltān Ahmad Sanjar (1086–1157) who reigned over Khorasan during ʿAttār’s early years and is positively portrayed in medieval sources. For instance, to open his section on the positive images of kings in ʿAttār’s works, Ritter is quick to note that historical kings were known to visit the pious, a practice that he couches within the context of good manners and maintaining a specific “meritorious” image: “And yet Sanjar and other rulers are always visiting pious shaykhs to have them preach to them, and they listen patiently to their reproaches and are occasionally even moved to tears. This came to be considered good manners among Islamic rulers and many of them paid great respect to the shaykhs, to the point of humiliating themselves. It would be seen as bad for
in toto rather than by in-depth analyses of individual maṣnavīs (long narrative poems) in juxtaposition with their associated tales. Furthermore, these assessments generally trade in absolutes—kings are oppressors, saints are wise, the people speak truth to power. In a recent article, I called for a holistic, genre-based reading of the EN to illustrate that it may be read as a work of Sufi practical ethics. I argued that, first, the EN may have been understood in this way by ordinary audiences and that, secondly, the “Tale of the Virtuous Woman” embodies a number of themes that outline the EN’s nuanced view of an ideal society and kingship (ibid.).

This paper is intended as a continuation of that discussion. I hope to illustrate that by training the focus of our scope on the EN and its tales, we may get a clearer sense of ʿAttār’s socio-religious and political worldview, at least as it is expressed in this particular work. What emerges from such an analysis is a more nuanced view; though kingship and its trappings do have their corrupting influence, vigilant rulers can counter its negative effects. They can (and must) do so by recognizing the ultimate source of their power in the divine, and by cultivating self-awareness and nurturing their souls.

The EN accomplishes this subtle treatment of kingship in two related ways. The first is through its frame tale, which is about a father who is also a caliph. One day, the caliph gathers his sons, consummate kings in their own rights, to ask them what each desires, so that he can arrange their affairs. Disappointed that each of his sons wants some manifestation of worldly power, the caliph encourages them to be content with God and, instead of chasing transformative objects and knowledge, to pursue self-awareness and to cultivate their souls. ʿAttār’s second strategy is to employ a series of supporting tales, in which members of the religious classes to go to the courts of the amirs, whereas it would be thought to be meritorious if the rulers went to visit religious scholars and men of God. A saying of the Prophet regarding this has been transmitted: ‘The worst of religious scholars is the one who visits the amirs, and the best of amirs is the one who visits the religious scholars. Excellent is the amir at the door of the poor man, and abominable is the poor man at the door of the amir’” (126). Positive instances of kingship are, thus, put in terms of the image-making of historical kings rather than emphasizing the function of the tale within the larger work.

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7 O’Malley, too, has recently called (23–25) for analyses of ʿAttār’s tales in juxtaposition with their associated frame tale, with a focus on the Mosibat-nāma (Book of Hardships).
8 For instance, in Discourse 18, story 2, the wind is instructed by God not to obey the commands of the beloved prophet-ruler, Solomon, should the latter’s thoughts turn to his kingdom.
9 The sons ask for Solomon’s signet, Jamshid’s world-seeing chalice, and Alexander’s water of life, respectively.
10 Two sons ask for complete knowledge of thaumaturgy and alchemy.
the caliph, narrating the stories to his sons, illustrates the importance of these spiritual pursuits. Indeed, each tale is a snapshot of the various mundane and extraordinary moments that may occur in life. Significantly, the focus of the tales ranges equally from the lowest social classes to rulers and prophets, and includes talking insects and animals.

The tales, infused with the tenets of Sufism, are ontological: they illustrate how to be in this world according to the main principles of Sufism. Accordingly, they are also prescriptive: they map the treacherous terrain of living within this world and offer a roadmap by which anyone, from every walk of life, can strive towards self-awareness and love of the divine. To accomplish this purpose, the tales sometimes follow the typical pattern of ideal types standing in opposition to the flawed. Many more examples resist such conformity: there are hardly any characters who are consistently portrayed as ideal or unideal. Even (anonymous) Sufis may be counted among the latter. And conversely, for all the anecdotes in which Eblis (Satan) or Nimrod are veritable metonyms for oppression, the two nevertheless receive sympathetic treatment in other tales with Eblis being the “mythical model” of the lover of God (Ritter, 553, 555–567). Moreover, ordinary people and animals are sometimes cast as one ideal type: they are teachers of kings and saints. In other cases, common folk are depicted as having momentarily faltered, or fallen off the (Sufi) path and are in need of their own guide. At some point in the EN, all these types of protagonists are in need of advice, just like the caliph’s sons. In other words, the EN is not a series of tidy tales in which good and bad are unambiguously juxtaposed and certain groups are type-cast to particular roles. The majority of tales in the EN may be more accurately described as moments between instructor and instructed, or (to take this a step further) master and disciple, even if briefly. Just as the caliph wears two robes—the Sufi master’s (ibid., 321) and the king’s—his sons take on the dual roles of accomplished kings and (wayward) disciples. The broader didactical implication is that as the caliph turns his sons into his disciples, the EN turns its audiences into its disciples. The EN thus depicts, invokes, and complements the practice of Sufi

11 See, for instance, Discourse 2, story 8, which I analyze below.
12 See, for instance, Nimrod in Discourse 7, story 2 (see below), and Eblis in Discourse 8, stories 2 and 10.
13 Rapp maps out an excellent case of this for the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, “where the desert fathers are cast as teachers (didaskaloi) automatically transforming their audience—regardless of temporal or geographical remove—into disciples. The teaching applies to the readers and hearers of the written word in any urban setting as much as it did to the original disciple who listened to the abba’s words in the Egyptian desert. In this book are written up the virtuous asceticism and marvelous conduct of life, and the
mentor-discipleships, probably for a broad non-specialist yet interested audience familiar with the basic tenets of Sufism.

Here, then, we may offer a more refined definition of ‘Attār’s views according to the EN: an ideal king is one who resembles Sufi saints and masters, and an ideal society is one in which all its members—kings, saints, and common folk alike—are equally responsible for nurturing and cultivating their souls and for guiding those who need it. The EN conveys this view by offering brief hagiographical portraits of kings, saints, and common folk to show that holy living is attainable and a (civic) duty for all.14

This is not to claim that the EN outlines a specific political doctrine,15 since it resembles the Qur’an in its “broad moral guidelines for the social and political behavior of the individual” and emphasis on “the community structure rather than a state structure” (Yücesoy, 12). Nor is it to argue that the EN is Sufi hagiography as we currently understand and define manāqeb (“qualities, virtues, miracles”), fazāʾel (“virtues”), malfuzāt (“sayings”), and taskerāt (“remembrances”).16 Instead, this article argues that the EN engages with sayings of the holy blessed fathers, for the encouragement, instruction and imitation of those who wish to strive for the heavenly way of life and who wish to follow the path that leads to the kingdom of heaven” (2010, 125). In his introduction to the Taẕkerat al-owliyāʾ (Memorial of God’s Friends), ‘Attār states something quite similar, which is equally applicable to the EN: “Another motive is that I considered the words of God’s friends to be the finest words after the Qur’an and the hadith and considered all their words to be a commentary upon [them]. I threw myself into this task so that if I am not one of God’s friends, at least I might make myself resemble them” (ʿAttār 2009, 43). In addition, ʿAttār expresses the wish that his tales should be of benefit for all (ibid., 39–46).

Though the “doctrine of civic responsibility did not arise” among jurists in the medieval conception of the state (Lambton 1981, 311), nevertheless, the community of believers were bound together by their adherence to God’s laws and the mechanisms of the state existed, in theory, to uphold those laws. It therefore follows that responsibility to the religion and the self and the other as members of the community/state is a civic duty; one that ‘Attār and, as we shall see below, Ebn ‘Arabi, enjoin in contrast to medieval jurists and philosophers who in general focus on the responsibilities of the head of state and the community’s responsibilities toward the latter.

14 Irwin astutely notes that a similar approach to the Thousand and One Nights is warranted, albeit one must first be willing to set aside his choice to use Burton’s translation and his subsequent judgements about the tediousness of the tale’s exhortations to rule justly.

15 For the various shades of meaning of this term and its relation to the hagiographical tradition, see Pellat.

16 Since the term “hagiography” arose in connection with the vitae (chronological events from birth/early childhood to death) of Christian saints by the Bollandists in Belgium, we might do well to question the usefulness of its application in the present context. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore the history and usage of the term, but it is worth noting that in recent decades, scholars have included a wide variety of texts under the rubric (for an overview, see Efthymiadis, II and, especially, Rapp 2015), many
political philosophy and hagiography simultaneously and in singular ways. The EN's engagement with the aforementioned generic types will be treated throughout the paper by looking at various tales against the frame tale. Viewing the EN from multiple angles enhances our understanding of such a multivalent text. For the purposes of this volume, this paper presents a comprehensive overview of the tales of kings; time and space preclude a similarly extensive review of the tales of saints, prophets, and ordinary folk. Nevertheless, some of the stories discussed in this paper involve figures belonging to these other groups, and their treatment in these selected examples is representative of various tropes and tale-types found throughout the EN. It is my hope that this paper will open up further discussion of this complex text. For indeed, the EN is one of the finer examples of the plasticity of medieval Islamicate texts in its dynamic engagement with popular stories, various generic types, and views of ideal society.

Below, I will discuss how the EN particularly evokes the structures of tazkerāt and malfuzāt and adopts popular hagiographical tropes. It is not necessary to expend too much time here on ‘Attār’s engagement with hagiography; his seminal Taẕkerat al-owliyāʾ (Memorial of God’s Friends; henceforth TO) is both well-known and popularly studied. What may need further context, however, is my treatment here of the EN as a work of Sufi practical ethics; it is well known that ‘Attār eschewed court life (he apparently never took patronage), and none of his other works can be classified as political philosophy. Nevertheless, the EN does participate in the various discourses surrounding the broader concerns of society. It does so in a fashion similar to its courtly counterparts, such as mirrors for princes and histories, but towards its own aims. The EN, thus, should be viewed as an important alternative to these genres, since it comes from one of the rank-and-file of society, an individual who earned his daily sustenance as an apothecary (‘attār), and was a prominent Sufi.

The EN takes up the formal characteristics—structure, content, and style—of practical ethics (akhlāq-e ʿamali) and mirrors. Indeed, to ensure maximum comprehension of complex concepts explored in other, more theoretically oriented Sufi treatises, it offers entertaining tales, eschews theoretical jargon, and uses “artfully artless” language (Losensky 2009, xxii)—but it disrupts these formal characteristics at the level of meaning (Dabiri 2018, passim). One of which incidentally have their analogues in the Sufi context. I follow the consensus in using the term.

18 For more on the TO, see Losensky 2007 and 2009 (and the sources cited therein); Foruzānfar.
19 On the deceptive simplicity of ‘Attār’s language, see Stepien.
“disruption” we may focus on here is that the EN adopts the universalism of practical ethics and mirrors by bringing historical and fictional figures from all walks of life together into the same space. Strikingly, though, by bringing together some of the most well-known Sufi masters from across the medieval Islamic world and from different generations, it offers a universal view of Sufism wherein all social and theological differences are made immaterial.20 Indeed, the different Sufi orders (tariqas)21 and their genealogical mappings (spiritual and bloodline descent from the prophet) are completely sublimated to common aims. So too are Sufis’ adherence and allegiances to the disparate religious schools (mażhab) of law (feqh) and theology (kalām), which had torn Ṭātār’s home city of Nishapur apart in the generations before he was born.22 Instead, the saints featured in the EN become aware of their shortcomings on the Sufi path (they are not fervent enough in their engagement with the divine) and renew their faith, or they serve as guides and instructors to others in similar situations.

Another “disruption” that is important for our current discussion lies in the EN’s adoption of the centrality of the figure of the king. In courtly mirrors and works of practical ethics, such as the influential mirrors for princes, Siyāsat-nāma (Book of Governance), by the eminent Saljuq vizier, Nezām al-Molk (1018–1092), and the Nasihat al-moluk, by the prominent Nishapuri jurist-turned-Sufi Ghazāli (1058–1111), the ideal king is a just and religious one and society’s stability is dependent on the king’s stability which, in circular fashion, is ensured by all others, who know their place in the hierarchy and act and speak accordingly.23 By contrast, the EN’s ideal king is a figure imbued with spiritual authority, a Sufi-king. Moreover, even as the king is a central figure (considering the prominent role of the caliph), the focus of the tales in the EN is broadly distributed across various character types, whose responsibilities are the nurture of their own souls, love of the divine, and helping others to cultivate this same quality. Thus, the EN puts a Sufi spin on the well-known late Sasanian-era precept—religion and the kingship are twin pillars of the state;24 this

20 For more on this topic, in terms of the concept of towhid (oneness), see Dabiri 2018.
21 For an excellent summary of the different mażhab to which the prominent Sufis of Nishapur belonged, see Cornell, 27–30.
22 For more on these factions and the decline of Nishapur, see Bulliet.
23 For more on the concept of the state and government in medieval Islam and in medieval mirrors, see the seminal works of Lambton 1962 and 1984.
24 In the Letter of Tansar, this concept is attributed to Ardashir I (180–242), the founder of the Sasanian Empire, by his statesman Tansar. The letter, likely composed or revised (this is still debated) in the sixth century, was translated into Arabic in the ninth century and into Persian in the thirteenth.
The EN’s Sufi adaptation of the concept of kingship-and-religion-as-twins is prominently displayed in the tales of kings that intertwine the civic (that is, pertaining to the running of the state) and the spiritual. The “Tale of the Virtuous Woman” provides an example of this type of story, in that the woman’s spiritual authority factors greatly in her appointment as heir-apparent by the king, and is also upheld by the statesmen and the community. Another particularly illuminating example is the second story of the EN (Discourse 2, story 1), in which a woman falls in love with a prince; her attentions annoy him so fully, however, that finally the prince has to ask his father, the king, to intervene. After failing to persuade the woman to stop making a nuisance of herself, the king sentences her to death by trampling. When she asks him for a request, the king is adamant that he will not consider a reprieve nor entertain a different form of capital punishment. However, the woman accepts the sentence on the condition that she be put to death by being tied to the prince’s horse. Her reasoning is that if she is to be trampled to death, at least she will be trampled by her beloved by proxy. At this request, the king finally recognizes the truth of her love. His heart softens (narm del shod) and he not only commutes her sentence, but sends her to the castle to be with her beloved, the prince.

Of course, the story is about a woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for love—the Sufi way (as implied). It is also about a king, who is empowered by society to sentence a woman to death, but who gets a fresh lease on life when he is taught by a humble member of that society the true meaning of love. Ultimately, even as the story is about a woman who, against all obstacles, wins the opportunity to be with her beloved, it is also about a king who undergoes a spiritual conversion and who is able to appreciate his servant and love.

One of the most well-known examples of this tale type in the EN concerns the love affair between Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (971–1030), the famous ruler of the Ghaznavid empire, and his beloved servant, Ayāz. It has not escaped notice that ‘Attār depicts this love affair in the most sensual of terms; the tales of Mahmud and Ayāz elicit all five senses as well as physical and emotional intimacy.25 Nevertheless, the couple’s love is commonly cited as one of the most popular metaphors in Persian literature for the lover and beloved in Sufi

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25 For a comprehensive overview of the different classifications of love across ‘Attār’s works and in Islamic orthodoxy and mysticism, see Ritter, 360–361 and 372–592. On same-sex desire in Sufi hagiography, see Miller. On the relationship between Mahmud and Ayāz across ‘Attār’s corpus and in terms of bending medieval gender and class expectations, see Yaghoobi, 71–92.
In this regard, it is similar to the love relationships of other well-known pairs, such as Leylā and Majnun, Shirin and Farhād, and Yusof and Zoleykhā. And indeed, Mahmud and Ayāz’s tales in the EN are nearly always followed by the caliph’s commentary that their affair, like a mirror, reflects the kind of love that all people should seek with the divine—the lover should be fully, completely aware with all five senses attuned, until the self and all sense of self disappear into the other. Yet, surprisingly, like Mahmud and the princess mentioned at the outset of this article, the rulers’ beloveds almost never hail from among the elite. Except for one quite macabre and telling exception (to be discussed in further detail below), the rulers’ lovers or beloveds come from the serving class or common folk; they are slaves, servants, soldiers, guards, or humble women, as in the tale cited above. The princess or the king who cultivates her or his soul serves her or his servants. In this way, these royal figures mirror God’s love for His servants, that is, for humankind. As the old man who offers himself to his beloved, a peasant, to sell into slavery, says: “Do you know of any blessings greater than / when God your Creator calls you His slave?” (ʿAttār 2013, 291, l. 3981).

In other words, according to the EN, the serving class represents the beloved; so does the soul, and so too does the divine: all are one, and all emanate from and should strive to disappear into the One. If the difference between ascetics and Sufis is that the former are devoted to God and the latter seek communion with God, then the difference between practical ethics, such as the Siyāsat-nāma and the Nasihat al-moluk, and the EN runs similarly. The ideal

26 The status of the metaphor is due in no small part to ʿAttār’s works.
27 See Ritter (308–312) for the view that tales of kings and their slaves illustrate “the false and correct relationship of man to God” across ʿAttār’s works. Ritter interprets the tales of Ayāz and Mahmud through the twinned themes of good manners and humility (333). The love between slave and king, in Ritter’s estimation, also tends toward one direction, from slave to the king (534). In the stories of the EN, love flows in both directions just as frequently (see the final section of this paper for such examples).
28 In the other tale (Discourse 4, story 4), a prince marries a princess. The lover/beloved dynamic, however, is between the prince and his soldier, with the prince unaware of his position as the soldier’s beloved. The prince remains clueless after the soldier’s loving attendance upon the prince while both men were prisoners of war, and even after witnessing his former cell-mate’s death before his eyes forty days after the prince’s wedding celebrations.
29 Even though there are more tales in which the servant, Ayāz, appears as the lover and the teacher of the king Mahmud, most of these tale types resist designating one as the lover and the other as the beloved. See n. 27.
30 For more on this theme across ʿAttār’s works, see Ritter, chs. 28–30, and for the EN specifically, see 640–642, 645–646.
31 See Melchert.
society in the former genre revolves around everyone’s relationship to the king, who ideally is just and religious. In the EN, by contrast, the epicenter is the relationship with the divine, with oneself, and with the other, the conjunction that constitutes the Sufi ethos.\(^{32}\) One's self and the other are the same, surface differences notwithstanding. The princess's story represents the extreme version of this typology; the princess sacrifices her life for her beloved, the servant, whose life had been sacrificed for loving her.\(^{33}\) The king's responsibility, then, is the same as that of any other member of society—but with added significance. Being the leader of the early and medieval Muslim community meant being in charge of the community’s earthly and spiritual wellbeing, with implications for salvation.\(^{34}\) In other words, like the vast majority of the tales, those focusing on kings are not just descriptive metaphors for the Sufi way of life. They also are prescriptive; they offer a road map for navigating kingship’s various entrapments. Taken individually, the tales, then, are certainly entertaining, didactic allegorical tales of life and love, according to the Sufi way. Taken altogether and from a generic point of view, they are brief hagiographical portraits that espouse a political ethic and ideal.

**The Religio-Political Responsibilities of the Individual**

In his *al-Tadbirāt al-elāhiyya fi eslāh al-mamlaka al-ensāniyya* (Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom), the prolific Andalusian Sufi master and ʿAttār’s contemporary, Ebn ʿArabi (1165–1240) is similarly concerned with the individual’s responsibility for his or her own soul and for instructing others. Here, a brief look at Ebn ʿArabi’s treatise will allow us to illuminate some of the implicit and finer points in the tales contained in the EN. It also offers a chance to analyze the EN within the wider context of Sufi literature and ethics. To that end, it is worth noting that what makes the *Tadbirāt* especially pertinent here is that it has a similar dynamic to that of the EN. In other words, what the EN is to practical ethics, the *Tadbirāt* is to political philosophy. Just as the EN takes

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\(^{32}\) Ritter notes (325) the responsibilities of and among Sufis as brethren—*okhovvat*—and in terms of chivalry—*fotovvat*. Nevertheless, he posits that the responsibility to the other belongs also to the realm of good manners (see n. 6). Ritter also states (341) that, for Sufis, the relationship with (or to) the divine is of utmost importance compared to their relationships with humankind. The point here is that the EN highlights the relationship between all three constituents in its reconfiguration of typical practical ethics and mirrors.

\(^{33}\) When he becomes king, the prince, her brother, is outraged to learn that his sister has fallen in love with the servant and vice-versa.

\(^{34}\) See further Crone.
the formal characteristics of practical ethics (structure, style, and content) and disrupts them at the level of meaning, the Tadbirāt takes the structures and terminology of political philosophy and disrupts them at the level of meaning. However, it may be a response to one particular text, namely Fārābi (872–950)’s the Virtuous City.

According to a well-known anecdote, Ebn ‘Arabi wrote the Tadbirāt within the space of four days at the request of the twelfth-century Andalusian Sufi, Mowruri. In another anecdote, Mowruri asks Ebn ‘Arabi to write a response to a book by Aristotle that he had found. Aristotle, reportedly, was too old to accompany Alexander the Great and advise him in person. Instead, Aristotle had written a manual on ruling the world so that Alexander could take it with him on his adventures to guide him in lieu of his teacher (Ebn ‘Arabi, 3). It is tempting to note that the Ebn ‘Arabi—Mowruri episode is patterned on the Aristotle—Alexander one. In other words, Aristotle’s reason for composing his manual evokes one of the principal purposes of hagiography, namely to guide others, and the account comes within the biographical sketch of two Sufi masters, one asking the other for a manual on spiritual governance.

The assertion of the author of this anecdote, namely that the Tadbirāt is a response to Aristotle, is justifiable to a certain extent, despite its spuriousness. The Tadbirāt seems to engage with Fārābi’s al-Madina al-fāzela (Virtuous City), which is a synthesis of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and Politica and Plato’s Politeia adapted for contemporary concerns. The most prominent of these concerns is the meaning of just rule and society, a quite pressing and long-standing question for early and medieval Muslims. Fārābi, whose title is the “Second Teacher,” outlines the responsibilities of each member in the Virtuous City. Furthermore, Fārābi outlines the role of religion in both creating the

35 This anecdote does not occur in the few printed editions of the Tadbirāt that were available to me at the time of writing. The text purportedly written for Alexander by Aristotle is the pseudo-Aristotelian, Serr al-asrār. For more on this text and in relation to Ebn ‘Arabi, see Forster, 33–35).
36 In one example, Sheykh Ahmad-e Jām (1049–1141) retreated from society when he underwent a spiritual conversion to Sufism, and came back at the age of forty to “guide the people and make wine drinkers and sinners repent” (Moayyad and Lewis, 11). Interestingly, he too wrote a treatise about the Sufi path at the request of his repentant son (ibid., 31). Other equally important purposes of hagiography include the establishment and promotion of a particular order, founding of shrines devoted to a master or saint, memorializing the words and deeds of one’s own master for posterity, and establishing one’s own pedigree.
37 According to Germann, Fārābi’s Virtuous City is a metaphysical place that brings into accord Plato’s ideal and Aristotle’s realism.
38 Bonelli traces a Plotinian line of thought in al-Madina al-fāzela, particularly the World Soul, and argues that both the World Soul and the Virtuous City is an intelligible or
perfect human (*al-ensān al-kāmel*)—the one who has achieved happiness through cooperation—and “emulating society’s normative model, namely, the cosmic order, through the makeup of the city” (Germann).

In the *Tadbirāt*, Ebn ʿArabi starts (9) with the premise that “the whole creation in all its perfection is manifested in humankind.” Ebn ʿArabi envisions the human being as a microcosm of the city, which, in turn, is a microcosm of all creation. He details how the body embodies the city; he describes in precise detail the function of each “member” of this embodied city and the care due to each: the soul is the king; the city’s imam is God’s decree, which is just and imbued with authority; the chief minister of the city is the intellect; the scribe is the recorder of one’s deeds; and the tax collector is perfect knowledge. But, as Ebn ʿArabi warns (*ibid.*, 142), the true enemy at the gates, the one “who revolted against you and caused mischief in the kingdom ... entrusted to you” is one’s own greed and ambition.

All three of our texts show similar concerns with happiness and how to achieve it, but they differ in the details. Ebn ʿArabi states (8–9) that for all those “who wish to reach the doorstep of divine benevolence ... [a]ll are intent upon the same goal, they have joy in their hearts, they share their due and are satisfied with their lot.” Happiness, as it were, is contentment with what one has. In the *EN*, happiness is for those who are content with God, while the “happy foundations” of society are laid when someone with spiritual authority is in a leadership position.39

What all three texts have most in common is the sense of shared responsibility. For Fārābi, happiness comes through mutual co-operation. Meanwhile, Ebn ʿArabi states that God

> sent man into the universe as His deputy in order to make the created know the Creator. He gave him His trust and the light to enlighten others. He gave him all that and more, not to support tyranny but so that mankind might rule in justice, and made him responsible for all that might happen in the whole creation.

_Ebn ʿArabi, 40_

39 Meanwhile, for Ghazāli (24), happiness derives from intelligence, the third of ten principles of justice, since it allows one to perceive the “spirit and reality of things.”

Incorporeal world “where all perfected souls will go when they have no need of a body, but it is also where all souls reside before descending into the material world” (8). From this perspective, Ebn ʿArabi’s text may be contrasted with Fārābi’s in terms of concern with the care of the soul in the corporeal world.
Even as each individual is responsible for justice at the personal level—care for the soul—God has divided humans into rulers and other followers: “some to be masters and others, their servants. But on the Day of Judgement those destined to rule will be asked if they have ruled in justice, and those who have been ruled will be called as witnesses” (131).40

Much of Ebn ʿArabi’s discussion of God’s trust given to humankind “to enlighten others” is indubitably ʿAttār’s overall aim for his audiences—across his works. In the TO, ʿAttār highlights his eight reasons for composing the work, and these motivations are quite applicable broadly. His motives center on the benefits that listening to the words and deeds of God’s friends (saints) brings. Interestingly for our purposes, ʿAttār notes two different audiences whom he wishes to aid by means of the words of God’s friends, namely, himself and the other41 (2009, 43–44). (In his introduction, ʿAttār functions in a manner similar to that of the narrators of the EN and the Manteq al-tayr, respectively the caliph and the hoopoe, each of whom gathers a group who would benefit most from illustrative stories.42) The EN’s stance on the individual’s responsibility for his or her soul and to the other is outlined in its frame tale. By focusing on the caliph and his sons, the EN, like the Tadbīrāt, understands the king’s position as one that carries additional responsibility for the welfare of the community. Yet, like the Tadbīrāt, the EN does not make kingship the epicenter of its focus. That role is reserved for the individual. As we will see below, the state of the individual is as much a matter of governance as are building infrastructure, inspecting the army, campaigning, surveying fields, and interacting with courtiers—activities in which kings are involved throughout the EN as they learn about or engage in the Sufi path.

The frame tale, as noted above, is about a caliph’s use of multiple tactics to guide his sons, who, despite their various accomplishments, are lacking in appropriate spirituality. First, the caliph informs his sons that they have misunderstood the nature of power, and hence themselves and the divine. For instance, the son who asks for the hand in marriage of the beautiful fairy

40 See also Ghazāli, who details (14, 46) the eternal risks carried by a ruler who is unjust.
41 For the Byzantine context, see also Rapp 2015, 124–125.
42 In fact, these two works should be considered sister texts in that the caliph in the EN gathers his sons in order to persuade them to recognize themselves and develop into ideal Sufi kings, while the hoopoe in Manteq al-tayr convinces a flock of birds who have been remiss in their own spiritual endeavors to undertake the arduous journey to search for the missing king. This king turns out to be the birds themselves, together as one: thirty birds survive the flight; when they enter God’s realm, a mirror is presented to them, and all thirty birds suspended in flight together see that they are the mythical bird of Iranian lore, Simorgh (lit. “thirty birds”).
princess is confusing lust for love; the sons who wish for world-altering tokens or knowledge of magic and alchemy are shown the futility of such (false) objects of power and knowledge in light of the real source, namely, the divine. And, like Ebn ‘Arabi, the caliph exposes his sons, who are hiding their true intentions—stature and ambition—behind these objects of power.43

The caliph not only points out the negative, or what his sons get wrong; he also encourages his sons to nurture their souls and cultivate self-awareness, for to know oneself is to know God. The caliph participates, as it were, in ethics (akhlāq), “the science that investigates virtue and vice, specifically how to acquire the former and avoid the latter” (Chittick, 30). He aids his sons in perceiving the error of their ways as individuals and as kings, as earthly and spiritual leaders, by telling them entertaining and illuminating tales that incidentally are centered on our three main social types. Put another way, the individual tales are replicates, in miniature, of the frame tale, except that in the tales all of God’s creatures, from ants and dogs to ordinary folk to the prophets, saints, and kings, instruct one another. As the caliph (the narrator, or ‘Attār’s poetic persona) states: “How often those who have submitted to the religion / learn the most from the least [of God’s] servants” (2013, 250, l. 3117).44

Here we turn to two tales that are especially illuminating about the responsibilities of individuals extending over society. First, we begin with Discourse 2, story 8. In this tale, a dog is beaten viciously and injured by a Sufi. He limps over to the prominent Khorasani Sufi and poet Abu Saʿid (967–1049), who is outraged by such a casual display of cruelty. The sheikh asks the (anonymous) Sufi his reason for maiming a helpless animal. The Sufi says that, when the dog approached him, he defiled his (Sufi’s) robe by brushing up against it. Abu Saʿid then asks the dog how he wishes for the Sufi to be punished, and the dog asks Abu Saʿid to divest the Sufi of his robe. The dog clarifies his reason without prompting: he had approached the Sufi because the latter was wearing the robe of the People of Peace (ahl-e salāmat) and the dog thought he would not be harmed. Had he seen someone wearing a tunic, the dog explains, he would have heeded caution and stayed away. The dog continues to explain that he wants the Sufi disrobed so that everyone can be safe from his malevolence.

The portrait drawn here of Abu Saʿid is, first and foremost, one of a compassionate individual. It soon becomes clear, however, that he is an arbiter of social justice. The most oppressed member of society—in this instance, a dog—can come to the saint for comfort and protection, and, in addition to shelter, he can also redress grievances as would occur in organized Sufism

43 See below for more.
44 For the rest of this tale (Discourse 11, story 7), see n. 72.
and which parallels the rituals and practices of medieval courts—in, for example, the investiture and divestment of honorific robes. Furthermore, like a judge, Abu Saʿiḍ seeks testimony first from the Sufi (the defendant) and then from the dog (the accuser). Next, he asks the dog to voice his opinion on the appropriate sentencing. We need not belabor the symbolism of the Sufi’s robe to understand what this sentencing means for the anonymous Sufi and his standing among his brethren. What is significant is that the dog’s recommendation is intended to benefit the wider community; he seeks safety and security for all who would otherwise believe they are in the company of a true Sufi, which the robe signifies.

The tale, thus, is more than just a vignette of a compassionate saint and his miraculous powers (karamāt)—in this instance, his ability to commune with a dog. Since it takes place outside the court and its apparatus, it is also the tale of an alternative source of social justice. Yet, considered in the context of the frame tale, it is an example of the type of social justice that the caliph would like his sons to dispense, to make them on par with a Sufi saint and even a dog. And if this latter point were not already clear, we should turn to the advice that the caliph gives the first son at the conclusion of the tale—not to think that he is better than a dog! The dog, after all, is the one who displays the best sense of social justice in showing concern for the greater community.45

A second reading of this tale is also possible; it is about a self-berating master. In Sufism and certainly across the EN, the baseness of the self is referred to as a dog (sagi-ye khish).46 The Sufi and the dog are the two sides of the same coin, Abu Saʿiḍ. In this reading, the Sufi who beats the dog has not done enough to keep his baser instincts at bay, and so he resorts to violence. The dog is calling out the Sufi for his hypocrisy. In other words, the individual and, hence, community need protection from the hypocritical sheikh, who has allowed his baser instincts to affect his loftier aims. In either reading, the individual’s responsibility to the self and the other is prominently displayed. With this second reading, however, the saint is in good company. In Discourse 14, story 13, Sultan Mahmud is made to understand the full extent of his lack of control over others, because, as the madman/(holy) fool (dīvāna) next to whom he

45 This reading holds even if we consider that Abu Saʿiḍ is speaking to the dog in the “language of states (zabān-e hāl),” and that he is interpreting the dog’s needs in human terms. The tale makes clear that the decision and reasoning are the dog’s.

46 See, for instance, the tale of Hallāj, who encourages his son to beat the dog of his soul (Discourse 19, story 12). Ghazālī also urges (24) the ruler to “act justly towards his subjects (and at the same time) keep his staff, household, and sons (on the) path of justice. Nobody, however, can do this unless he first observes justice inside himself.” See also ibid., 56.
sat explains, the king lacks control of his self (*khish*) (*ibid.*, 294, ll. 4062–4063). Whether king or saint, exerting control over one’s self is a necessary given in order to be in a position to lead others. In Ebn ’Arabi’s terms, a ruler (or Sufi master) must be king of his own heart in order to rule himself and be able to rule justly over others.47

The tale of Sheykh Jandi48 and the man who feared no one (Discourse 2, Story 6) may best be viewed in light of the individual as a microcosm of the mirroring macrocosms, namely, society and the realm of God. A brief summary of the story is as follows: A man asks a sheikh before his disciples whether the latter or a dog is better. The disciples, in their anger, are ready to tear the man to pieces when the sheikh intervenes. He says that it remains to be seen if he is better than a dog or not, since he is not aware of God’s decree (*taqdir*). He claims, however, that if his faith is better than that of the hoi polloi (*owbāsh*) then he is better than a dog and, if it is not, then he is worth less than the hair of a dog.

Three types of characters are portrayed in this tale. The first is the unnamed impertinent man, whose city, in Ebn ’Arabi’s configuration, is in complete disarray for his pride and impudence. The second, represented by the saint’s disciples, have let the enemy, their pride over their master’s stature and honor (and hence their own), cause great mischief in their city by allowing themselves to react violently toward the fearless man. The third is the sheikh who recognizes the bait—pride in his honor and stature. Warnings against excessive pride and honor among Sufis, saints and otherwise, and kings is a recurrent theme in the *EN*. In the form of Sheykh Jandi’s tale, the theme is posed in terms of the master’s own refusal to give any credence to his past deeds, which have earned him his stature, and which the rude man believes he can attack. The sheikh, instead, is painfully aware that he does not know yet all that will happen and for what he may have to answer on Judgement Day,49 just like the king in the passage cited above from the *Tadbirāt*.

A fourth type is also present in the tale, albeit in the background: the masses. The sheikh sets his baseline as the faith of the rabble and his yardstick is

47 See also Discourse 13, story 1, in which Alexander the Great is told he is a slave to a slave who has mastered himself. And indeed, the old man does get the king to come to him after refusing the latter’s summons.

48 This may be Bābā Kamāl-e Jandi (d. 1273), the preeminent master of the Kobravi order (Ritter, 767).

49 In Discourse 10, story 9, the reverse occurs when a male prostitute tells the saint who had criticized him that neither one of them can know what their balance is until Judgement Day.
measured against the dog. In this way, he is intimately tying his faith and salvation to that of his society. The actions of the sheikh’s wayward disciples and the rudeness of the anonymous man create a somewhat negative image of that society. Nevertheless, the sheikh’s answer and his comportment reaffirm his status as a saint, who views the importance of his community’s faith as central to the status of his own.

This tale is one of many that resembles the frame tale: the master’s teaching relationship to his disciples. Also on display are the sheikh’s stature in his community, his ability to withstand temptations of the honor accorded to him, and his concern about the faith of the community. We also see him in a moment replicated frequently in hagiographies: a saint, surrounded by his disciples, is asked a legitimate question about faith by the laity, even if in this case it is asked rudely. And, like hagiographies, both the immediate audience (the sheikh’s disciples and the impertinent man) and the “remote” audience (the EN’s audience) are the recipients of the embedded lessons. Here, then, I turn to a discussion on the EN’s adoption of the hagiographic as I continue to highlight the responsibilities of the individual and community as they appear in other tales.

**Evoking the Hagiographic I: Structure and Content of the Tales**

A world-traveler, one who had lost his beloved / was bewildered and distressed,  
Said that he had a tale from someone /  
that there once was a caliph who had six sons.  
ʿATTĀR 2013, 130, ll. 464–465

Paul defines hagiography “as a biographical genre devoted to individuals enjoying an exclusive religious status as ‘saints’ or ‘holy men’ in the eyes of the authors.” Rapp, meanwhile, proposes that the common purpose of hagiographies “is creating a saint” (2010, 121). Following both leads, I read the EN as a text that devotes itself to saints’ lives and creates them, albeit with a twist. The EN takes snapshots in the moments of historical saints’ lives to illustrate exemplary moral living according to the tenets of Sufism or, as noted above, holy living. In addition, it takes this same principle and applies it to tales of ordinary folk and kings. Consequently, on one level, the EN creates a saint’s life out of the figure of the caliph, who acts as a Sufi sheikh or saint, and it makes disciples out of his sons and the EN’s various audiences. At the same time, it
creates momentary saints out of figures from a broad cross-section of society who, as noted above, take on the roles of teacher and guide and, hence, are examples of attainable holy living.

From this perspective, let us return to the opening lines of the EN, cited at the outset of this section. On their own, nothing in these lines suggests that they function as anything remotely resembling hagiography. However, a close reading of the frame tale evokes the genre of the malfuzāt. For instance, the focus of malfuzāt is on a single master, a Sufi saint as it were, and texts of this kind were written usually by a disciple (in many cases the master’s sons)—someone with direct access to the saint’s teachings, which were delivered in private, semi-private, and public settings. Malfuzāt consist of aphorisms, hadīṣ, tales of the prophets, stories about the master’s own teachers in various contexts and encounters, accounts of the miracles that the master performed, and the master’s own encounters with his disciples, rulers, and the general public. In a similar manner, the EN opens with a narrator, whose distraught state makes him, from the Sufi point of view, a reliable narrator (Dabiri 2018, 42–43). This narrator knows of a caliph whose aim it is to help his sons to live a Sufi way of life and, like his historical counterparts, the caliph’s teaching consists of aphorisms, a few hadīṣ, and tales of historical and fictional Sufi saints and the prophets.

The generic type that the EN most clearly evokes is the taẕkerat, or at least ‘Attār’s TO, which is the oldest text to bear this name in Persian literature (de Bruijn, 54). Indeed, upon close inspection the formal differences between the EN and the TO seem less like a chasm and more like a fault line. Above, I noted the similar functions of ‘Attār’s authorial voice in the TO and that of the caliph in the EN’s frame tale. Let us turn now to the tales themselves. Of course, in the EN, the tales of saints are scattered throughout the text, whereas the tales in the TO are organized by saints. Nevertheless, the TO resists any kind of formulaic chronological account of the saints’ lives (a frequent complaint

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50 These lines along with the approximately fifty preceding ones, belong to mss. A F I B G H L D U and Q, but not S, which Shafi’i-Kadkani has chosen as the basis of his edition (‘Attār 2013, 452).

51 Though malfuzāt gained much of their popularity in South Asia, the genre was known and written in medieval Iran as well. See Steinfels.

52 Incidentally, the autobiography of the hadīṣ scholar and jurist-turned-Sufi, Tirmazī (820–869), who makes a cameo appearance in the EN, starts out fairly similarly: “My career began because God favored me with a father—God rest his soul—who pressed me to take up the pursuit of knowledge. When I was eight years old, he began to instruct me and to encourage me to study” (Reynolds, 121).

53 See further de Bruijn.
made by positivist-oriented historians for texts such as the ones analyzed here). Furthermore, though there are quite a few tales depicting saints at the moment of death, many saints’ lives do not include any notice of birth or early childhood, much less begin with such an account that marches toward the saints’ final breath. Finally, there are hardly any concrete temporal markers to connect one episode to the next. The anecdotes stand as discrete units, as hagiography in miniature.

Especially illuminating is the entry on the sixth Shi’ite imam, Ja’far Sādeq (702–765), who is the first person treated in the TO. The notice on Ja’far Sādeq begins with a basic introduction to Ja’far’s rank—he was “the sultan of the people of Mohammad” (‘Attār 2009, 46) and status—he was “transmitter of ‘Ali’s teachings, heir of the prophet, the knowing lover” (ibid., 46–47). Next, ‘Attār delves into his reason for including him in a work devoted to Sufi saints: “he was the exemplar for all the masters, and everyone relied on him. He was the perfect model, the sheikh of all men of God, and the imam of all the followers of Mohammad” (47). After this introduction, the first account from Ja’far Sādeq’s life that ‘Attār chooses to present is an encounter between Ja’far and the ‘Abbasid caliph, Mansur (r. 754–775). The story begins with the notice that one day the caliph summoned the imam to court in order to have him put to death. The story ends with Mansur’s confession as to why he let the imam go and a concession with regard to the imam’s miraculous powers: Mansur fainted from fright when he saw that he and the throne upon which he was sitting were held between the jaws of a dragon, who threatened to swallow the caliph should Ja’far come to harm by his hand. The supernatural element aside, the tale of Ja’far and Mansur is relatively firmly anchored to a historical time-frame. The episode can be dated to the last ten years of the imam’s life, which coincide with Mansur’s reign; it is, furthermore, corroborated by other historical accounts of the imam being summoned to the caliph’s court. By contrast, the next episode in ‘Attār’s composition leaves the reader fairly unmoored. This narrative, to be detailed in the following paragraph, describes an encounter between the imam and Dāvud-e Tā’i (d. c. 781), an influential ascetic with important disciples of his own. However, ‘Attār offers no context, and no

54 This is especially so when there is a miracle associated with the death, or a final imparting of wisdom to disciples and the laity.
55 The tales of those who have some miraculous event associated with their birth or conception or were known to be particularly precocious in early childhood are, however, presented.
56 For a survey of how time and death function, and not necessarily chronologically, in Arabic biographies, see Kilpatrick.
temporal markers (“then,” “next,” “after,” “later,” or even “before”) to indicate when the meeting occurred.

The EN, it almost goes without saying, displays little interest in specificities of time and chronology, and instead adopts the universalism of practical ethics and mirrors. Nor, however, does chronology take precedence as an organizing factor in the arrangement of the notices of the saints in the TO either, as just noted. It is beyond the scope of the current paper to delve into the schema of the TO, but it is worth noting that the EN and the TO cover many of the same types of themes. For instance, in the TO’s notice concerning the imam and Dāvud-e Tā’i, mentioned in the previous paragraph, Dāvud-e Tā’i’s heart is heavy. He comes to the imam asking for advice couched in praises of Ja’far’s extraordinary lineage, which ‘Attār reverently highlights a few lines earlier. The implication is that the imam is privileged to supranatural knowledge. Ja’far’s response resembles the warning of Sheykh Jandi and the Tadbirāt: “Dāvud, I fear that, at the resurrection, my forefather will lay hold of me and ask, ‘Why didn’t you live up to your duties in following me?’ This affair has nothing to do with sound lineage or powerful ancestors. This affair has to do with conducting oneself in a way that is worthy of the presence of the Real” (‘Attār 2009, 48). This story puts into concrete terms the underlying universalism of the EN: it emphasizes the importance of deeds, in vast contrast to the genealogical and spiritual claims to legitimacy, which came to carry great political and social import for various Sufi masters and their orders (Karamustafa, 143–176).

Thus, not all Sufis, masters or otherwise, are always wise. In the EN, except for a handful of people, among whom we may count Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Majnun, and women, no one person or group can lay claim to such wisdom at all times and in all ways. As a particularly illustrative example, we turn to one of the most esteemed female ascetics and Sufi saints, Rābe’a ‘Adaviyya (713–801). Often cited as one of the most visible examples of medieval female saints as she appears in a wide variety of texts, Rābe’a only appears a handful of times in the EN. Two stories in particular stand out, however. When read together, these two narratives embody the EN’s nuanced view of saints and sainthood, which mirrors its treatment of kings and the laity. In the first of these tales, Discourse 7, story 11, the pre-eminent saint, Hasan Basri (642–728), sets out for the desert to visit Rābe’a. From a distance he sees that animals of

57 See Losensky 2006 and the sources cited therein.
58 On the concept of sainthood in the TO, see further Pazouki.
59 I refer here to figures who make multiple appearances.
60 See further Schimmel and Smith.
all sorts were gathered around her, yet when they sense his approach, they all flee. Jealous, he asks Rābe’a why they gather around her but flee from him. She responds by asking him what he had eaten. It turns out that before heading out he had eaten a tiny meal of onions and animal fat. In a “well, no wonder!” response, Rābe’a scolds him for his “voracious” appetite (she is an ascetic after all) and tells him that his dinner was the reason his presence was intolerable to animals. (Hasan, the saint, is the oppressor here.) Then she prescribes for him an ant-like diet, which should cure him of both his appetite and his jealousy and would enable the animals to tolerate his presence.

Strikingly, instances in which a woman scolds a male of equal or greater social stature echo throughout the EN. Indeed, the EN features quite a number of tales in which women (usually old peasants) are able to bring kings to tears when they chide them for their negligence in maintaining social justice or for behaving downright unjustly, a theme highlighted in great detail by Ritter (107–132). Furthermore, the topos bears remarkable resemblance to the theme that runs throughout Zekr al-nesva al-mota’abeddāt al-Sufiyāt (Memorial of Female Sufi Devotees), the hagiography of renowned female Sufi saints composed by the seminal Sufi biographer, Solami (937–1021), who, like ʿAttār, hailed from Nishapur. In Solami’s work, female saints spend their time in devotions, teaching, guiding, and performing miracles. Their favorite pastime, however, seems to be upbraiding the most prominent male Sufi saints for their behavior or words deemed unfitting or unbecoming. As Cornell highlights (34), Solami even includes an anecdote in which Omm al-Hosayn Qorashiyya, a prominent female saint and fellow Nishapurian, castigates Nasrābādi (d. 976), Solami’s “most influential teacher” (ibid.) and, according to another prominent Sufi writer, Hojviri (d. 1072), the “master of the later shaykhs of Khorasan” (ibid.). In the narrative concerning Rābe’a, the EN adopts a common trope from the broader hagiographical tradition, which is also manifested across ʿAttār’s tales, for examples, see Discourse 9, story 1 and Discourse 15, stories 1, 10, and 12. The motif of the old peasant teaching the king is, of course, not limited to women. The ones involving old men, however, are fewer in number. See further below for these stories.

Kings are not the only ones reduced to tears by old peasant women in the EN. Discourse 14, story 5, relates the story of an anonymous old woman (not a saint), who scolds an anonymous pious man sitting at the mehrāb who had become vainglorious. In Discourse 14, story 12, an anonymous old woman publicly brings low Mohammad b. ʿIsā, the chief of police of the ʿAbbasid caliph Amin (787–813), when she equates his wealth and prestige with being distant from God’s.

For a detailed description of the Sufi biographical tradition in Arabic and Persian with a focus on the tabaqāt (generations) genre and Solami’s influence, see Mojaddedi.
namely, that of a master berating a disciple or some other individual who has waivered off the path, a trope portrayed also in the frame tale.

Before turning to another popular hagiographical trope that the tales in the EN evoke, let us turn to Discourse 10, story 5, in which we are offered a different picture of Rābeʿa. In this tale, the saint’s usually indomitable spirit is flagged after a week of continuous prayer and complete abstention from food and water. While Rābeʿa is in this weakened state, a neighborhood woman brings her some food which is knocked over by her cat. Rābeʿa makes a second attempt for a flask and, this time, it breaks. In her frustration, Rābeʿa calls out to God and asks what more could He want from her. He responds that she can suffer either for Him or for this world.

As she appears in this narrative, Rābeʿa is, from a certain perspective, in good company. The caliph of the frame tale tells a similar story of Moses, who in Discourse 10, story 2 asks God to show him one of his friends (dustān). Moses is directed to a valley where an old man spends his life worshipping God. Moses asks the man if there is anything he can do to help him. The man asks for some water. When Moses returns with water, he finds that the man is dead. He asks God the meaning of this. God’s response is an extreme version of Jaʿfar’s point to Dāvud: God replies to Moses that He alone had always given the man water. Thus, when the man turned to Moses for water, he had turned to the prophet as an intercessor. Moses had disrupted the favors God had bestowed directly upon His friend, and so God took him away in order to give him water directly.

Both stories are embedded in discourse 10, which centers on the caliph’s third son, who wishes for Jamshid’s world-seeing chalice. The son at first claims that he desires the chalice not as a means to seek power, but in order to know the world’s hidden secrets. The caliph exposes him for dissembling and the son confesses that, indeed, his true intent is to achieve honor. As a justification, he then claims that he is not the only one in the world who seeks honor and likens his desire to that of Jesus, who was quite honored in heaven. Much like kings, Dāvud-e Tāʾi, Rābeʿa, Sheykh Abu Saʿid, Sheykh Jandi’s disciples, and God’s friend (as well as many others) have all let pride, honor, and ambition (in Ebn Arabi’s terms, the “enemies at the gate”) distract them from their true goal. Though they may be the most exemplary teachers or masters in other contexts, in the aforementioned examples, they, just like kings and the laity, are in desperate need of teachers of their own (Rābeʿa, however, is set above the rest, she is equal to Moses, since it is God himself who is her instructor). Importantly, however, each of these tales shows these individuals as open to receiving the appropriate lesson in one way or another. This point leads us to the other hagiographical trope that the EN frequently adopts: the moment of awareness.
Evoking the Hagiographic II: a Moment Amplified

Because of her truthfulness \((\text{sedq})\) and fervor \((\text{suz})\) the king’s heart softened \((\text{narm del shod})\) /  
What can I say of the copious tears he shed that turned dust into mud?  
He pardoned her and sent her to his palace /  
And, as one with a new lease on life, he sent her to her beloved [the prince].

\text{ʿAttār 2013, 147, ll. 861–862}

ʿAttār’s tales, across his corpus, have been accurately labelled as didactic. Even as his stories range from moderately to wildly entertaining, their entertainment value (and in many cases also shock value, as will be seen below) is a means of ensuring the didacticism’s comprehensibility for an ordinary (non-specialist) audience. The lessons cover many aspects of medieval life from the mundane (what to do if a dog wanders into a mosque) to the extraordinary (what to do if you are a medieval princess and have fallen in love with a servant). As noted above, the lessons are imbued with the tenets of Sufism, or more precisely, how to live a moral life according to Sufi doctrines. The tales are ontological and thereby prescriptive. Notably, in a significant share of the tales, the didacticism drives towards a particular moment. In fact, the caliph narrates tales of various characters’ “break-through” moments in order to stimulate such episodes in his sons (and in the EN’s audience for that matter).

The experience of sudden awareness brings inward transformation in its wake. As in the tale of the woman who fell in love with and annoyed a prince (cited at the start of this section and summarized in the introduction), the moment of awareness is transitional. For indeed, when the king recognizes the woman’s true love for his son, he is brought to tears. More importantly, the king not only grants the woman her life; he is given a new lease on his own life. In other words, ʿAttār’s lessons concerning love, faith, kindness, and understanding towards one’s neighbors, social justice, and cultivating the soul are important; yet his tales drive towards the moment when the subject realizes these truths. As a result, a descriptivist reading of the realization moment can enhance our understanding of these tales as well.

To that end, we turn to a couple of examples drawn from hagiographies, since the moment of recognition, realization, or awareness is a frequent trope

\footnote{In both cases, the caliph often adds commentary at the end of the tale, to ensure complete comprehension of its underlying meaning.}
in hagiographical literature. Usually it signals an episode of spiritual conversion—it either generates an initial impulse to follow the Sufi way or occasions a recommitment to it. These moments also range in magnitude from the quiet and contemplative to the intense and dramatic. Termesi’s autobiography, for instance, offers a sober account of such an awakening:

When I reached the age of twenty-seven or thereabouts, I suddenly felt the need to make the pilgrimage…. There I was truly converted in my heart, and made to see past the clash of questions great and small. I performed the pilgrimage and returned, having effected in myself a change of heart.

REYNOLDS, 121–122

Meanwhile, Ghazâli, at the age of thirty-seven and at the height of a brilliant career, famously underwent a spiritual crisis that lasted for six months, during which time he could neither eat, sleep, or even speak. He left his prestigious position at the Nezâmiyya in Baghdad, to which he had been appointed by Nezâm al-Molk himself.65 The reason for his break-down was that he had come to understand the truth (the Sufi path), but was “effectively paralyzed” by it (Ormsby, i).

As ʿAttâr outlines in his other two great works, the Mosibat-nāma and the ever-popular Manteq al-tayr, the path of the Sufi is perilous and arduous, and the struggle to continue in it requires constant vigilance. ʿAttâr’s poems, also, are replete with moments of spiritual conversion. While some examples are plaintive in nature, they are also declaratory. Some use shocking tropes, such as a Sufi hanging up his robe in exchange for that of a Zoroastrian and circumambulating a fire-temple.66 We have seen in the tales related to Râbeʿa saints faltering while on the path towards full self-awareness, and towards the ultimate goal, namely, death-before-death (fanāʾ be-ʾllāh) or union with the divine in this world.67 In the EN, furthermore, some tales are gruesome68

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65 The episode is described in detail in his autobiography, al-Mongez men al-zalāl (Delivery from Error).
66 For examples, see poems 154, 160, 252, 272, 493, 515, 571, 610, 611, and 702 (ʿAttâr 2000).
67 Ritter makes (597) the astute observation that not all instances of fanāʾ (negation) lead to union in the tales.
68 In Discourse 6, story 9, Sheykh Abuʾl-Qâsem Hamadâni sees a crowd of spectators gathered around a temple. When he approaches, he witnesses twelve people, including a Christian, prostrate themselves before an idol when they are asked (presumably by the keepers of the temple) their relation to God. Everyone, including the Christian, responds, “I am a slave of God.” Immediately after each profession, a cauldron of boiling oil is dumped on the person’s head. The last person to step forward, however, says, “I am my
and sanguinary, in some cases, stereotypical characters behave in jarringly uncharacteristic ways, or an unusual character type takes on a teaching role. These stunning and sometimes unnerving tropes are used for maximum effect in conveying the need to renew one’s faith and to abandon any honor and fame that might become associated with one’s stature as a person of faith.

One such reminder comes to Sheykh Abu Bakr al-Vāseti (d. 932), in Discourse 9, story 8. In this tale, Vāseti experiences an awakening (entebāhi) one night and immediately proceeds to a madhouse (divānestān). There he encounters a madman who, though bound and shackled, was joyful. When the sheikh asks the madman the reason for his happiness, chained as he is and far from the path, the madman’s answer and, thus, lesson is as follows: “if my feet are now chained, / my heart is unbound, and that is my essence, / since my heart is open this is my union [with the divine]” (ʿAttār 2013, 227, ll. 2617–2618). Madness (divānegi) is a metaphor for the enlightened condition of one who has embarked on the path—annihilation of the self—and attained the true goal—union with the beloved. As explained in various Sufi treatises, the human faculties are incapable of comprehending the divine in a conscious state; this incapacity sometimes induces this kind of madness (at other times the madness comes from the inability to reach the divine in the incorporeal world). If the imprisoned madman (divāna) is very far off the path, it is because he has already reached his destination of union with the divine, the ultimate goal of the wayfaring Sufi. The salient point here is that even if the madman in ʿAttār’s tale is to be read in an allegorical manner—as an individual who has reached the master’s level—he is not, in the story, accorded any

69 For instance, Discourse 8, story 7, is the brief tale of a thief who carried his severed hand (done in punishment) wherever he went, because the name of his friend had been written on it.

70 In Discourse 2, story 2, a catamite teaches an ʿAlid and a scholar the true meaning of faith.

71 Someone who is divāna can either be a madman or a (holy) fool, as noted above. In this tale, the fact that the sheikh goes to the divānestān makes the meaning clear here.
such status.\footnote{Though it might be a truism to state that we are invited to interpret drunkenness and madness as the ideal Sufi state, we should also be mindful of the degrees to which this equation is possible. In the EN, ʿAttār carefully distinguishes between two states of drunkenness, the physical and the spiritual, and explores the extent to which the physical kind should be interpreted as the spiritual kind. Though several stories are analyzed below in this regard, we may also cite the tale (Discourse 11, story 7) in which Sheykh Bāyazid learns an invaluable lesson on love and forbearance from a drunkard who is being lashed for his crimes. When the sheikh asks the drunkard why he is joyous while being whipped, the man replies that his beloved is in attendance watching him and that is all he needs. The sheikh sees a lesson in it for himself: He said to himself, O unfortunate old man! / Learn the path of religion from this drunkard (qollāsh). / All you’ve done for the religion has been for the opposite / Look at you and your state and look at his!} It is Vāseti, who does hold this kind of status as well as considerable fame, being called “a soaring minaret” (Silvers), and who in actuality is depicted as far from the Sufi path. Furthermore, ʿAttār’s reference to shackling the mad because the source of their madness, communion with the divine, is not recognized constitutes a form of social commentary. It is at once a critique of society for building institutions that imprison such individuals, and of the master for not recognizing his very own goal. Still, ʿAttār’s portrait of Vāseti is not all negative. The saint appears receptive and open; he was inspired to go to the madhouse after a (spiritual) awakening in the middle of the night. Clearly, the sheikh himself was (un)aware of how far from the path he had fallen, but he was inspired to find out. This constant receptivity represents a fitting aspiration for everyone.

If the EN explores the topos of the “moment of awareness” in the tales of saints in particular, it also applies to all members of society. Hardly anyone in the EN is spared the reminder of the need to commit to the divine and to social justice. Sometimes, the character in the tale experiences the moment of awareness, sometimes the caliph leads his sons (and thus the EN’s audience) to it. Similar to Vāseti’s experience is an episode concerning Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi. In Discourse 7, story 9, the king goes to a deserted place (we are not told why) and finds a madman grieving relentlessly. When Mahmud asks the stranger the cause of his grief, he is given a direct response with a commentary on wealth: the king is not fully aware of himself since he was raised in the lap of luxury, so how could he know the pain of separation [from the divine]? Given the similarities in the structure of Vāseti’s night sojourn with this tale, Mahmud’s seemingly aimless journey to the desolate place may be read
similarly, he sensed and was inspired to find out about his own shortcomings. In Discourse 8, story 12, the prominent Sufi master Shebli (861–946), a disciple of Jonayd of Baghdad (835–910), is the one whose madness has exceeded all bounds, and, accordingly, it is he who is shackled; and it is the townsfolk who are in the role of the unaware, claiming to be his friends but not knowing the true meaning of friendship, and in need of teaching.

Shebli, it seems, has difficulty in this regard since in Discourse 5, story 1, he is put in the position of teaching a baker the true meaning of friendship, love, and social justice. According to this story, a baker has heard tales of Shebli’s sayings and deeds and has become enamored of him even though he has never met the saint. One day, Shebli, traveling from afar, arrives in the city, comes to the baker’s shop and takes a loaf of bread. Outraged, the baker grabs the loaf from out of Shebli’s hands, declaring that he would never give his bread to someone so disheveled. The baker, it seems, may have needed more than the legends and tales (hagiographies) of the saint to learn about compassion. Someone who knows the baker and knows of his love for Shebli asks the baker why he would snatch bread out of Shebli’s hand. The baker, repentant, runs out after Shebli crying for forgiveness. Shebli tells the man to throw him a party if he wishes to be forgiven. The baker goes out and sets up an extravagant party, spending one hundred gold dinars. At the party, a respected guest in a distressed state (shulida-hāli) asks Shebli what defines the person in heaven and what defines the one in hell. Shebli points to the baker as a living example of the type of person who populates hell, stating: “For the sake of God, he did not give a loaf of bread / but, for mine, he gave a hundred dinars” (ʿAttār 2013, 178, l. 1570). The baker, like a king or a Sufi, can find himself in a position of power, and so he too has the power to oppress or to love those who are less fortunate. As is the case for all individuals, the person who loves God, serves all God’s creation. If death, in medieval mirrors and practical ethics, is the great inescapable equalizer (making insignificant the difference between social classes, but especially the chasm that separates the king and the pauper),73 in the EN, love is also a great equalizer, insofar as it is transformative.

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73 Death is also an equalizer in the EN. See Discourse 16, story 3, for an instance in which Solomon asks for a pitcher of water not made from the dust of the earth, which is made up of the bones of the living; of course no such item can be had; or Discourse 16, story 4, in which a king banishes a dervish from his kingdom only to find the dervish residing in the local cemetery, claiming that the cemetery marks the limits of the king’s realm. Among the few stories about the uselessness of accumulating wealth given the transitory nature of life, Alexander the Great is the recipient of words of sage advice; see for instance Discourse 11, story 11, in which a sage felt the need to offer such advice to the king, even while the latter was being buried (see also Discourse 13, story 1; Discourse 14, story 1; and
Kings: Between the Civic and the Spiritual

Before we turn to the EN’s stories of love among royalty, it is fitting to discuss first the narratives of the kings in general. So far, I have given a few examples to demonstrate the fact that the tales involving kings are just as nuanced as those concerning saints and common folk and, like the latter, these narratives center around a moment of awareness or realization.

Indeed, a handful of Ṭattār’s tales concerning kings run along two axes, intersecting at the moment of awareness. To the first axis belong tales that we may liken to mirrors, which reflect what the caliph’s sons get wrong about life and the meaning of true power. To the second belong tales that may be likened to portraits, which paint an idealized picture of kingship. It should be mentioned here that, in addition to adopting these tale types common to mirrors for princes and practical ethics, the EN also includes representatives of the most popular generic types. Discourse 13, no. 12 is not a tale, but rather an aphorism: the Sasanian king Khosrow II (r. 590–628), gives advice about happiness (ridding oneself of envy and being content with God) to his illustrious musician Bārbod and, therefore, evokes the collections of sayings popular in the Sasanian and early Islamic periods.74 A few tales evoke texts such as the Qābus-nāma, written by rulers for their sons; in Discourse 14, story 17, for example, Sultan Mahmud informs his son that everything he has is his because of God. Furthermore, like the caliph, he advises his son always to remember God, and cautions him that if his carnal desires should ever cause him to forget, then his heart must strive all the harder to remember.75

Above, I have mentioned that the tales that run along the first axis describe what the caliph’s sons get wrong about themselves and the nature of power. In

Discourse 15 story 6). In Discourse 15, story 4, Sultan Mahmud comes across a servant who is his namesake. This similarity offends Mahmud—it may mean that they are equal—until the servant tells him that when the dust takes them both they certainly will be equal. In Discourse 15, story 7, a king asks his sages to make a ring of pure metal that can make him happy whenever he is disconsolate. They decide upon a metal and inscribe on the band the message: “this too shall pass.” One tale (Discourse 9, story 3) involving a king and the topic of death has to do with fear of death itself. It is only particular to kingship because the king (erroneously) believes he can avert the disaster he had foreseen with his wealth (he builds a fortified palace). A similar story with Ghazālī in the role of the king, fearing death and holed up somewhere to avoid it, is found in Discourse 10, story 10. See further Ritter, 196.

74 See also Discourse 19, story 3, which is an aphorism by the Sasanian king Khosrow I Anushervān the Just (r. 531–579) and Discourse 15, story 3, in which Ghazālī offers (un solicited) advice to Soltān Sanjar.

75 See also Discourse 16, story 1.
the EN, Alexander the Great is the king who receives the most unsolicited advice about death and the transitory nature of life and wealth. In Discourse 7, story 2, Nimrod falls gravely sick from a mosquito-borne illness. Nimrod knows with certitude that God has punished him with the small insect for his disavowals, and he begs Abraham to unlock his heart (ibid., 199, ll. 2021–2028). Though this tale may be about humanity’s inability to bargain with God regarding the individual’s fate (Ritter, 75–76), with this request, Nimrod understands that the soul and the servant may be oppressed by the hard-hearted king or loved by the open-hearted one.

Interestingly, there are only a handful of tales (approximately ten) in which kings are portrayed as hard-hearted, and only a small percentage of these depict a king ordering harsh or capital punishment. In the most chilling example of the former type (Discourse 10, story 1), Soltān Sanjar sits next to ʿAbbāsa (d. c. 1154) and neither speaks a word to the other. Later, ʿAbbāsa is asked why he said nothing to the king, and he responds that as he sat there, he saw a large impenetrable thicket materialize before him and all he had in hand was a small, useless sickle. He stayed silent realizing he would be unable to cut through the thicket (that is, to soften the king’s heart). In Discourse 5, story 7, Soltān Mahmud berates a Zoroastrian for taking it upon himself to build a bridge in his kingdom. The king demands the right to remunerate the Zoroastrian, which the latter refuses, even though the Zoroastrian performed

——— See n. 73. Significantly there is one instance that runs counter to this pattern. In one humorous tale (Discourse 22, story 1), Alexander and his tutor, Aristotle, search high and low for the relatively immortal Plato in a quest to receive the philosopher’s advice.

——— In Discourse 13, story 8, Bozorgmehr, the wise and clever minister of Khosrow Anushervān, has his eyes gouged out by the king when the latter is displeased with his minister. The king is soon forced to reckon with the limits of his powers (not necessarily with his hard-heartedness) when he offers the minister a boon for helping him save face. The minister asks for his eyes back. Ritter reads this story as a metaphor for a life spent that can never be recovered (188–189). See also Discourse 20, story 4, which is taken from a tale in the Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr (Book of Deeds of Ardashir); the Sasanian king sentences his wife to death for trying to poison him. The lesson is again not about a hard-hearted king, but about self-recognition, which, as true knowledge, should be pursued in place of alchemy. (Ardashir, upon discovering that he has a child by this wife—she had been rescued from the death sentence when his minister discovered that she was pregnant and had hidden her away—asks for the child to be brought before him with a group of similar children to see if he can recognize the child. Of course, he does and is reunited with his child, the crown prince, Shāpur 1 [r. 239–270].)

78 Abu Mohammad ʿAbbās b. Mohammad b. Abi Mansur, also known as ʿAbbāsa-ye Tusi, is ʿAttār’s alleged master (Ritter, 703).
his act out of love, to help ease the passage of travelers;\textsuperscript{79} in this way, he humiliates the king for neglecting his kingdom and his people.

Then there are the few examples in which the kings are above reproach. In Discourse 4, story 5, Mahmud takes such pity on an honest old man selling wood that he gives him a kingdom in return after a quick ruse. The caliph then draws a quick parallel between the ruse—giving wealth to the old man bit by bit without the man knowing at first that it is the king being so generous with him—to what the true King does for humanity every time we draw breath.\textsuperscript{80} Discourse 2, story 5, is the popular tale of the Sasanian king, Khosrow I Anushervān the Just (r. 531–579), and an old walnut farmer (the story appears in the \textit{Siyāsat-nāma} and Saʿdi's thirteenth-century \textit{Golestān} [Rose Garden], as well). In this tale, the Sasanian king rewards a walnut farmer for cleverly showing the king true forward thinking: he plants trees for the next generation to eat, since he himself will never live long enough to enjoy the fruits of the tree.\textsuperscript{81}

The majority of the tales of kings are more subtle; they revolve directly around the moment of awareness, which is usually, though not always, touched off by the plights of ordinary folk. These tales illustrate the point that the hearts of kings do not always operate in binaries (\textit{narm del/sang del}). For the most part, kings stumble their way into situations that bring them to their moments of awareness. In Discourse 9, story 1, Sultan Mahmud rides past an old woman who is seeking redress from someone who has harmed her. The king rides by the woman, but, unlike the story about the Zoroastrian, this time he is haunted by his actions when he dreams of her later that night. In Discourse 16, story 2, Hārun Rashid (r. 786–809), the celebrated ʿAbbasid caliph, encounters Bohlul, the famous wise fool, who reduces the caliph to tears when he cleverly disabuses the caliph of the notion that he is anything but a thief; when the king tries to reward him for a clever retort, Bohlul points out that the latter owns nothing which he has not taken from hardworking people.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{79} Thus, even Zoroastrians can be a part of the Sufi's path. I am currently working on an article about the images of Zoroastrians in ʿAttār's works with a special focus on the \textit{EN}.

\textsuperscript{80} See also Ritter, 193–194.

\textsuperscript{81} This is the only tale that Ritter (326–327) cites for the concept of being responsible towards, acting for the benefit of, others in the \textit{EN}. (He only notes three other stories from the \textit{Mosibat-nāma} and \textit{Manteq al-tayr} in which one person acts for the benefit of the other, but against his or her own interests). Ritter does mention, albeit almost in passing, the universal love of mankind based on compassion, but offers not a single illustrative episode from the \textit{EN} and only one from the \textit{Manteq al-tayr} (335).

\textsuperscript{82} You are paying a debt with debt / Like the [depleted] stores of your soul, you don't have a grain to your name. Your wealth belongs to the people / Of that which is in your treasury, nothing is [actually] yours.

ʿ\textsc{attār} 2013, 320, ll. 4630–4631
incident between the two figures began when the king was offended by Bohlul’s unceremonious greeting. Other tales offer more poignant critiques of the system—the customs and institutions established by society and cultivated by generations of jurists and philosophers who expounded upon the absolute obedience due to (even unjust) kings because kingship is “granted by God” (Ghazālī 46)—rather than of kings as individuals. A prime example of this kind is Discourse 15, story 5. When Sultan Mahmud sees a fuller toiling away washing loads of canvas, he is moved to unburden the man and asks to buy the peasant’s whole load. The peasant refuses and tells the king that he will sell him no more than ten, for that is all a king really needs. In Discourse 14, story 22, Mahmud comes to the realization all on his own that the supplicants of his kingdom take precedence over his own desire, symbolized by his galloping horse, which Mahmud fails to rein in fast enough when a supplicant tries to grab it and is wounded in the attempt.

The most comical, yet macabre tale of a ruler stumbling his way into awareness is Discourse 19, story 10. In this tale, a prince, excited about his upcoming nuptials to a princess whose beauty is beyond compare, becomes drunk on the night of his wedding. In his drunkenness, he wanders off and ends up in a tower of silence (a Zoroastrian structure for the exposure of the dead). Thinking he has found his bridal chamber, the prince crawls in next to the corpse of a dead woman, whom he kisses (with tongue no less!) as he falls asleep. When the prince does not appear at the marriage ceremony, the king sends out a search party, and they eventually find him in that macabre embrace. When the prince awakens, he wants to die for shame.

Certainly, the tale, on its own, is one about “man’s relationship to the world” (Ritter, 48–49). Indeed, in the frame tale, the caliph accuses his son of being seduced by the world, which he likens to an old woman who has concealed her age behind veils in order to seduce the king. There is, however, an argument to be made for a second reading, by turning to what the caliph tells the
prince at the end of the tale: he accuses his son of being drunk on the pursuit of false knowledge (alchemy). Then, he impishly says that he cannot wait until the light hits his son's pillow, so that he can see exactly with whom he has been keeping company, drunk as he is with power. Herein lies the crux of the matter. This is the only tale in the *EN* in which the beloved of a member of the ruling elite is not a servant. In this case, the beloved is a princess to whom the prince has been betrothed. Reading this tale in light of the notion that the human being is a microcosm of the king's court and God's realm, the prince, in taking up royalty and its trappings, has let his kingship and realm, in all their incumbent meanings, fall into decay even before he has ascended to the throne. The caliph's wise-crack is telling: he is eager for his son to learn exactly whom he is choosing to love and, hence, what kind of kingdom he will rule—one that, in Ebn ʿArabi's terms, has let in the enemy (greed, ambition) at the gates, or one whose members will testify to his just rule.

From this broad perspective, the stumbling ruler of this tale-type thus may be characterized as a ruler who has not been vigilant in the affairs of the heart, and who becomes aware of this situation both through the plight of others and through his own receptivity. This is the portrait of Mahmud and other kings in love that ʿAttār presents to us most frequently. In one significant example, the caliph informs his sons that Mahmud was a popular king because his soul sensed something about the [ways] of the dervish. And it is because he understood this as a ruler that the people are filled with remembrances (*zekr*) of him (ʿAttār 2013, 314, ll. 4482–4483).

Before we turn to the paper’s final tale-type, the king-as-Sufi lover, it should be noted that, in Discourse 12, story 1, one finds, perhaps, the most complex portrait of ʿAttār's ideal king and his view of kingship. With this complex portrait, ʿAttār solves one of the great mysteries of Iranian lore, namely, Key Khosrow's occultation, which followed his setting the world aright after the tumultuous years of his grandfather's reign. In this story, Key Khosrow has in his possession Jamshid's world-seeing chalice. The king is initially pleased to have all the secret mysteries of the universe revealed to him, until it eventually occurs to him that he has not seen the inner workings of the chalice itself. When Key Khosrow asks the chalice about this phenomenon, it responds that it no longer exists: its self has been annihilated,85 which is why it can reflect the world. The chalice then welcomes Key Khosrow to do the same, and so:

85 See also Discourse 12, story 8 (analyzed below), where a very similar sentiment is expressed, except between Mahmud and Ayāz.
Key Khosrow having become aware of the secret / washed his hands of his kingdom.
He became certain that his kingdom was destruction itself / for there is nothing eternal in a world that is transient.
When he saw the self is a desert and his own obstacle / and saw that the cloak of selflessness was bespoke.
Bravely, he parted ways with this short existence, / he professed his faith and slipped into the sleep of annihilation.
He summoned Lohrāsp, who happened to be nearby / and seated him on the throne in his stead.
He went into a cave and took that chalice with him / he crawled under a blanket of snow, think no more (digar mayandish).86

ʿAttār 2013, 258–259, ll. 3295–3300

Key Khosrow’s story is an extreme example of ‘Attār’s ideal king. The ruler becomes self-aware through a mystical chalice that had only ever been held by his ancestor Jamshid, the most fallible, yet beloved, ruler of Iranian mythohistory. Key Khosrow also goes to extraordinary lengths to annihilate his self, and seems to hand off the kingship almost haphazardly to the first person he sees. From a broader perspective, Key Khosrow’s tale brings to mind the “Tale of the Virtuous Woman.” In the latter case, the virtuous woman also willingly undergoes extreme self-annihilation: she prays so fervently for deliverance through death that instead, she experiences the rare death-before-death and achieves near union with the divine, which endows her with miraculous powers.87 Both of these figures, in their desire to worship continuously, give up rulership,88 and appoint someone worthy to rule in their stead. The absolute ideal ruler, then, is one who is devoted solely to contemplation and worship, is imbued with complete spirituality, and appoints someone exemplary to rule the day-to-day affairs of state.89 According to the EN, then, there are two types of ideal rulers:

86 Boyle translates (77) this phrase as “think no more of him.”
87 She is on a boat out at sea; the sailors who had originally sought to protect her have succumbed to their lusts and are threatening her with sexual violence. After she fails to dissuade them, she prays to God for deliverance (death), and God instead sends a fire-storm that burns the men up in an instant and knocks the woman unconscious. When she comes to, she finds herself on the shore of another kingdom, sitting on the sailors’ riches, which she exchanges for her freedom and for the building of a place of worship.
88 Among the most famous historical examples is Ebrāhim b. Adham (718–777) of Balkh, who gave up his kingship to become an ascetic and who also appears in Discourse 15, story 8.
89 The spiritual-political dimension of Key Khosrow’s reign was explored in great length in the works of Shehāb al-Din Sohravardi (1154–1191), the founder of the Illuminationist
the rare ones—represented by the virtuous woman and Key Khosrow who have attained the goals of Sufism and have transcended all earthly concerns—and the model ones who reach their highest potential through love.⁹⁰

In keeping with the consistent subtleties of the characterizations in the EN, the tales that intertwine love and kingship are highly nuanced. Some kings are ignorant of love and do not even recognize the symptoms of love-sickness. Examples of this type include the king of Discourse 2, story 1,⁹¹ and Discourse 2, story 3, in which Solomon, “the lion,” is chastised by an ant;⁹² Solomon had berated the ant for responding too late to his summons. The reason the ant was delayed was that he was busy meeting the demands of his/her beloved, a commitment which, the ant pointedly reminds Solomon, takes precedence over the commands of even a ruler-prophet who enjoys God’s favor. Some kings fail to recognize love even when they are its object.⁹³ When a king’s beloved is literally burned to death in Discourse 6, story 4, however, it is a calamitous twist on the Sufi metaphor of the lover engulfed by the flames of passion. The tragedy begins when at a party, a king⁹⁴ notices in the face of his acclaimed court poet, Fakhr al-Din Gorgāni (d. 1054), signs of two types of drunkenness: the kind that arises from drinking and another kind that derives from loving. The king, in his drunkenness, gifts Gorgāni his beloved. However, Gorgāni, still in possession of his faculties, realizes the king may regret this decision in the morning. He locks the king’s beloved, a servant, away for the night in order to be able to prove that he had left the servant untouched. Unfortunately, the servant too had drunk to excess, and does not awaken when the room is burnt down by an overturned candle. The lesson here is that the king has succumbed to the wrong kind of drunkenness, that which arises from imbibing, and as a

⁹⁰ I would like to thank Louise Marlow for her insightful suggestion here.
⁹¹ See also Discourse 14, story 6, in which Mohammad rebukes ‘Omar b. Khattāb (d. 644) for having put to death a young man who refused to profess his faith in Islam and instead professed his love. Apparently, sorrow had already killed him, and it was unjust for ‘Omar to do so again.
⁹² The title of this paper is mostly taken from Boyle’s translation of this line: “when a lion is chid by an ant” (‘Attār 1976, 51).
⁹³ See n. 28.
⁹⁴ ‘Attār does not specifically mention which king, though either the Saljuqid Toghrel Beg (990–1063) or his governor of Esfahan, ‘Amid Abu’l-Fath Mozaffar are likely candidates.
result becomes careless with his beloved, or soul, and it is the servant who pays the ultimate price, annihilation, for it.95

For many of the tales in which the king recognizes and values love, the caliph offers the key to understanding the king's tales as allegories: the king's court represents a microcosm of God's court. For instance, in Discourse 12, story 6, Soltān Malekshāh (1055–1092), when out campaigning, wakes up one night alone in his tent. Hoping to find someone who has braved the cold and snow, the king searches his entire camp, yet he finds no one except for a lone sentinel keeping guard. The king is so moved by this sentinel's act of love and devotion that he grants him the governorship of Khorasan. The caliph, at the end of the tale, likens the king's act to God's bounteous generosity for those whom He loves and who love Him. In the converse of this story (Discourse 18, story 3), the 'Abbasid caliph, Ma'mun (786–833), falls in love with his servant, and decides to appoint him to the governorship of Basra to test where his love lies. When he does so, he discerns a burning desire for Basra in his servant's heart. After he sends him off, he sends word to his agents in Basra, instructing them to poison the servant and parade his body about town as a lesson to all who prefer the trappings of kingship to the king himself. Here too, the caliph informs his sons that the tale should be read allegorically as well—as a warning not to misplace one's love for God on the worldly. The passionate version of this story-type is to be found in Discourse 12, story 8. One night, Ayāz is fast asleep, unaware that Mahmud is there. Mahmud caresses Ayāz in his sleep until dawn. When the latter awakens, Mahmud tells him that since he was asleep, there was no Ayāz, and as he touched him, he disappeared, so that Mahmud was none other than Ayāz. The differences between king and slave are effaced, through love. Dissolving the boundaries between self and other, the caliph notes at the end of the tale, is how one should love God.

The most illuminating example of the soul as a microcosm of the king's realm and God's realm with love bridging all three is Discourse 14, story 11. In this tale, Mahmud turns to his lover for assurance that his kingdom is greater than anyone else's. The servant informs his king that he, Ayāz, possesses the greater kingdom. Evoking the philosophical, a less-than-surprised Mahmud asks for proof of Ayāz's assertion. Ayāz, chiding Mahmud for knowing full-well the reasoning for his statement, nevertheless indulges the king's demand. In a series of tautologies that are echoed in Ebn 'Arabi's construction of the human body as a city, Ayāz responds:

95 Muted versions of the disastrous love triangle are to be found in Discourse 14, stories 16 and 24. In both of these tales, the jealous kings, Soltān Sanjar and Soltān Mahmud respectively, realize the futility of jealousy in the face of true love.
Though you are king, / 
Your heart is your king. 
Your heart is subject to me, your slave / 
And so my reign is supreme. 
You are king, your heart is your king today / 
But I am the king that has conquered your heart.

ʿATTĀR 2013, 293, ll. 4037–4039

As Ayāz teaches Mahmud and, as Nimrod learns at the end of his life, the servant and the soul are the two sides of the same coin: to love God is to love one’s servant, which is to love one’s self; and this love requires the openness of heart (narm del) to perceive it (awareness) and to receive it in return.

**Conclusion**

Far from evoking images of despots who have their virtues and weaknesses,96 the EN castigates the social institution of kingship. At the same time, it portrays a complex view of kings as individuals, who like everyone else, including saints, are responsible for nurturing the soul, the other, and cultivating love for the divine. Furthermore, just as kings are responsible for the communities over which they rule, the caliph, by offering illuminating tales and key commentary for his sons, conveys the message that to rule oneself justly is to rule one’s kingdom the same way. Altogether, the frame tale and the various stories of saints, kings, and common folk offer a vision of ideal society, with all its attendant complexities, wherein everyone is responsible and is ruled over by a Sufi king who, in recognizing and reciprocating love, mirrors the realm of God, and hence rules justly. The EN portrays this vision by offering remembrances (zekr, or, more aptly, taẕkerāt) of saints and ordinary people, as well as kings, such as Mahmud; and by adopting the formal characteristics of practical ethics, which it then disrupts at the level of meaning.

Though the EN works in concert with other hagiographical narratives and practical ethics, it also complements these genres. It serves as a manual for those outside the peripheries of Sufi orders and courts as well as for those within them. Nevertheless, despite ʿAttār’s importance in the study of hagiography and the development of medieval Sufism, the EN remains curiously understudied. While it lacks specificity in matters of dogma or political doctrine, the simplicity of the EN’s tales hardly betokens an uncomplicated text. Most

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96 See n. 6.
tales resist conformity or a single type of reading; all, however, are invitations to renew one’s faith, engage in spiritual growth, and aspire to attain Sufism’s loftiest goals, self-awareness and love of the divine. The EN primarily targets the ordinary (non-specialized) audiences of practical ethics and hagiography, with the goal of turning them into its disciples. It is my hope that the preceding analysis has helped to establish the EN as a text that deserves much more detailed study than it has so far received: it provides a fascinatingly complex example of the plasticity of Sufi popular texts.

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