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Splitting hairs and trimming tresses: translating Amīr Khusraw's Persian locks into an American 'do

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the process involved in translating a passage by medieval Indian court poet Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325) that appears in a preface to a book of his poetry, *Vasaṭ al-Hayāt* (The Middle of Life). The article demonstrates possible solutions to difficult problems of translation, including how to render double entendres relating to the metaphor of hair. Trimming some of the puns, briefly suggesting others, and adding explanatory notes when necessary yielded a translation that strove to convey much of the sense and richness of the original without getting bogged down in an excess of wordplay.

Introduction

If even the best translations really are, as Robert Bly opined, like Persian rugs seen from the back, in which the “pattern is apparent, but not much more,” then how much more so is a translation from Persian into English?¹ Here the metaphor takes on new meaning, because in the translation the reader can glimpse, even from the knotty underside, the ornate, intricate patterning, the arabesques, and richness of color that characterize those pieces of craftsmanship. It is easy to get carried away and to imagine one's self, as translator, unrolling an ornate Kermani carpet (flipped over of course) in a room otherwise furnished with spare, minimalist lines, and basking in the awe and applause of the onlookers.

In order for this vision to become reality, of course, the translator must be, at least to some degree, faithful to the original. She cannot blithely transform 14th-century formal prose into 21st-century American vernacular. She cannot unbend the paisleys, mute the dyes, and exchange the silk threads for polyester ones, all in the name of making the work accessible to watchers of reality television. Any of those actions are akin to betraying the work, as well as the target language, by depriving it of the sort of enrichment that might benefit it.² At the same time, however, she cannot reproduce the text word by word, for too often the translation will then dissolve into gibberish. She must strive for that perfect balance between literalness and originality. The task is an unforgiving one. As Sprachman writes, “Faced with the *mot juste* problem, the translator [from Persian to English] is forced to choose among an array of inelegant solutions, including madness.”³

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Madness seemed like a particularly viable option as I translated the prefaces written by Amīr Khusraw (d. 1325), the medieval Indian court poet, for a volume to be published by Harvard University Press's Murty Classical Library of India series. Khusraw produced five *dīvāns* (collections) of poetry, naming each after a different phase of life and writing an introductory preface, or *dībāchah*, for each. These prefaces, which range in length from just a few pages to about 90 pages, are remarkable texts in themselves, because in them Khusraw gives vivid accounts of his rise to fame, airs his views on Persian poetry, and records the violent outcomes of battles in which, as a courtier who accompanied his sultan everywhere, the poet took part. Like other of his prose works, and characteristic of medieval Islamicate writing, the prefaces burst with literary flourishes and overflow with repetition and word play.

The rhetorical conceit known as *ihām*, or double entendre, is a particular favorite of Khusraw's, one that seems especially designed to deprive translators of their sanity.⁴ *Ihām* consists of a word that can be understood in two or more ways, generating multiple meanings for a sentence. As an early practitioner of meta-writing, Khusraw especially favors those words that have literary connotations, because they allow him to continually conjure up the act of writing (while writing) even when he is ostensibly speaking about other subjects. For example, he often uses *bayt* to mean both "house" and "couplet" and *baḥr* to mean both "sea" and "poetic metre." After introducing an analogy, he bats it around like a cat does a toy, coaxing the greatest possible number of meanings from it. In the preface to his work *Ghurrat al-Kamāl* (Full Moon of Perfection), for example, Khusraw praises his mentor, the Sufi saint Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā' (d. 1325), by comparing him with poetry and with verses in the Qur'an—an analogy facilitated by a play on the word *niẓām* (order, discipline; also, poem), which has connotations of stringing pearls, giving order, and writing poetry. The passage ends with the following line:

شاعر از برای او چه بیت سازد، جائی که بیت الله بیت اوست [۴]

This can be translated as: "What house can the poet build for him? Where he is, God's house is his house." But if we read *bayt* as "verse" instead of "house," it reads: "What verse can the poet compose for him? Where he is, God's verse is his verse." Elsewhere, Khusraw brags about his ability to produce *ihām*-laden verses that work equally well in Persian and in Arabic, saying: "Before me—the skillful horseman of Arabic and Persian—no one had applied this harsh discipline to the swift-footed steed of speech, which, in one race, arrives both in Arabia and in Iran."⁵

Ihām makes a series of especially complicated appearances in a long section in the preface to *Vasaṭ al-Ḥayāt* (The Middle of Life), composed in about 1285. Here, in the context of discussing his growing aptitude and fame for writing, Khusraw seizes upon what may seem an unlikely conceit for the subject—hair—and then goes on to enmesh his reader in a veritable tangle of wordplay. By introducing into the discussion several terms that have both a hirsute and a literary meaning, Khusraw depicts his development on two simultaneous tracks: that of writing poetry and growing hair, including facial hair. These words include, most notably, *khatt*, which can indicate both the black lines made by a pen (handwriting) and the first marks of the beard that appear on the face of the youth; *maḥāsīn*, which can mean both beauties or charms, including literary charms, as well as beards and mustaches; and *ash'ār*, which is the plural for both poem and hair.

It is here that the translator begins, quite literally, to tear out her own hair. How to reproduce all of the double entendres? Or if she does not reproduce them, how does she provide at least the “echo of the original” that Walter Benjamin speaks of with regard to the goal of translation?⁶ The problem is further complicated by the associations of hair in Persian with extreme slenderness and subtlety—one that it lacks in English.⁷ In the end, my task as translator was remarkably akin to that of a barber: how much hair did I want to leave and how much did I want to trim? Trim too little, and the reader would not be able to make out the features of the poet’s main theme—his growth as a poet. Trim too much, and his prose would appear bald.

In the following, I will explore these problems and the solutions I arrived at. For example, I found that leaving just enough hair to suggest the conceit without allowing it to obscure the “real” subject allowed me to feel as though I was staying true to the text while still providing the reader with accessible passages, rather than incomprehensible jumbles inundated with footnotes. My goals in writing about this process are twofold. First, I believe it is important to draw attention to the wordplay that characterizes Khusraw’s work. Even though hairy *ihāms* presented me with endless challenges as a translator, I am glad Khusraw included this humorous conceit in his work, and think that it deserves to be highlighted. His playfulness with language and his inherent confidence in the mutability and multiplicity of meaning are refreshing tendencies to encounter in any language.

Second, I believe that too often translators are put off from attempting works that, like Khusraw’s, contain a great deal of rhetorical flourish or other elements typically deemed untranslatable. But as Paul Losensky and Sunil Sharma have demonstrated in their excellent volume of translations of Khusraw’s *ghazals* (short lyric poems) and other poems, *In the Bazaar of Love*, these tasks, although difficult, are not insurmountable.⁸ I hope to be able to provide additional solutions to such problems. Ultimately, translations from works such as Khusraw’s enrich our own language and experience. In other words, the more Persian rugs the better, even if they are seen from the underside.

A Close Shave (or Four)

Khusraw begins to develop the conceit of hair in a section of the preface that talks about his growing mastery of poetry as a young man.

Paragraph 1

The section starts off by describing how intelligent, subtle writers spend their nights creating double entendres:

اریک بینان در ایام جوانی که وسط زندگانیست بکلک تیر شکل در شب سواد موی شکافند و یکی را
کنند و این نوع طریق خاصه منطبق [...] است که دو معنین می انگیزم اگر هر معنی من که چون موئی
یک ست بشکافند دو موی شود یعنی دو معنی باریک در نظر آید. بیت
معنی چون مویم را که بشکافی دو مو گردد

انم من ولی این طرفه کاولاد دو مو دارم [۹-۱۰]

The following is a literal (and therefore clunky) translation that focuses on the artistic rather than hairy development:

And the perspicacious ones, in the days of youth, which is the middle of life, split hairs in the middle of night with their arrow-shaped pens, and make one two, and this method is the specialty of eloquent speech, that I excite two meanings. If they split every meaning of mine, which is as slender as a hair, it becomes two hairs; that is, two slender hairs enter the gaze. Couplet:

If you split one of my hairlike expressions, it becomes two hairs
I am young, but I have already given birth to this novelty of the two hairs

As can be seen, the metaphor of hair cascades through the passage. To begin with, a strand of hair symbolizes a slender, subtle expression from which the highly accomplished writer can elicit two meanings. The poet calls this act “splitting hairs.” He then introduces a pun about how the reader absorbs a very subtle meaning in the same way as a tiny piece of hair (such as an eyelash) enters the eye. In this case, he masterfully demonstrates the act of “splitting hairs” at the same time as he describes it—akin, perhaps, to speaking out of both sides of one’s mouth while talking about what that metaphor means. He concludes with yet another reference to hair that acts on at least two levels, one metaphorical and the other material: first, although he is young, he is able to accomplish this phenomenal feat of splitting hairs; second, although young, he is not barefaced—he has sprouted (at least) two facial hairs. The last expression, two hairs, *du mū*, also translates as “middle aged,” because it refers to the bi-colored, salt-and-pepper mixture that adorns the scalp of many a middle-aged person.

Although complex, this passage did not present the same degree of difficulty in translation as did later ones, in which all of the action takes place on two levels at once. My primary concern in translating it dealt with rendering the expression “splitting hairs.” At first, Khusraw’s use of it seemed like a happy coincidence, since it is one of the few Persian expressions that have an identical counterpart in English. Yet although the expression carries a similar meaning in Persian and English, to be extremely exact in one’s undertakings (or, in English, to quibble) its function in the passage was, as has been indicated, different. I found it conjuring up ideas that led the English-speaking reader astray from the poet’s meaning. Thus, I trimmed the first allusion to it. I did, however, leave the hair that appeared in the rest of the passage, introducing it as a metaphor for subtle expression. Even though this usage would be unfamiliar to English speakers, I felt that they would be able to grasp its significance and that, in fact, its very peculiarity would lend it charm and freshness.

Here, then, is the reworked translation:

During the time of youth, which is the middle of life, subtle, intelligent writers split meanings with their arrow-like pens in the dark night, and turn one into two! This method is exclusive to those who practice the art of eloquent speech. If you look closely at every expression of mine—narrow and subtle as a hair—it divides and becomes two: that is, two subtle hairs enter the gaze. Poem:

If you split one of my subtle, hair-like expressions, it becomes two
I am young, but I have already given birth to this novelty of the “two hairs.”

As can be seen, the translation gradually works hair into the mix as a metaphor for subtlety, slenderness, and double meanings. The translation of the first hemistich of the

poem provides the reader with more context for Khusraw's reference to "hair" by adding the adjective "subtle" to the description of "expressions." In the second hemistich, I ignored the double meaning of "giving birth to two hairs," preferring to focus on the poet's artistic development rather than his physical maturation. Attempting to include both meanings would overload the verses in a cumbersome manner. There would be plenty of time for those puns to appear.

Paragraph 2

Khusraw extends the allusion of being "two-haired" into the next paragraph, but here weaves in the aforementioned double entendre of poetry and hair (*ash'ār*), along with handwriting/facial hair (*khatt*) and beauties/beards (*maḥāsīn*), to enmesh the reader in the snaky tendrils of multiple *ihāms*:

اگر چه سودای جوانی در سرست لیکن ازین روی که میان پختگان اشعار دو مو شده ام یعنی اشعار

که در خط مو بموی محاسن ست یگان یگان پخته می شود تا بدانند پختگان کاهلم [۱۰]

First, a literal translation of the text that focuses on the poet's artistic development:

Even though the passion of youth is in my head, nevertheless, since among the mature men of poetry I have become middle aged, that is, since my poems (which, in detailed writing, are beauties) one by one become mature, the mature men know that I am one of them.

Here I will tease out some of the puns. In the first line, Khusraw refers to the *sawdā-yi javānī*, the "passion of youth," which might make his poetry appear less mature. The same phrase can be translated, however, as "Even if the blackness of youth is still upon my head," thus referring, of course, to the youthful darkness of his hair. Likewise, when Khusraw writes that he has become "middle aged" (*du mū*) in the eyes of the "mature men of poetry" (*pukhtigān-i ash'ār*), the *ash'ār* pun simultaneously yields the meaning that his hair has become salt-and-pepper colored in the eyes of the "mature men of hair"; that is, men whose hair is white, unlike his. (The "two hairs" reference could also allude to the facial hair he is growing.) The next phrase works almost perfectly on two levels. At the same time as he states that his poems—which, written in detailed writing, are beauties—become mature, he likewise says that his facial hair (*khatt*), which hair by hair forms a beard and mustache (*maḥāsīn*), little by little becomes mature.

I was confronted with a variety of choices for translating this passage. I could ignore the hairy puns and simply focus on the artistic development. I could focus on the artistic development but provide extensive footnotes that would indicate the puns. I could try to find English alternatives for every single pun. Or I could focus on the artistic development, and meanwhile here and there allude to the metaphor of hair, or even allow it to take precedence at times when it seemed appropriate. I rejected the first solution: hair acted as an adornment to these passages, and a translation shorn of locks would seem glaringly bare. The second solution likewise did not appeal because I did not imagine readers would want to wade through footnotes. The third solution seemed most appealing if feasible, but I could not imagine duplicating every pun in English—and even if this was

possible, would the resulting translation be understandable? (Even comprehending all of the subtleties of Khusraw's passages in Persian involved nearly superhuman effort on the part of the reader.) The last solution, then, was the one I decided to adopt. This sometimes meant adding a descriptive passage or two to Khusraw's words.

The reworked translation is as follows:

Even though my hair may still be youthfully black, nevertheless, since I have become middle aged among the mature men of poetry—that is, since my poems, which, like the slowly growing down on the cheek of a youth, little by little collect into full beauties—the mature men know that I am one of them.

As can be seen, I adopted the “hair” metaphor in my translation of the first phrase, but not in the second. In the phrase explaining how he has become “middle aged,” I added a phrase which acknowledged the metaphor of hair, “like the slowly growing down on the cheek of a youth,” which conjures up the image of a beard even if it does not specifically mention that facial ornament.

Paragraph 3

The next paragraph launches into the action of editing and of writing poetry. Once again, this first, literal translation examines mostly the poet's depiction of his literary activities:

و بریدن من همه از محاسن اشعارست آری **ریش المرء محاسنه** با آنکه کار اشعار همه تعلق بزنج دارد

مع هذا کلک تراشیده من که دو زبانش چون دندانهای شانه است بهنگامی که جعدش می کنم هم بران

تراشیده صد هزار طره مسلسل بر می بافد.

نبات دلم را قلم شانه کرد

نکو می کند کلم را شانها [۱۰]

And all my snipping and trimming is of the beauties of poetry. Yes, “A man's good attributes [and beautiful literary accomplishments] form his plumage,” even though the work of poetry is entirely related to idle speech. Even so, when I create intricate curlicues with my sharpened pen, whose two tongues are like the teeth of a comb, it also weaves 100,000 cascading ringlets upon that bareness. Poem:

My pen combed the sweet things of my heart
The matters make beautiful the words

Once again, every passage can be read as an action having to do with hair. “All of my cutting and trimming is of the beauties of poetry” also reads “All of my cutting and trimming is of the beard and mustaches of hair (*maḥāsīn-i ash'ār*).” The Arabic phrase “A man's good attributes form his plumage” can also read “A man's beard and mustache form his plumage.” (In fact, the passage forms a triple entendre since the word in Arabic for plumage, *rīsh*, also means beard in Persian.) The phrase “even though the work of poetry is entirely related

to idle speech” can read “All of the matter of hair dangles from the chin.” The final phrase before the couplet can be understood as the author weaving hair upon a shaven chin—as well as inscribing rounded letters upon a page.

How to translate? I opted once more to eliminate many of the puns, which, I imagined, would serve only to confuse the reader if translated. Indeed, the prospect of leaving all of the references conjured up the vivid image of the reader ensnared by hair, a common trope in Persian, but perhaps not one that the English speaker would appreciate experiencing without proper forewarning.

The reworked translation is as follows:

And all my snipping and trimming is of the beauties of poetry. Yes, “A man’s beautiful literary accomplishments form his plumage,” even though the work of poetry is nothing more than idle speech. Nevertheless, when I set to work with my sharpened pen, whose two tongues are like the teeth of a comb, I weave 100,000 cascading ringlets of poetry upon the bare page. Poem:

My pen combed the honey of my heart
Its teeth produced beautiful words

As can be seen, the passage now focuses on the literary accomplishments, but allows the suggestion of hair to remain in the references to “snipping and trimming,” “plumage,” “ringlets,” and “comb.”

Paragraph 4

The final paragraph plays once again on the *maḥāsīn*, *ash‘ār*, and *khaṭṭ* puns with great facility, as well as adding a few more:

زم آغاز خط بود که نقشبندان تقدیر سودای باریکهای اشعار در بناگوش من دمانیدند و تکلفاتِ عارضی

از بلغهٔ بلاغت خط در کشیدیم و آنکه در زیر نمودار از زرخ بود مو بموی بمحاسن این پوشیدم [۱۰]

Once again, the first literal translation conveys the poet’s description of his artistic development:

I still was just beginning to write when the painters of fate caused to blow the passion of delicate lines of poetry into my ears, and I drew forth my literary exertions from my rhetorical eloquence, and that which was evident of “idle talk,” I concealed, bit by bit, with the beauties [of my poetry].

The passage works brilliantly as a description of how the poet began to develop facial hair. “I still was just beginning to write when the painters of fate caused to blow the passion of delicate lines of poetry into my ears” can be read “I still had just the beginnings of a beard when the painters of fate caused the blackness of delicate hairs to sprout upon my jaws.” The double meanings of *takallufāt* (both adornment and literary exertion) and *balāghat* (eloquence, rhetoric, as well as maturity) as well as the usual *khaṭṭ* allow the next phrase to be read on a plane of hair: “And I drew forth bristles for the adornment of my cheeks from my maturity.” Finally the usual suspects of *zanakh* (both idle talk and

chin) and *mahāsin* in the final phrase yield this hirsute meaning: “And that which, underneath, was evident of the chin, I covered, hair by hair, with this beard and mustache.”

Here again, while appreciating the poet’s genius, I felt drastic measures were necessary. The puns, if translated, would only drag down the prose. I cut most of them, leaving only the suggestion of hair:

I still had just the beginning of down on my cheeks when Fate whispered into my ears the first delicate lines of poetry, and I exerted myself to produce eloquent works. Mark by mark, I replaced nonsense scribbling with the beauties of my excellent composition.

I trusted that the reader would sense (even if he was not consciously aware of it) the relationship between the delicate lines on the writer’s face and those on the page. Hair would subtly echo in the reader’s mind but would not form a trap obscuring the writer’s purpose or blocking the movement of his prose.

Conclusion

The decision to sacrifice hair was, often, a difficult one for me. Like any barber or stylist, I hoped to show off my subject to his advantage, to trim just enough so that the remaining tresses would act as a pleasing adornment—one that would, perhaps, go unnoticed in the conscious mind, but nevertheless radiate in the subconscious. Forestalled by English’s limitations from executing the sort of gymnastic feats with hair and writing that Khusraw accomplishes with Persian *ihāms*, I strove to allow the reader a flavor of the original without a sense of being encumbered by it. The resulting translation perhaps only hints at the richness and play of the original text. But a Persian rug, even when seen from the underside, still introduces new rhythms and patterns into a room, and enlarges its occupants’ ideas of the possible.

Notes

1. Bly, “The Eight Stages of Translation,” 80.
2. For more discussion of this topic, see Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* cited in Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 261–262; and Fani, “Rewriting Hafez.”
3. Sprachman, “Lost in Translation,” 14.
4. For more on *ihām* in Khusraw’s works, see Gabbay, *Islamic Tolerance*, 36–38; also Sharma, *Amir Khusraw*, 51, 53, 79 and 92; and Losensky and Sharma, *In the Bazaar of Love*, liii.
5. Khusraw, *Dibāchah-yi divān-i ghurraṭ al-kamāl* cited in Gabbay, *Islamic Tolerance*, 37.
6. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 258–259.
7. Davis, “On Not Translating Hafez,” 315.
8. See in particular Sharma’s translations of short punning poems. Losensky and Sharma, *In the Bazaar of Love*, 103 and 104.

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