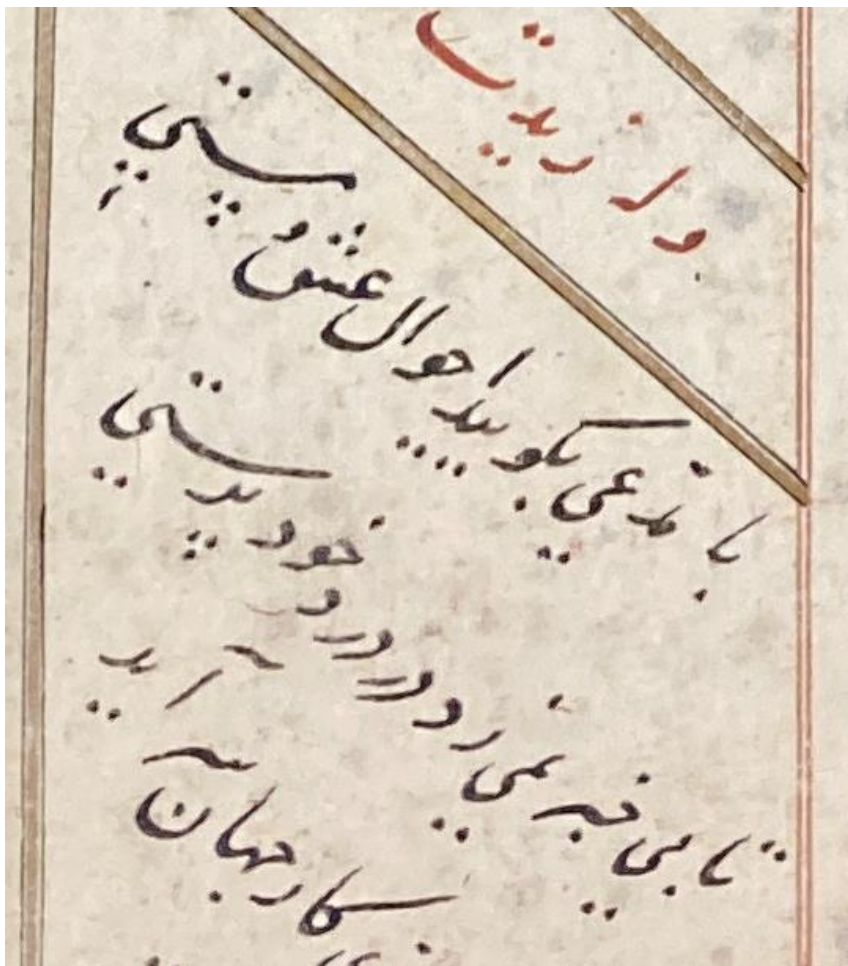


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No. 18

TAŞHĪF: A POETICS OF MISREADING



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Cover image: © Opening of a ghazal by Ḥāfiẓ from *Bayāẓ-i ‘Alā Marandī*, MS. Clarke 24, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Taṣḥīf: A Poetics of Misreading¹

I

In the rich tradition of classical Persian love literature—mostly in poetry— a variety of intricate roles are defined for the participants in the affairs of love. Beside the main actants, the lover and the beloved (*‘āshiq* and *ma‘shūq*), and the opponent or rival in love (*raqīb* or *ḥarīf*), and the intimate helper of the lover (*maḥram*), there is the unfavourable figure of boaster or pretender (*muda‘ī*): one who falsely boasts of love, one who reduces love to sheer rhetoric and subjects it to the discourse of judgement.

Much has been written in classical Persian discourses of love about *muda‘ī*. Literally meaning one who makes a claim (*iddi‘ā*), the boaster has been characterised as one who has not come over their selfishness, as Sa‘dī (d. 1291) writes:

نبیند مدعی جز خویشتن را
که دارد پرده پندار در پیش

[The boaster does not see but himself;
because he has a veil of delusion before his eyes.]

Ḥāfīz (d. c. 1390) assures the boaster that the invisible hand of God waits in ambush:

مدعی خواست که آید به تماشاگاه راز
دست غیب آمد و بر سینه نامحرم زد

[The boaster wanted to sightsee the secret;
the invisible hand rejected his unintimate heart.]

The Bodleian library at the University of Oxford holds a manuscript containing 48 *ghazals* (lyric poems) by Ḥāfīz. An edited version of this manuscript was published in Tehran

¹ The author wishes to thank Rebecca Ruth Gould for her valuable review and feedback.

in 2008 and raised a debate over the originality of the manuscript. The editor, Ali Ferdowsi, insists the manuscript was copied by a certain ‘Alā Marandī in Shiraz around 1389 when Ḥāfiẓ was alive.²

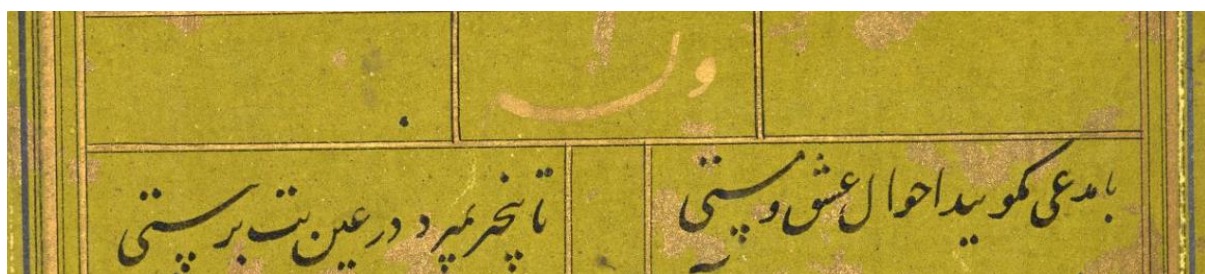
One of the most interesting variants that was scrutinized in this manuscript was the famous opening of a *ghazal* in which the poet suggests how to treat the ones who falsely boast of love. The verse is read in more standard versions of Ḥāfiẓ as:

با مدعی مگوئید اسرار عشق و مستی

تا بی‌خبر بمیرد در درد خودپرستی

[Do **not** share the secrets of love and drunkenness with the boasters

Let them die in ignorance and suffering from selfishness.]



From MS. 7759, British Library

However, the manuscript ascribed to ‘Alā Marandī records the verse with a minor change to two words: the line acquires a completely opposite meaning:

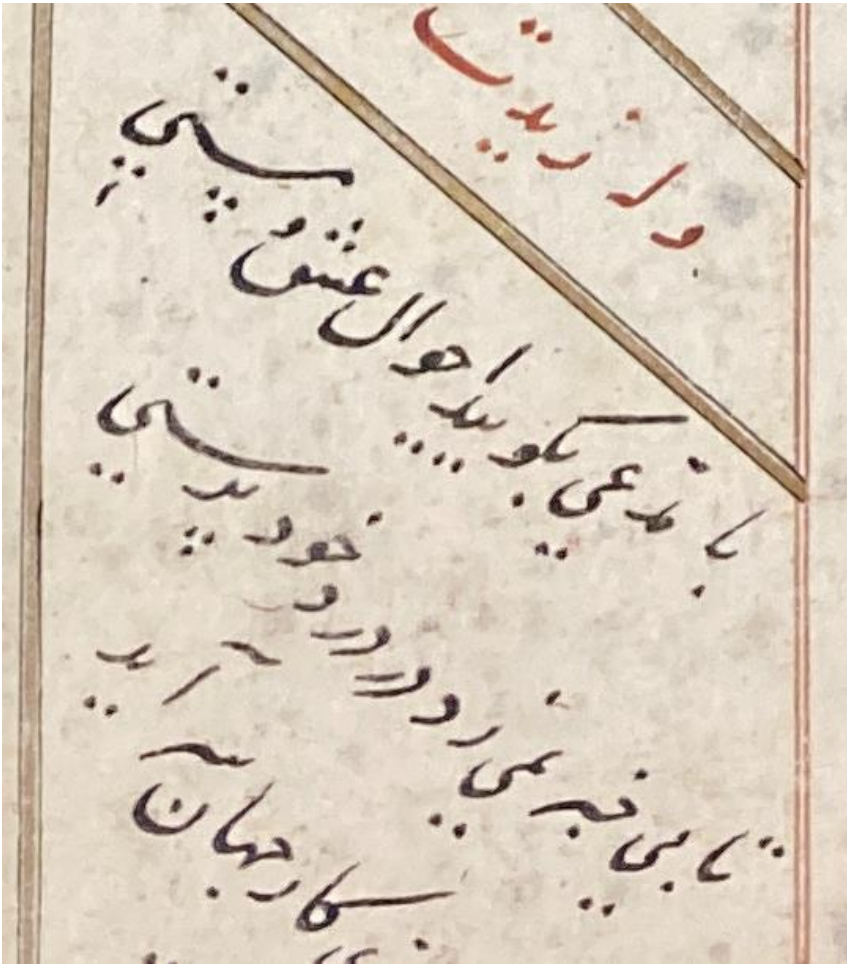
با مدعی بگوئید اسرار عشق و مستی

تا بی‌خبر نمیرد در درد خودپرستی

[**Do** share the secrets of love and drunkenness with the boaster;

² See *Ghazal-hā-yi Ḥāfiẓ: nakhustīn nuskhā-yi yāft-shuda dar zamān-i ḥayāt-i shā‘ir*, edited by Ali Ferdowsi (Tehran: Dibayeh, 2008). For debates on this manuscript, see Salim Neysari, “Ghazal-hā-yi Ḥāfiẓ az zamān-i ḥayāt-i shā‘ir,” *Gozarash-e mirath* 2: 29–30 (2009), 55–60; Abolfazl Khatibi, “Bā muda ī bigūyīd yā magūyīd,” *Nama-ye Farhangestan* 10:2 (2008), 112–124; Iraj Afshar, “Bayāz-i ‘Alā Marandī,” *Ayina-ye Mirath* 4 (2008), 5–49.

Let them **not** die in ignorance and suffering from selfishness.]



From MS. Clarke 24, Bodleian Library

Whereas the speaker in the standard variant of Ḥāfiẓ's ghazal sounds imperative and unapologetically merciless, the second variant represents a sounds sympathetic and merciful speaker. The speaker in the second variant is worried about the boaster dying without having ever tasted unselfish love, while the only thing the speaker in the first variant wishes for the boaster is death in ignorance and selfishness.

The ambiguous script draws our attention to the significance of a rhetorical figure in Arabic and Persian named *taṣḥīf*³ (also called *muṣaḥḥaf* by most classical Persian rhetoricians), carrying a wide range of meaning from alteration and distortion to misreading or mis-writing.⁴ An elaborate associate of visual paronomasia (*jinās-i khaṭṭ*) in Arabic and Persian rhetoric, *taṣḥīf* occurs when the meaning of a word changes through the addition or removal of dots or the alteration of vowel patterns (*i' rāb*).⁵

In this paper, I argue that *taṣḥīf* deconstructs efforts by textual criticism to determine the one and single genuine version of the text, to identify the original reading of the text, the one originally intended by the author, the authoritative versions. In the face of textual variants, and aware of the poets' conscious use of the potentials of misreading, we come to this question: *What if the poet's choice was originally double, or triple, or even more? What if in the above example Ḥāfiẓ intended both variants?*

II

بر حاشیه کتاب چون نقطه شک

بی کار نه ایم اگر چه در کار نه ایم⁶

[Like a dot of doubt in the margins of the book

we're not purposeless, though we're not in the text]

³ See F. Rosenthal, "Taṣḥīf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 29 July 2023 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7428>.

⁴ For historical and aesthetic development of script-based rhetorical figures see, Lara Harb, "Beyond the Known Limits: Ibn Dāwūd al-İsfahānī's Chapter on 'Intermedial' Poetry," in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*, edited by Joseph Lowry and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017): 122–149; Nasser Ahmed Ismail, "Rhetorical Devices in Mamluk Poetry: The Case of Paronomasia," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, vol.9 (2014), 131-143.

⁵ For a description of the technical term *i' rāb*, see H. Fleisch, "i' rāb," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 29 July 2023 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3583>.

⁶ *Sukhanān-i manẓūm-i Abū Sa'īd Abi'l Khayr*, edited by Sa'īd Nafisi (Tehran: Ketabkhana-ye Sana'i, nd), 68.

Persian mystic literature is enriched by technical terms borrowed from calligraphy and codicology. In the above quoted verse ascribed to Abū Saʿīd Abi'l Khayr (d. 1041), the Persian mystic uses the term “*nuqṭa-yi shakk* [dot of doubt]” as a metaphor for epistemological uncertainty that threatens the purity of the Sufi’s beliefs and ambitions. The term, however, was technically used to refer to the three triangular-shaped dots that copyists placed in the margins of their manuscripts as a signal for doubtful variants or illegible words on the line beside which the three dots were placed.

Persian mysticism, in its turn, appropriates aesthetic notions from calligraphy and technical terms from codicology. In a fragment of *Tamhīdāt* (Preludes), Sufi martyr ʿAyn-al-Quzzāt Hamadānī (d. 1131) boasts of a nighttime vision: “Alas! That night, which was a Friday night, I was writing these words when I reached a point where I saw whatever was before the beginning (*azal*) and will be after the end (*abad*) in a letter *alif*. Alas! Someone should understand what I say.”⁷ For instance, the progress of a Sufi on the path to truth has been consistently likened, in Persian mystic literature, to the development of a master calligrapher through persistent artistic practice (*mashq*).⁸ The influential mystic-political movements, *hurūfiyya* (letterism) and *nuqṭaviyya* (dottism), that traversed early modern Iran, Anatolia, and Balkans, were based on an exegetic approach to the Quran with respect to the shape of the letters in the text. Harshly suppressed by Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1588–1629) for heresy, dottists believed that the Qur’an’s message is condensed in its first chapter (*sūra*), which is condensed itself, in the *basmalah* at the beginning of the *sura*, which is condensed in its turn in the letter *b* (ب) at the beginning of the *basmalah*, itself condensed in the dot under the letter ب. That dot, they believed, was the manifestation of ʿAlī, the fourth caliph and the first Shiʿite Imam (656-61).

⁷ ʿAyn-al-Quzzāt Hamadānī, *Tamhīdāt*, edited by ʿAfif ʿOsayran (Tehran: Manuchehri, 1994), 347.

⁸ See for example, Bābā Shāh Iṣfāhānī, “Ādāb al-mashq,” in *Risālātī dar khushnivīsī va hunar-hā-yi vābasta*, edited by Hamidreza Qelichkhani (Tehran: Rowzaneh, 1994): 209–224.

In scripts such as Arabic (and its Persian variation), where letters vary at times with the change in the number and position of dots, dots play a significant poetic role. In Persian codicology, the term *nuqta-yi sahv* (wrong dot) refers to a wrong dot unnecessarily placed on a letter.⁹ The 20th century Iranian lexicographer ‘Ali Akbar Dehkhoda cites the author of *Daqāiq al-inshā’*, a late-sixteenth century treatise on ornate writing by Ranjhur Raj, calling dotted letters *mua’jjam* (in contrast to undotted letters being called *muhmala*, literally meaning “useless”) in that the word is derived from *i jām*, which in Arabic means “correcting a mistake.”¹⁰

The morphological features of Persian letters (which were adapted from Arabic alphabet following the Muslim conquest in seventh century) allow for interesting paratextual effects in manuscripts. As can be seen below (**figure 1**), 29 out of the 32 letters of the Persian alphabet can be classified in 11 groups. Each group consists of letters with the same general morphology. What distinguishes the letters in each group is the number and the position of diacritical dots (*nuqta*).

	Disconnected form	Connected form
1	ب پ ت ث	ب پ ت ث Also two other letters, that is ن and ی fall in this group in their connected form.
2	ج چ ح خ	ج چ ح خ
3	د ذ	د ذ
4	ر ز ژ	ر ز ژ
5	س ش	س ش
6	ص ض	ص ض
7	ط ظ	ط ظ
8	ع غ	ع غ / ع غ
9	ف ق	ف ق
10	ک گ	ک گ
11	م ه (The two letters form a group only in their connected forms)	م ه / م ه

Figure 1. Eleven groups of Persian letters with parallel morphologies

⁹ See “nuqta-yi sahv,” in *Zarafshān: Farhang-i iṣṭilāḥāt va tarkībāt-i khushnivīsī, kitāb-ārāyī, va nuskhā-pardāzī dar shi‘r-i fārsī*, rdited by Hamidreza Qelichkhani (Tehran: Farhang-e Mo‘aser, 2013), 790.

¹⁰ ‘Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, *Lughat-nāma*, vol. 14, edited by Mohammad Mo‘in and Sayyed Ja‘far Sahidi (Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 1998), 21133.

This morphological feature of the Arabic/Persian alphabet plays an important role in creating textual variants in Arabic/Persian manuscripts. Persian calligraphic styles such as *nasta‘liq* and *shikasta nasta‘liq* (a short-hand version of *nasta‘liq*) further expanded the range of variants within the manuscript tradition. Meanwhile, letters with similar shapes provided Persian poets with immense potential for creating scriptorial ambiguities or near homographs, which enhanced aesthetic pleasure. In classical Persian treatises of rhetoric, these scriptorial ambiguities are defined under the main rubrics of *jinās-i khaṭṭ* (scriptorial paronomasia) and a variant of this visual ambiguity named *muṣaḥḥaf*.

Jinās-i khaṭṭ refers to wide range of scriptorial paronomasia in which words resemble each other visually—and not, as in paronomasia, phonetically— as in the words for “wine” and “mirage” in Persian, respectively *sharāb* (شراب) and *sarāb* (سراب). The two words only differ visually in the three dots over their first letters, س and ش. (Arabic and Persian are read from right to left.)

In *Tarjuman al-balāgha*, the first known Persian treatise on rhetoric (written circa 1088-1114 in the Ferghana region of Central Asia), Radūyānī calls this device as *muṣārī‘a* “literally meaning similarity (*manandagī*) in form,” and categorizes it separately from the four types of *jinās* that he identifies.¹¹ For Radūyānī, *muṣārī‘a* is “when the poet uses words [*alfāz*] in a verse [*bayt*] that are the same in letters [*hurūf*] and writing [*nibishtan*], but different in reading [*khāndan*], in dots [*nuqṭa*], in vowels [*i‘rāb*], and ‘*arūz* [rhythmics] as in *tārīkh* [تاریخ, “history”] and *nāranj* [نارنج, “orange”], or in *chīra* [چیره, “dominant”] and *khīra* [خیره, “dazzled”].”¹²

Radūyānī recounts a story about Abu al-‘Abbās-i ‘Abbās, a poet who sends this verse to to King Bigzīn in Farghāna:

Choose (*biguzīn*) your kingdom (*mulkā*), O King Bigzīn (*Bigzīn malikā*),

¹¹ Muḥammad b. ‘Umar ar-Rādūyānī, *Tarjuman al-balāgha*, ed. Aḥmed Ateş (Tehran: Asatir, 1983), 25. The first English translation of this work was completed by Michelle Quay for the Global Literary Theory project.

¹² *Tarjuman al-balāgha*, 25.

you're good-natured like an angel (*malakā*).

بگزين ملکا بگزين ملکا

پاک طبع تو بسان ملکا

“Supposing that his name had been written twice, the king said, ‘This is not a poem.’

A son of his was there, read the verse as it was; the king found it beautiful and rewarded it good prize.”

Another example he gives for the visual type of paronomasia is a verse by Rūdakī:

نیل دهنده تویی بگاہ عطیت

پیل دمنده بگاہ کینه‌گزاری

[At the time of generosity, you're the giving Nile (*nīl-i dahanda*);

At the time of revenge, you're the roaring elephant (*pīl-i damanda*).]

Radūyānī introduces several other poetic devices that are focused on letters, including *mujarrad* (when the poet deliberately excludes one or more letters of the alphabet in a poem, for example by writing a poem in which the letter *alif* is not used), *muqattaʿ* (when the poet exclusively uses words with disconnected letters [*muʿṭṭal*]), *muwaṣṣal* (when the poet exclusively uses words with connected letters), and finally *muṣahḥaf*, which he defines—rather inaccurately—as “when the poet or scribe uses words that are different in terms of diacritical dots and vowels but are the same in terms of letters.”¹³ Radūyānī gives two examples for *muṣahḥaf*, one from Persian and the other from Arabic. The Persian example reads:

عزی محبتی و گل و گلبنان پذر

¹³ *Tarjuman al-balāgha*, 112.

عمار بیسری و نکوسار در سفر

[Your kindness is sweetest; you're a rose and your father is the rosebush;

You are incomparable in your faithfulness and a good companion in journeys.]

The verse transforms through variation in dotting patterns from praise to invective:

غری مخنثی و کل و کلتبان پذر

غماز بیسری و نکوسار در سفر

[You son of a bitch, catamite, are emasculated, and your father is a cuckold

slandered, stupid, hanging down in the hell.]

Whereas Radūyānī introduces *muḏāri`a* as an independent category from the four types of paronomasia (i.e. *muṭlaq*, *murakkab*, *muraddad*, and *zā`id*) in his compendium, Persian critic, Rashīd al-Dīn Vaṭvāṭ, from the 12th century Caucasus, categorizes the device as the last of the seven types of paronomasia (i.e. *tāmm*, *nāqiṣ*, *zā`id*, *murakkab*, *mukarrar*, *muṭarraḡ*, and *khaṭṭ*). Reminding that script paronomasia (*tajnīs-i khaṭṭ*) is also called *muḏāri`a* and *mushākala* (literally meaning “similarity in appearance”), Vaṭvāṭ characterizes it as a poetic effect created by the tension between writing and speech: “when two words are similar in script [*khaṭṭ*], and different in pronunciation [*nuṭq*].”¹⁴

Vaṭvāṭ, who is famed for including Arabic examples in his compendium, cites Quranic verses and prophetic traditions as well as Arabic poems to as examples of script paronomasia, including Quran (18:104):

¹⁴ Rashīd al-Dīn Vaṭvāṭ, *Ḥadā`iq al-siḡr fi daqā`iq al-shi`r*, ed. `Abbas Eqbal (Tehran: 1929-1930), 11.

و هم یحسبون انهم یحسنون صنعا

[And they suppose they are doing good.]

For Persian examples, he uses his own poems, as in this verse from his panegyric to Khwarazmshah ruler Atsiz (r. 1127–1156):

همان خوشتر که نوشی اندر این مدت می صافی

همان بهتر که پوشی اندر این موسم خز ادکن

[It's better to drink clear wine in these days;

It's nicer to wear dark fur in this season.]

Vatvāt also introduces more complex letter-based poetic devices such as *raqṭā'* and *khayfā'*, which refer to the alternation of dotted and undotted letters in the words of a verse and the alternation of all-dotted and all-undotted words in a verse, respectively. His definition and typology of *muṣaḥḥaf* is also more nuanced than Radūyānī's. Vatvāt describes *muṣaḥḥaf* as “when the poet uses words [*alfāz*] in prose or in poetry that change from eulogy [*thanā*] and praise [*āfarīn*] to invective [*hijā*] and curse [*nifrīn*] if their form [*ṣūrat*] is maintained but the dots and vowels are changed.”¹⁵

Vatvāt identifies two types of *muṣaḥḥaf*: disordered (*muṣṭarab*) and ordered (*muntazam*). In the disordered type, the letters are connected and it needs effort (*jahd*) and thought (*fikrat*) to disconnect and disjoin words that constitute the *muṣaḥḥaf*. An Arabic example he cites for this type of *muṣaḥḥaf* is the reconstruction of the phrase فی تنور هیثم جمد (literally meaning “in Haytham's oven is ice”) as the phrase فی قسوره بن محمد (literally meaning “about Qaswara ibn Muḥammad”).¹⁶ The first Arabic phrase undergoes

¹⁵ *Hadā'iq al-sihr*, 68.

¹⁶ For a complete account of the background, see Lara Harb, “Beyond the Known Limits,” 132.

transformation first as **فى تنوره يث مجمد**, which is re- or mis-constructed in the *muṣahḥaf* form, **فى قسوره بن محمد**. In the ordered type, the *muṣahḥaf* is effortlessly evident as the constituting words are already separated and disconnected. A Persian example Vaṭvāt offers for this type is **ما در میان دولت تو می‌زییم** (meaning “we live under your favour”), which can be reconstructed in *muṣahḥaf* as **ما در میان دو لب تو می‌رییم** (meaning “we shit in between your lips”). He offers more complex examples including a *qasida* in thirteen verses in which, he claims, there are no verses without one or two *taṣhīfs*. He also claims he has written a brief treatise on *taṣhīf* containing examples from his own prose and poetry and anyone who has access to it can decode most of *taṣhīfs*.¹⁷ Another device that Vaṭvāt introduces and is very similar to *muṣahḥaf* is *mutazalzal*: “when the writer or poet uses a word that changes [the meaning] from praise to invective if a vowel of that word is changed.”¹⁸ The device works better in Arabic, a language that is grammatically structured by its vowel patterns (*i‘rāb*). This is especially evident in religious contexts in which misreading a vowel might change a sentence into a heretical statement, as in the Arabic sentence, **الله معذب الكفار و محرقهم فى النار**. With the highlighted words read as *mu‘adhdhib* and *muḥarriq*, respectively, the sentence means, “God tortures the heretics and burns them in fire,” whereas with the same words read with a different vowel, i.e. *mu‘adhdhab* and *muḥarraq*, the sentence becomes heretical and signifies “God is tortured by the heretic and burnt by them in fire.” However, Vaṭvāt doesn’t fail to offer a Persian example for this device:

سخن هر سرى را کند تاج دار

The last two words, if read as *tāj-dār*, make the sentence mean “poetry crowns the poet’s head”; the same words, if read as *tāj-i dār*, predict a reverse fate for the poet’s head: “poetry makes the poet’s head crown the gallows.”

¹⁷ *Hadā’iq al-sihr*, 70

¹⁸ *Hadā’iq al-sihr*, 78–79.

Shams-i Qays's typology of paronomasia corresponds to Vaṭvāt's seven types of paronomasia, adding the comment that "all types are pleasing [*pasandīda*] and elegant [*mustahsan*] in poetry and prose, add to the splendour of discourse [*rawnaq-i sukhan*], are considered a proof of eloquence [*faṣāḥat*] and evidence of the man's authority [*iqtidār-r mard*] in ordering the discourse [*tansīq-i sukhan*], on the condition that they are not used extravagantly, are not mixed up [*bar ham uftāda*], with no more than two or four words in each verse, equally distributed [*taqṣīm-i mustavī*]."¹⁹ Shams-i Qays offers no definition or description for script paronomasia (*tajnīs-i khaṭṭ*) and uses Vaṭvāt's examples for the device. Shams-i Qays does not include a chapter on *muṣaḥḥaf* in his compendium.

Except for new examples from the poets Kamāl al-Dīn Ismā'īl (d. 1237) and Khāqānī Shirvānī (d. 1198), 'Alī b. Muḥammad Tāj al-Ḥalāvī's *Daqā'iq al-shi'r* (fourteenth century) adds little to the established definition and typology of paronomasia. Interestingly whereas he maintains "*mushākala, muḏāraba, and muṣaḥḥaf* are other names for *tajnīs-i khaṭṭ*,"²⁰ he dedicates a separate chapter to *muṣaḥḥaf*, which adds little to Vaṭvāt's description and examples of the device.

In his manual of Persian rhetorical figures, *Ḥadā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq*, Sharaf al-Dīn Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Rāmī Tabrīzī (fl. fourteenth century) adds two points about script paronomasia to the rhetoricians who preceded him: first, that this can take place in two verses.²¹ For example,

یا مکن با پیل بانان دوستی

یا بنا کن خانه در خورد پیل

یا مرو با یار ازرق پیرهن

¹⁹ Shams-i Qays Rāzī, *Al-mu'jam fi ma'ā'ir-i ash'ār-i l-ajam*, ed. M. Qazvini and Modarris-Razavi (Tehran: Khavar Bookseller, 1935), 330.

²⁰ 'Alī b. Muḥammad Tāj al-Ḥalāvī, *Daqā'iq al-shi'r*, ed. Sayyed Mohammad Kazem Emam (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1929-1930), 9.

²¹ Sharaf al-dīn Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Rāmī Tabrīzī, *Ḥadā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq*, ed. Sayyed Mohammad Kazem Emam (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1963), 13.

یا بکش در خان و مان انگشت نیل

[Never befriend a mahout,

or build a house that is fit for an elephant;

Never fall in love with a beloved who wears blue (that is, one who is cheating)

or strike a gloomy finger on (that is, forget about) your house and household.]

Where the words *pīl* (elephant) and *nīl* (gloomy) do not fall in the same verse. And second, it's aesthetically preferable for one of the two words to be ambiguous,²² as in:

گر نرگس مست تو بتیرم بکشد

ترکش نکنم وگر شوم قربانش

[Even if your drunk narcissus (*nargis*) kills me with arrows,

I don't abandon it (*tarkash*) even if I'll be sacrificed.]

The drunk daffodil is used extensively in premodern Persian poetry to evoke the beloved's eyes. The word *tarkash* can be read ambiguously in reference to both abandonment (as translated above) and quiver, the container for holding arrows.

Interestingly, while Rāmī has separate chapters for *muqaṭṭa'*, *muwaṣṣal*, *raqṭā'*, *khayfā'*, and *ḥadhf*, *taṣhīf* falls under the category of enigma (*mu'ammā'*) and is defined as “when the dotted becomes undotted and vice versa.”²³

The description and typology of script-based devices is enriched in *Badāyi' al-afkār fi ṣanāyi' al-ash'ār* (Innovative reflections on poetic devices) by Vā'iz Kāshifī Sabzavārī (d. 1504). First, he identifies twelve types of paronomasia (i.e. *tāmm*, *murakkab*, *mushābih*, *mafrūq*, *marfuuv*, *nāqiṣ*, *zā'id*, *mukarrar*, *muraddad*, *muṭarrāf*, *lāḥiq*, and *khaff*). Moreover, he defines script paronomasia generally as homogeneity (*tajānus*) of words in terms of writing

²² *Hadā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq*, 13.

²³ *Hadā'iq al-ḥaqā'iq*, 96.

(*kitābat*).²⁴ Then he discerns two types of script paronomasia: first, involving the sameness of some letters and diacritics (*ḥarakāt*) and difference of others, as in نرد and برد, *nard* and *barad*; and second, when the two words are similar only in script, as in شیر and سبز, *shīr* and *sabz*. Although Kāshifī admits that *mushākala* and *muzāraba* are other names for script paronomasia, he considers *taṣhīf* a different device and dedicates a separate chapter to it in his compendium.²⁵

The point of difference for Kāshifī between *taṣhīf* and *tajnīs-i khaṭṭ* is that while the two sides of the latter speak to praise (*madḥ*), the former speaks to praise in one sense and to invective in another.²⁶ Kāshifī's most important contribution to the topic is his introduction of a very innovative type of *muṣaḥḥaf*, which he calls bilingual (*dhullisānāy*). He ascribes the invention of this type of *muṣaḥḥaf* to multilingual poet of India Amīr Khusraw Dihlavī (d. 1325). The bilingual *muṣaḥḥaf*, which he believes is too difficult and not free of complication, takes place across Arabic and Persian, in such a way that a single verse is readable and meaningful in both Arabic and Persian, when the reader changes the diacritical patterns of certain letters:

تواری مرد بیکی تحت داری
و انت برد هم خانی و ساهی

This is transformed through *taṣhīf* into:

تو آری مرد نیکی بخت داری
و أنت بر دهم خانی و شاهی

[Yes! You are a good lucky man:

and now I give you lordship and kingdom.]

²⁴ Mīrzā Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī Sabzavārī, *Badāyi' al-afkār fi ṣanāyi' al-ash'ār*, ed. Mir Jalal al-Din Kazzazi (Tehran: Markaz, 1990), 91.

²⁵ *Badāyi' al-afkār fi ṣanāyi' al-ash'ār*, 91.

²⁶ *Badāyi' al-afkār fi ṣanāyi' al-ash'ār*, 145.

For the Iranian rhetorician Shams al-'Ulamā Garakānī (d. 1927), *muṣaḥḥaf* is, like *mutazalzil*, a subcategory of *mu'araba*,²⁷ yet he seems to disagree with Persian rhetoricians (*badī'īyyīn-i 'ajam*) who treat *muṣaḥḥaf* as an independent category. His definition of *muṣaḥḥaf* and its subdivision into ordered and disordered types remain classic. Yet, with the background of a scholar of Islamic sciences, Garakānī (d. 1927) cites numerous anecdotal examples of Arabic and Persian prose and poetry from scholastic and seminary sources. *Muṣaḥḥaf* played a decisive role in the transmission of Islamic traditions, the copying of the Qur'an, and in its exegesis. Al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 995), a well-known scholar of *ḥadīth* (Muslim traditions), dedicated a full study of scribal errors in copying of the *hadiths* in the book *Taṣḥīf al-muḥaddithīn* (The Transmitters' Misspellings), which has not survived. Even the meaning of the Qur'an verses can radically change—in some cases in a heretical way—due to a minor variation in the pattern of diacritical dots or vowels of the text.

One example is the following verse from the Qur'an (7: 156):

عَذَابِي أَصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ

Meaning, “I smite with My punishment whom I will.” If the dots in the last word are removed and the verse is copied as:

عَذَابِي أَصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَسَاءُ

The meaning changes to “I smite with My punishment any wrongdoer.”

Literally meaning “to deceive,” *mu'araba*, as per Garakānī's explanation means saying something controversial with a solution to resolve the controversy prepared beforehand. The solutions range from *taṣḥīf* to changing the vowels to adding, removing, joining, or disjoining letters. In one of his examples, Garakānī tells the story of a smart man in

²⁷ Shams al-'Ulamā Muḥammad Ḥusayn Garakānī, *Abda' al-badāyi'*, ed. Hosayn Ja'fari (Tabriz: Ahrar, 1993), 320.

Isfahan who was known and signed as Mullā Hadī Bīdīn. When confronted by a religious authority about his inappropriate name, he explained that his name was Bīdayn.²⁸

Garakānī distinguishes *mutazalzil* as another sub-type of *mu'araba* in that the change of vowels in *mutazalzil* leads to a signification opposite to what is originally intended for the text. The example is from the Qur'ān (9:3). The verse is:

ان الله برئ من المشركين ورسوله

Which means “God and His Prophet despise the unbelievers.” However, if the last word of the verse, *rasūluhu*, is read with a different vowel as *rasūlihi* (which is written exactly in the same way as the original verse), the verse comes to mean “God despises the unbelievers and His Prophet.”

The use of visual paronomasia is not restricted to premodern writing. Modernist poets extensively exploit this potential of Persian script. Consider the following visual paronomasia employed by Ahmad Shamlu (d. 2000) in one of his poems from Qasr prison in Tehran in 1954.

آه! تنها همه جا، از تک تاریک، فراموشی کور

سوی من داد آواز

پاسخی کوتاه و سرد:

«— مرد دل بند تو، مرد!»²⁹

Although Shamlu specified his intended reading of this line in the edited version of his collected poetry by using vowels as “your sweetheart is **dead, man!**” the line can be read (without the vowels) as “man your sweetheart is dead,” and “dead, your sweetheart is dead,” and less meaningfully as “man, your sweetheart, man.”

Conceptualized simply as similarity in writing and difference in pronunciation, visual paronomasia functions as polylogue, a rhetorical effect described by Jacques Derrida: “This

²⁸ *Abda' al-badāyi'*, 331.

²⁹ Ahmad Shamlu, *Majmu'a ash'ār: She'r-hā 1323–1378* (Tehran: Negah, 2003), 181.

tension risked between writing and speech, this vibration of grammar in the voice, is one of the themes of the *polylogue*. And this *polylogue*, it seems, is destined for the eye; it corresponds only to an interior voice, an absolutely low voice.”³⁰

Garakānī has explained that *taṣḥīf* is considered a figure of speech only when the speaker or writer intends to conceal their intention and not misreads by accident.³¹ Although the intentionality of *taṣḥīf* highlights the role of the writer, it does not defy the immense potential the device provides for a readerly contribution to the formation of the text—and not merely in making sense of the text. What primarily differentiates *tajnīs* from *taṣḥīf* is that the two visually parallel words are co-present in the text in the former while the latter provides the reader with only one form and demands that the reader evoke other parallel shapes of the given form.

The art of diacritical ambiguity involves a kind of poetic creation in which writing aims to arouse mirages which acquire definite form in the course of the readers’ cognitive engagement with the visual aspect of the poetic. For example, the word *khatt* appears undotted in a manuscript before the readers’ eyes while readers must decide for themselves whether to read it as *khatt* ([*khatt*]/script) or as *hazz* ([*hazz*]/pleasure).

Hence, the *jinās-i khatt* between the words *khatt* and *hazz* from Ḥasan Dihlavī (1253–ca. 1328):

خط خوب تو مسطر از خط عشق

عقل کی داند این معما را

[The beautiful hair (*khatt*) on your face is like a text written in a script (*khatt*) of love

Intellect cannot solve this mystery.]

The second *khatt* can also be read as *hazz*, which changes the meaning of the verse to:

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, tr. Ned Lukacher (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 22

³¹ *Abda’ al-badāyi’*, 322.

[The beautiful hair on your face (*khatt*) is like a text written in pleasures (*hazz*) of love.

Intellect cannot solve this mystery.]

The first variant could also ambiguously mean:

[Your beautiful handwriting (*khatt*) is written on the lines (*khatt*) of love.

Intellect cannot solve this mystery.]

Another example is this verse from one of Ḥasan Dihlavī's ghazals:

ز تیر غمزه او کشته گشته بین شهری

که هست هر سر پیکانش را نشانه جدا

[A whole city has been killed with the arrow of her eyebrows,

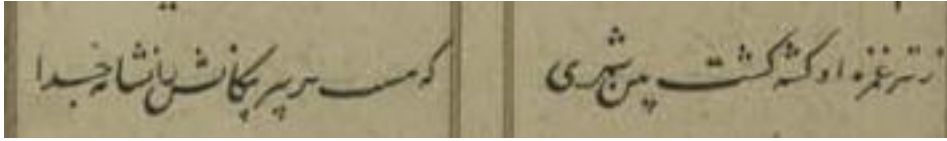
with separate arrow-heads for separate targets.]

Visual paronomasia takes place in the first line between *kushta* (کشته/killed) and *gashta* (گشته/has become). The only means of distinguishing between the two words is the slanted hyphen that differentiates letter گ (/g/) in Persian from ک (/k/). Premodern copyists typically used the form ک for both sounds. The reader had to insert the missing sign mentally during the reading process. Thus, in this example, the verse can be read in at least three possible variant readings:

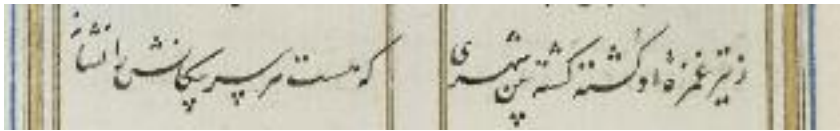
- 1) *kushta gashta* (meaning “has been killed”)
- 2) *kushta kushta* (meaning “killed one by one”)
- 3) *gashta kushta* (an inverted form of “has been killed”)

In the five different manuscripts below (labelled *a* to *e*) of Ḥasan's verse, we observe that except for MS *b* and lithograph *e*, which clearly opt for the insertion of the slanted hyphen and thereby for the definite reading (variant no. 1) provided above, the other manuscripts avoid using the slanted hyphen, thereby leaving space for the reader to choose

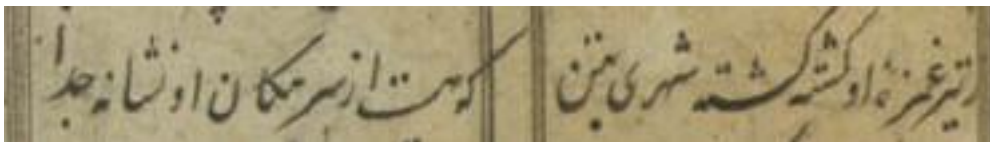
among the three possible variants above. Two or even three of these variant readings can be simultaneously correct; it is left to the reader to select one.



a) From MS. 62826, Majlis Library, Tehran (copied by Ja‘far Bāysunqurī, 1422)



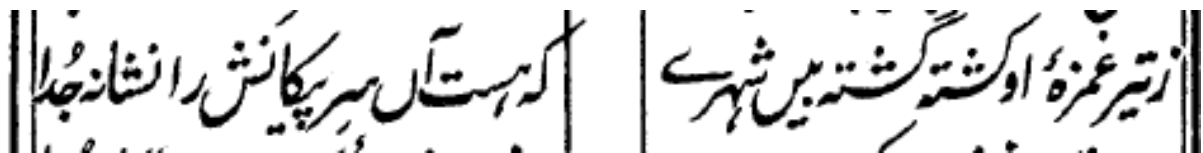
b) From Persian MS 855, The John Rylands Library, Manchester (copied by Mun‘im al-Dīn al-Awḥadī, 1507)



c) From MS. 61947, Majlis Library, Tehran (copied by ‘Alī Mīzānī Ṭabbākh, 1513)



d) From MS. W.650, Walters Art Museum (copied by ‘Abdullāh Mishkīn Qalam, 1602)



e) From a lithography (Hyderabad, 1933)

III

During the lockdown in 2020, Rebecca Ruth Gould and I worked toward a translation for the first time into English of a romance *mathnawī* by Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlavī (d. 1327), known

as *Tale of the Lover from Nagaur* (*Hikāyat-i 'āshiq-i Nagūrī*), or alternatively *'Ishq-nāma*.³² As we made progress through our translation we felt we needed to expand the project into a critical bilingual edition of the text. The only edited version of the poem included in Ḥasan Dihlavī's *Dīvān* was not free from errors, which slowed down the process of translation in search of other versions of the text.³³ The existing Persian edition coincided with a nineteenth century lithograph published in Lucknow. This version was very erratic and unreliable as a source for translation. At times, Persian words appeared in syntactic combinations that did not make sense. I could not believe that the Ḥasan who composed the *mathnavī* was the same Ḥasan who had written those magnificent *ghazals* in his *Dīvān*.

In October 2020, Rebecca and I received an email containing a link to a scanned manuscript we had requested from Bodleian Library. Thanks to remote working conditions, we had access to a scanned version of the medieval Indo-Persian romance by Ḥasan Dihlavī. By then a first draft of our translation, based on the printed edition and the lithograph, was ready. The manuscript from Bodleian gave us better insight of the inconsistencies in the edited version.

The manuscript of *Dīvān of Amīr Najm-al-Dīn Ḥasan Sanjarī* from the Bodleian (MS. Ouseley 122) was copied by Muḥammad bin Ilyās in the twentieth Shawwāl of A. H. 826 (31 August 1458), in small *nasta'liq*, with an illuminated frontispiece, beautifully ornamented, 7 ½ in by 4 5/8 in.

Reading a poem in a manuscript is a rewarding experience. It gives you new insights about what constitutes a text: A text is that which gradually reveals itself to you. Or, anything that gradually reveals itself to you can be read as a text. A text exists in graduation. Compared to the experience of reading a modern print edition, manuscripts engage the reader in a slow

³² This work is introduced in Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian, "The Temporality of Desire in ḤasanDihlavī's *'Ishq-nāma*," *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 2 (3-4): 72–95.

³³ *Dīvān-i Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlavī: sada-yi haftum va hashtum*, edited by Ahmad Beheshti Shirazi and Hamid Reza Qelich Khani (Tehran: Anjoman-e asar va mafakher-e farhangi, 2004), 557-580.

reading mode. While modern typeset editions provide a definitive text that flattens and reduces aesthetic cognition, premodern Persian manuscript cultures fostered a different kind of ethical and experiential relationship to the text.

In Persian manuscripts, words with undotted letters require the readers' active engagement with the text in order to definitely shape the words. The reader fills in the missing dots (*nuqṭa*), discovers the barely visible diacritical “teeth [*dandāna-hā*]” of the letters, surmises the unwritten words of the *radīf*, and notices a barely perceptible *alif* or *sarkash* (a crossbar shape as in letters ك and گ) lurking somewhere in the crouched words, which changes the meaning of the word altogether. Far from being a pre-determined materiality passively waiting for the reader to decode, the text gradually reveals its meaning through a dialogic reading process. The text is primarily a map of signals. A delicate dialectic defines the process of reading between the reader's cognition and the signals embedded within a text, which can be reshaped in many different forms, generating myriad meanings through the reader's aesthetic cognition.

Such instances of *i'jām*, that is, inserting diacritical dots in undotted letters, reveals yet another—more visual—dimension to Persian manuscripts and their paratexts. The ambiguities that were brought to life by varied interpretations of the words in manuscripts fostered a unique mystic-aesthetic experience with texts that Muslim mystics, poets, and theologians developed for centuries across South, Central, and West Asia.

‘Ayn-al-Quẓẓāt Hamadānī hypothesizes a process of reading in tandem with a Sufi's *sulūk* (path to truth). In his “letter 73,” ‘Ayn-al-Quẓẓāt models a gradual mode of reading founded upon the visual encounter with the script of the text: first, seeing the words as connected (*muttaṣil*) letters; second, seeing the words as disconnected (*munfaṣil*) letters — “while people read “*يحبونهم* [he loves them]” and take its connected letters for granted, [the word] comes out of the veil, exposes its beauty in disconnected letters to the Sufi's eyes and

all it says is *ی ح ب و ن ه م*³⁴; third, disintegration of letters into pure dots: “when the Sufi matures a little more, letters become all dots. Their strength comes of the dots in *ب* and *ی* in *یحییهم*. Nothing else. No letters remain”³⁵; and fourth, the disintegration of letters in pure whiteness of the page and reading into the white page: “when the man is permitted into another level, the dots will also disappear. People in the world read the Qur’an’s black letters [*savād*], while I read the whiteness of the Qur’an [*bayāz-i muṣḥaf*].”³⁶

‘Ayn-al-Quzzāt, who was tortured and murdered because of such unorthodox readings of the Qur’an, infuses a materialist understanding of the text in disintegration with a Sufi ethics of exit from dark ignorance to enlightenment. The experience of reading a poem in a manuscript is no less than a Sufi’s progress (*sulūk*). Some modes of calligraphic transcription (notably the *shikasta* style) omit the dots that distinguish certain letters from each other in order to deepen and intensify the aesthetic encounter with the text. The reader contributes to the realization of the text by detecting the missing dots. Premodern Persian poets wrote poetry in the awareness of the potential of the misreadings and mis-writings that occur in the course of the transmission of their poems.

Through the potential of *taṣhīf*, the poet lets the reader contribute to realizing the poem. Poets can imagine the fate of their words and all possible alterations they might undergo in the course of their transmission and reading. This transforms the act of reading into a decision-making process in which readers proceed according to the judgements they make. In this way, the manuscript is turned into a field of decisions and a map of traps and mirages. The poet consciously imagines diacritical ambiguities, the scribe/copyist performs the ambiguity through calligraphic styles and script, and the reader realizes the text by opting for a variant.

³⁴ ‘Ayn-al-Quzzāt Hamadānī, *Nāma-hā*, vol. 2, edited by ‘Alinaqi Monzavi and ‘Afif ‘Osayran (Tehran: Zavvar, 1983), 98.

³⁵ *Nāma-hā*, 99.

³⁶ *Nāma-hā*, 99.

Thus, the potential of misreading in Arabic and Persian poetics defines an aesthetic value. Tied to the word's written shape, the meaning of the poem undergoes flexible transformations, and the poem is not only an allegory of its misreading, as Paul De Man suggests, but is its own misreading.³⁷

Suggested readings:

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³⁷ See Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2005).

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Keywords:

jinās-i khaṭṭ – *taṣḥīf* – misreading – visual paronomasia – rhetorical figure - ambiguity