

# Riding the She-Camel into the Desert

## A Translation of Two Classical Arabic Poets

Anne Marie Flood  
Bryn Mawr College  
Department of Linguistics, Swarthmore College  
Fall 2008<sup>1</sup>

*Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.*  
-Anthony Burgess

### **1 Introduction**

For a language with as rich and varied a vocabulary as Arabic, it seems inevitable that poetry would occupy a place of high importance. From the pre-Islamic *qasidas*, or epic poems (the most well known of which decorate the walls of the Ka'ba in Mecca), to the modern, politically charged verses, poetry has long been a highly valued form of expression. During the classical period, poets were greatly valued for their work and those who gained favor at court were greatly rewarded. Even today, in countries like Jordan, students gather in crowds for weekly poetry readings, where even those who do not consider themselves poets bring verses of

---

<sup>1</sup> This project would not have been possible without the support and advice of many. I owe a much of my thesis to my two academic advisors, Professor Kim and Professor Harrison, who helped me through the many drafts of the translation and the discussion thereof, respectively. In addition, I would like to thank all of the students who either read my thesis or my poems for their helpful input: Andrew Crispin, Maryann Aguiar, Emily Johnson, Clara Shae and particularly Dan McEwan.

their own to share. This has led to a long and interesting poetic tradition. As a personal preference, I enjoy reading poems from the Abbasid era (750 -1258), for the ways in which the poets combined new forms with classical references. There are many different periods and genres to choose from, all of which help the reader gain an insight to the culture that produced them. For those who cannot read the poems in the original Arabic, a translation is the only available option. Classical Arabic poems are occasionally translated into English, but, as there is not great commercial demand, these translations are more scholarly than literary. As there are few options available that would appeal to the average reader, people do not know to look to classical Arabic poetry for the beauty and cultural insight.

I provide here a translation of two poems by two classical Arabic poets: al-Mutanabbi and Abu Nuwas. Through a discussion of my translations and a comparison to previous interpretations, I propose not just a revision of these two particular poems, but a general method of translating classical Arabic poetry for common, literary use.

## **2 On Translation**

In our currently, increasingly globalized world, the desire and need to become well informed about and comfortable with other cultures is more pressing than ever. We cannot now, if indeed we ever could, afford to live our lives concerned solely with our own small sphere of daily contact. Watching the news, necessary though it is, cannot be our only source of knowledge. Ideally, we would venture out into the world as much as possible, learning directly from experience and contact. However, we do not live in an ideal world, and such extensive travel is not always possible. In absence of real contact, reading the literature of another culture is a good alternative.

If you cannot see the culture for yourself, what better way to have a second-hand look, than to read the literature, see what themes fascinate them as a whole, hear the voices that shaped their literary history and those that reflect the current feelings? Ideally we would read these literatures in the original languages. Again, we do not live in an ideal world. Mastering a language takes time and effort, and many people only reach such a level in one foreign language, if any. Reading texts in translation is then the only option, and that is a risk. A poor translation can prejudice the reader against the culture, without ever conveying the intentions of the original text. On the other hand, a good translation can recreate, if not the poem in its entirety, enough of the original to give an informed understanding and a general appreciation.

### **2.1 *Issues in Translation***

The near-homophony between the Italian for translator and traitor (*traduttore* and *traditore*) is a translating cliché that describes the fine line that the translator must walk when trying to create a faithful translation, being faithful to both the original language and the one she is translating into. Betrayal of the original text is easy to understand, when a translator alters the meaning of the text to suit her needs, but the betrayal works both ways. Cling too closely to the original, and the translator risks using phrases that sound strained and forced, thus betraying her own language. I often struggled with the sentence structures of particularly clever lines in my poems. Arabic has case markings, allowing a freer word order. My initial translations of lines that used that freedom to full effect often closely resembled the original in structure, marking it as clearly foreign. Attempts to fix those sentences, and bring their structures closer to English, often resulted in clumsy imitations that did not do justice to the beauty of the original. Such lines went through more versions than most, until I was able to find the right balance.

Another kind of balance is that between form and content. Poetry demonstrates this dilemma with particular clarity, as poems rely on both together more heavily than other genres do. Meaning alone is difficult to translate, but the forms of poetry present another set of issues: the prosodic devices used in one language are either viewed as trite in another, or else simply do not exist. There is no way to preserve every aspect and nuance of meaning, so something is always lost. It falls to the individual translator to decide the aims of her rendition of the poem, and which aspects are most important. I have decided to recreate some of the poetic devices (such as alliteration), but not others (such as rhyme) in order to have the most freedom in my choices. I thought this the best way to recreate, if not preserve, the beauty of the poems.

One final issue is that of images that hold a large significance in a given culture, but not in another, such as with Layla and Majnuun Layla, two lovers well known to the Arab population, but virtually unheard of elsewhere. I could translate a passing reference to those lovers as one of Romeo and Juliet, but that would do neither justice. Though both conjure up images of passion and tragedy, they are very different in the details. The purpose of a translation is to give insight to a new culture, not re-read the same stories. The balance in translating such an image lies in making it understood without removing it from its culture.

These are issues that every translator should bear in mind, though they may choose to do so in different measures. It is the relationship between these issues that differentiate one method of translating from another.

## **2.2 *Classical Arabic Poetry***

It has been said that classical Arabic poetry is a craft, where the poets exhibit a masterful control over the language sounds and patterns (Arberry 1965), but it must be remembered as an art as well (Stetkevych 1967). It is true that it includes a consistent, mood-dictating meter and a

single rhyme that is maintained for the length of the poem, but that alone does not account for the beauty of the verses.

Many previous translations have not been updated in recent decades, leading to dated language. The more recent translations have other issues, such as taking liberties with the meaning in favor of creating more accessible translations. Translations of classical Arabic poems are often treated either in a mathematical or analytical fashion, where the results are often only ready by scholars of the field without stimulating interest in a wider audience (such as Arberry's (1965) *Arabic poetry: A Primer for Students*), or else they are recreated in eloquent verses (such as Tuetey's (1985) *Classical Arabic Poetry*), but the meaning is lost.

The two poets I have translated here, Abu Nuwas and al-Mutanabbi, are representatives of two important poetical genres: the *khamriyaat*, or wine poetry, and the panegyrics, written in honor of the political rulers of the day, respectively. Though they were written in the Abbasid era, both poets make references to the pre-Islamic poetic traditions, such as riding a she-camel off into the desert (this raises on how to translate those references to make them understood by an audience who does not know their significance). As the tone of the two poems is markedly different, they provide a good overview of the different genres in use at the time.

### 2.2.1 *Structure*

In classical Arabic poetry, each line is composed of two hemistiches, forming two columns down the page. Though there is no restriction as to whether the two hemistiches have to be one sentence or two, they are closely related in meaning and should be considered as one organic unit. When translated into English, the hemistiches are rarely short enough to remain as one line. It is important to preserve the format of the original in some way. Translators often arrange two hemistiches in a manner that is distinct from two lines, such as spacing only between

lines and not between hemistiches. I have chosen to indent the second hemistich, as well as space between the lines. Though this does not match the columns of the original, I feel it creates a similar visual effect.

### 2.2.2 *Meter*

Meter in classical Arabic poetry is dictated by syllable weight, though it is referred to as “syllable length” in the literature. A long syllable is defined any syllable that contains a long vowel and/or a coda (CVC, CVV, CVVC or VC); a short syllable is CV or V. There are 16 different meters used in classical poetry and in each there are certain syllable types that are defined as either long or short and others that are variable.

As Maling (1973) argues in her dissertation, the question of whether Arabic metrics relies on stress is under discussion. It seems likely that stress is the inevitable result of certain syllable sequences, rather than a separate component. Whatever role stress might play, it has been accepted that syllable weight plays the more important role, and that is the assumption I am working with.

As English is a stress-based language, the meters we use are based on that rather than syllable length. When I chose to recreate a meter, I did so with one common to English poetry, such as iambic.

### 2.2.3 *Rhyme*

Arabic marks grammatical case with suffixes. There is one final vowel for subjects, one for direct objects and one for indirect objects (after a preposition). This allows for freedom in word order, which, though not usually displayed in modern, colloquial Arabic, is used to full advantage in classical poetry. Rhyming in Arabic thus requires two words to end in the same letter and to take the same grammatical marking. One example of this would be *abim* (to be

cool/cold) and *saqim* (to be sick), which correspond to the last words of the two hemistiches of the first line of the al-Mutanabbi poem discussed below.

In the classical form of poetry, both of the hemistiches of the first line will rhyme and that same rhyme continues on the second hemistich over every line in the poem. Poems are then often known by both the author and the final consonant pattern, such as al-Mutanabbi's "miimiyya", which I am translating below.

As it is difficult (if not impossible) to maintain one single rhyming scheme over a large number of rhymes in English, translators of both modern and classical poem often render the hemistiches of a line as rhymed couplets. Though it is a way to recreate the rhyme of the original in a context appropriate to English, while acknowledging the formation of the hemistiches, I do not like the effect it creates.

#### *2.2.4 Discrepancies in the source texts*

Classical Arabic poetry was largely a spoken art. Poets did not write their poems, but rather recited them. They made changes and additions to existing poems, often altering them to suit the needs of a new ruler. The poems were often not written down until much later, and so there are often more than one accepted versions of the same poem. This is one explanation for why different translations of the same poem will not always include the exact same lines, though both claim to be translations of the whole text.

As I could only find one source text for either of my poems, it did not affect my translation directly, but there were differences in the versions I used as comparisons. One translation stopped about halfway through the poem, and the other was missing lines. It did not affect my work, so much as prevent me from having a full range of interpretations to use.

### 3 Al-Mutanabbi

Abu al-Tayyib Ahmad ibn Hussain (915-965), better known as al-Mutanabbi, is said to be one of the greatest Arabic poets of all time. His byname, meaning the would-be prophet, was acquired during his youth, when he founded his own religion and led a very briefly successful attempted uprising of the Bedouin before being imprisoned. As most poets of the time, he made his living in the courts of powerful men; creating elaborate panegyrics in honor of his noble patrons, alternately singing the praises of the patron and attacking their rivals in hopes of securing favor and the monetary gain that accompanied it. Unlike most others, however, al-Mutanabbi not only gained the favor of the Hamadanid dynasty prince of northern Syria, Saif al-Daula, he maintained it for many years, between 948 and 957. When al-Mutanabbi finally lost all favor with Saif al-Daula, he attempted to provide his services in other courts, but the resulting relationship was never as successful. (Huart 1903)

Al-Mutanabbi has been called the Shakespeare of Arabic, and his lines are much quoted, both by native Arabic speakers and in translations. His verses are among the best examples of Arabic poetry. The following poem is one of his most famous, and it is a good example of the poetry of his time for the variety of genres and tones he employs. The first three lines emulate the pre-Islamic forms of poetry, where al-Mutanabbi describes Saif ad-Daula as the beloved. He returns to that theme in the closing lines of the poem, when he moves to discuss the classical theme of departing from the beloved. In lines 4-11 al-Mutanabbi praises Saif al-Daula (*maDiiH*), though he moves on to criticism in lines 12-14 (*hijaa'*). The poet extols his own virtues at length in lines 15-24 (*fakhr*), with the eloquent, bombastic statements for which he is best known. The poem ends with a mixture of all of these forms. I marked where the poet most notably switches from one style to another by numbering the different sections, to make the flow

of the poem more easily followed by the reader. See Appendix II for the full text in the original Arabic.

### 3.1 *My Translation*

#### I

- (1) My heart burns for he whose heart grows cold,  
my body and soul have fallen ill,  
My frame withered by love of him: why deny it  
when the world vies for Saif ad-Daula's affection?  
If we are united by our love of his abundance,  
would that we shared it by the strength of our love.

#### II

- I visited him when the Indian-steeled swords were sheathed  
and I have seen him when the blades ran red with blood.
- (5) He was the best of all God's creations,  
his character most esteemed of all.  
His enemy fled before the battle, granting him a victory  
which was a delight as it was a distress.  
But the fear of your name proceeds you,  
accomplishing more than an advancing army could.  
Though unneeded, you pursued the fleeing enemy,  
allowing neither hills nor plains to cover them.  
Must an enemy's flight always prompt  
your ambitious spirit to give chase?
- (10) It is your duty to defeat them at every turn,  
but it is not your shame if they flee.  
Must a true victory always be gained  
with the white steel of a blade?

#### III

You, most just of men to all but me:  
you are the source of a quarrel and you alone must judge.  
Truly, I forgive your attention  
to those bloated boasters,  
but what use is sight  
if you cannot distinguish light from dark?

#### IV

- (15) Now this court will learn  
that I am the greatest in wit and courage.  
I am he whose writing the blind see  
and whose words grant hearing to the deaf.  
Content with complete verses, I sleep,  
while others strain for simple rhymes.  
I laughed at the frauds and their ignorance  
until, with discerning hand and mouth, I destroy them.  
If you see the lion bare his teeth,  
do not assume he is smiling!
- (20) Many have sought my life with their own,  
but I face them on a strong-backed mount.  
His fore and hind legs gallop as one  
and he does as my hand and foot demands.  
On him I have brandished my sword between two crashing armies  
until I struck and the waves of death collided.  
I am known to the knight, the desert and the night  
to the sword and the spear, to the paper and the pen.  
I have roamed the barren deserts with the wild beast  
until the mountains demanded my admiration.

#### V

- (25) Oh, the pain of leaving you,  
after which all life is empty!  
How I deserved to be honored by you,  
were your affairs and mine reconciled.  
So, you have heeded my envier's whisper.  
The wound, if it pleases you, does not ache.  
The ties between us, had you heeded them  
would be a bond for the wise.  
How much do you fault me, demeaning yourself,  
when God and Nobility despise your actions.
- (30) How far from my honor are weakness and shame:  
I am the bright Pleiades; they – old age and grey hair.  
I wish my storm clouds would take their lightning  
and strike those who thrive in gentle rain.

I see the destination that demands of me every step of a journey  
that no creature in existence could find small.

As my she-camel leaves the caravan far behind, to venture into the desert,  
those we leave behind will come to regret our departure.

When you travel from those who could have kept you near  
then in truth, they are the ones who have left you.

- (35) Evil the country where you have no friends,  
evil is the gain you spoil,  
and evil is the game my hand captures,  
if nothing distinguishes the falcon from the vulture.

With what words can the masses, either Arab or Persian,  
speak poetry? Still, you approve!

This is my rebuke, and yet it is loving.  
Though still mere words, they are pearls.

### 3.2 *Discussion and Previous Translations*

I was able to find three previous translations of this poem. Other sources that translated the poem only included a few of the most famous lines. The full translations I found were an older rendition in iambic pentameter (Nicholson 1930), a more recent literary translation (Tuetey 1985) that takes liberties with the meanings and a version that is very faithful, if less easily understood and enjoyed by the average uninformed reader (Jayyusi and Middleton 1996).

Of the three, I found the Nicholson translation to be the least helpful, except as a point of contrast. I do not compare it to my own version in specifics, but include here a few lines to serve as an example:

- (11) Or thinkest thou perchance that victory is sweet  
Only when scimitars and **necks each other greet?**
- (13) Look, I implore thee, well! Let not thine eye cajoled  
See fat in empty froth, **in all that glistens gold!**
- (19) Ah! When the lion bares his teeth, suspect his guile,  
Nor fancy that the lion shows to you a smile.

(23) My **deep** poetic art the blind **have eyes** to see,  
My verses ring in ears as deaf **as deaf can be**.

The rhymed couplets may have been to the 1930s audience what I intend my translation to be: an easily accessible and enjoyable rendition of a foreign poem. However, now the language and form used sounds outdated. Nicholson also falls into many of the pitfalls of translating classical Arabic poetry, as described in *Translations from Arabic* (Lewis 1980). In lines 11, 13 and 23, his translations include some elements (bold face) that were neither in the original, nor do they help to further the understanding of the reader. It appears to have been done to help better fit the meter. He is also guilty in line 19 to of not translating into a normal English, twisting the phrases around to fit the rhyme, or else using the original Arabic structure.

There is something to be said for using a non-modern language or a style that comes from another time. Native speakers of Arabic do not read classical poems as if they were modern. They often include archaisms and the diction is more convoluted is normal in Modern Standard. However, there is no particular reason to translate into rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter. That style is from a specific period in English literature, and does not coincide with the time in which this poetry was written. I found it more useful to avoid both colloquialisms and out-dated expressions.

The different renditions of the poem are generally similar in meaning, though there are places where my interpretation of the poem differed from the previous translations. One example of this is the first hemistich of line 6, in the Jayyusi-Middleton (1996) version

The flight of your enemy was victory enough

As is demonstrated by the actions supposedly taken by Saif ad-Daula, where all versions agree that he followed the fleeing enemy, that initial victory by default was certainly not enough.

Another example is line 13:

And for witness I trust your dispassionate eye  
true muscle to tell from bloated pretense. (Tuetey 1985)

The verb used in the first hemistich can be understood as either *witness* or *forgiveness*. In the context of the poem as a whole, it is more consistent to use the second meaning. That line, in which al-Mutanabbi declares his forgiveness for his ruler, is one of the most bombastic lines of an already extravagant poem. The effect of the line is lost when you substitute *witness* for *forgiveness*.

Another example of a line where the tone of the poem is altered in the Tuetey (1985) version is line 19:

[...]who misjudged the lion baring his teeth  
for a bigger fool expanding in smiles.

As it is a continuation from another line, this version makes it even more clear that the lion al-Mutanabbi is referring to is himself, and he does manage to convey the meaning of the original. The feeling of the original, a simple, concrete warning, seems lost here.

In addition to meaning, I focused my translation on the form as well. In my attempt to recreate as many of the original poetic devices as possible, without severely affecting the meaning, I have focused on alliteration, repetition, and parallel structures. I avoided both rhyme and meter, as I found them to be too restrictive for a poem as long and as varied as this.

Line internal alliteration is important to Arabic poetry and, as such is something I found important to recreate. Rather than attempting to alliterate the same words as the original, I used the device where I could, in those places that seemed appropriate to me. One example of this is in the second hemistich of line 4:

and I have seen him when the **bl**ades **ran** red with **bl**ood

The meaning of the original is closer to “..when the blades were bloodied”, but I saw that alliteration in the Tuetey version and decided to incorporate it into my translation. I also used alliteration in the second hemistich of line 6:

which was a **d**elight as it was a **d**istress

The meaning of the alliterated words is actually *triumph* and *sorrow*, but the alliteration fit without detracting from the meaning. Another example is on the second hemistich of line 13:

to those **b**loated **b**oasters

I found a few examples of alliteration in the Tuetey translation (such as line 4, mentioned above), but I could find no examples in the Jayyusi-Middleton rendition.

On a slightly larger scale, another important aspect of Arabic poetry is line internal repetition. This can be created by using the same words or different words from the same root. An example can be found in the second hemistich of line 6. A literal translation might be as follows

in his concealment there was sorrow; in his concealment there was triumph.

Though it is not as neatly phrased as the original, I acknowledge the repetition through the structure of the sentence and the alliteration. Neither Tuetey nor Jayyusi-Middleton reflect that repetition in any manner.

One example of repetition that I ignored myself was in the second hemistich of line 12, where *dispute* and *judge* are from the same root in Arabic *kh-S-m*. I could find no easy relation in English between the two words. That line was difficult for me, both in meaning and form. In the end, I chose to settle for a slight repetition in structure, in order to better preserve the meaning.

On an even larger scale, another form of repetition can be seen in the structures of two hemistiches or lines. I have attempted to preserve such parallels where I could, as they form an important aspect of the larger concept of repetition in the poem.

The first line of the poem includes such a parallel. The Jayyusi-Middleton version of that line is a tidy, nearly word-for-word, translation that helps show the structure of the original.

My heart is on fire **for one whose** heart is cold  
**For whom** my body and soul are sick.

I chose to recreate the effect by mirroring my lines differently. In my translation, the second hemistich begins in the same way as the first. I also phrased the first hemistich of the second line in the same way, to extend the parallel. Though this does not occur in the original, the effect is retained.

In line (10) of the original, the two hemistiches mirror each other neatly, as positive and negative version of the same structure. I was able to maintain a similar structure to the sentences. In his version Tuetey acknowledges the parallel, but does not explicitly maintain it.

To rout them face to face is your charge;  
Not yours is the shame if they turn their backs.

The Jayyusi-Middleton version, on the other hand, ignores the structure and uses a more direct language.

Your task is to defeat them at each encounter  
But their own disappearance brings no disgrace on you.

I believe that latter example is more valuable than the former. Tuetey uses a convoluted word order, without actually preserving the parallel structure of the original. The language in the Jayyusi-Middleton version is at least more faithfully English, but such parallels occur often in Arabic and preserving them on some level is important.

One example of a parallel both between hemistiches and between lines is on lines (35) and (36), where the first three of four hemistiches all begin with the same word.

Foul is the place where friends fall out;  
foul is all gain that dishonours a man;  
and foulest of all to me is a prize  
that is fair alike to falcon and crow. (Tuetey 1985)

The worst of all countries is that where you're wholly without friends  
And the worst gain that you make is a tainted one  
And the worst thing my hand could capture  
Is something where the noblest falcon and kite are one. (Jayyusi-Middleton 1996)

Tuetey does preserve the structure of the original, though he once again falls into the error of adding meanings that are not part of the original. The poet does not speak of a place where friends fall out, but where they do not exist. And the “prize” is one captured by a hunt, so the falcon and crow are being compared, not comparing the prize themselves. The Jayyusi-Middleton version does maintain the structure in a sense, but the impact of the original is lost when she alters the structure in favor of a more commonly English word order.

Once I decided not to recreate some sort of rhyming scheme for the translation, I found that on a few occasions, I had created rhymes unintentionally. Two isolated rhymes in the poem sounded accidental, which was an issue, since every word in a poem is generally very intentional. My first translation of line 12 read:

You, most just of men to all but me:  
an argument lies before you; you are both judge and enemy.

Not only did the single instance of a rhyme seem out of place, but the line was very long. My initial reaction to substitute *adversary* for *enemy* did not help either of those issues. As I could find no simple single-word substitutions that felt appropriate, I decided to chance the entire line. In the end, I liked my final version much more, not only because it avoided a rhyme. It also

reflects a little of the clever parallel between the words for “judge” and “adversary” from the original, but where the original was based on sharing a similar root, I had a similar structure instead. The other instance was line 14, where the original version was:

but what use is sight  
if you cannot distinguish dark from light?

I simply inverted the positions of dark and light, thereby avoiding the rhyme without altering the meaning in any way.

I also focused my translation carefully on the issue of explaining the classical references made throughout the poem, such as lines in 32 and 33. The image of the she-camel setting off into the desert for a journey is one so often told, so central to the pre-Islamic poetry that it would have conjured an entire story in the minds of those who listened in the times when this poem was recited. The story would be complete with reasons why he was leaving his implied beloved, the despair and sorrow he would have felt and the inevitability of the travel. The Jayyusi-Middleton version translates line 33 as:

The moment she leaves Dumair on her lee,  
those we leave behind will grieve indeed.

That is the most literal translation of this line. However, the reference to Dumair, the last stopping point before heading into the long desert journey, would be lost on those who are not familiar with the geography of the region. Tuetey translates the name of the city as Damascus, which is more easily recognizable, but the significance would still be unclear. I elected to ignore the city, and use the image of a caravan instead. Though this is not at all in the original, it is an image we generally associate with the desert, so it conveys the sense of the original better to a less informed reader than a literal translation would. It also helped me create an alliteration in the line.

I consulted the only professor to teach Arabic at Bryn Mawr extensively while working on my translations<sup>2</sup>. I found his input to be extremely helpful, but we did not always agree. One example of a disagreement we had was over lines 9 and 11. In one of my drafts line 9 read:

Must an enemy's escape always prompt  
your ambitious spirit to give chase?  
Is it not a true victory, if that victory  
is not gained with the white steel of a blade?

Professor Kim wanted me to change the beginning of line 9 to: "Is it not that...", as it was done in the Jayyusi-Middleton version, so that it would match the structure of line 11. I agreed that maintaining the parallel structure was a good idea, but had specifically avoided that phrasing, as it sounded awkward to my ear. Instead, I chose to alter the beginning of line 11.

I attempted to honor both the form and the meaning of the original in my translation. I recreated those poetic devices I found most appropriate (repetition and alliteration), but did not allow it to detract from the meaning. I only strayed from my literal interpretation of the lines when it served to further the understanding of the reader.

### **3.3 *My Alternative Suggestions***

The rhyme and meter of the original poem is an important aspect of its affect. I have chosen to forgo maintaining a consistent meter or rhyme in this draft in favor of translating the meaning as faithfully as possible while still preserving the beauty of the original, but I would like to provide one possible rhymed option and one for a consistent meter for a small section of the

---

<sup>2</sup> One of the greatest support systems, and most daunting obstacles, of my translation came from working with professor Kim, one of the Arabic professors at Bryn Mawr. He was, aside from dictionaries and previous translations, the only source I could rely on for help with the specifics of my translation. Through my discussions with him, he furthered my understanding of the original poem and provided alternate suggestions for my interpretations. Having to defend my decisions to Professor Kim was difficult, but it has made me more secure in my decisions.

poem. In an effort to keep the meaning as close to the original as possible, I have elected to focus on one aspect, either rhyme or meter, at a time.

### 3.3.1 *Rhyme*

I chose the three lines of the third section to attempt to create a rhyme because it is a short section that has its own meaning contained and in part because two of the lines lent themselves to that fairly easily. I will compare it to the same lines in the Nicholson (1930) rendition.

#### III

You, most just of men to all but me  
a dispute lies before you; you are both judge and enemy.

Truly, I forgive you your eyes,  
for finding skillful those in bloated disguise,

but of what use is your sight  
if you can not distinguish dark from light?

--

Oh justest of the just, save to thy deeds to me  
Thou art accused and thou, oh sire, must judge the plea!

Look, I implore thee, well! Let not thine eye cajoled  
see fat in empty froth, in all that glitters gold.

What use and profit reaps a mortal of his sight  
If darkness unto him be indistinct from light? (Nicholson 1930)

Here I employed the same kind of rhyme scheme as Nicholson, where each hemistich of a line rhymes with the other, but without a rhyme between lines. This was to provide an alternative to his rendition that is more faithful to the meaning of the original. I also attempted to maintain a consistent rhyme over the three lines of section 1:

#### I

My heart burns for he whose heart grows cold,  
whom my body and soul have been deprived of.

Love of him has withered my frame: why deny

when the world vies for the affection of he who sits above?  
If we are united by our love of his abundance,  
would that we shared it by the strength of our love.

I was able to create a few rhymed lines, but decided that rhyming was ultimately too restrictive in this case. I was forced, in both cases, to override other decisions I had previously made with regards to both the other poetic devices and the meaning. Those issues surfaced, even though I was only dealing with a few lines; to maintain that rhyme through the length of the poem would not have been possible, without detracting more from the meaning than I was willing to do.

### 3.3.2 *Meter*

Here are a few lines I have tried to render with an iambic meter, lines 9 and 10:

Must an enemy's escape  
forever prompt your spirit's chase?  
It falls do you: defeat them all.  
Their cowardice brings you no shame.

Again, as with the rhyming, I deviated from the meaning of the original even in just these few lines. Because of the length of the poem, any device that is maintained throughout is restrictive. Also, though it is true that some of the lines are easily rendered to a meter, I was not able to fix on the length (i.e. to a pentameter) without altering the meaning. The length of the lines in my translation vary greatly and I prefer not to restrict the length of the line, so I can add information where it is necessary and leave it out where it would intrude.

## 4 **Abu Nuwas**

Another great poet of the Abbasid era whose poetry is still held in high regard today is Abu-Nuwas al-Hasan ben Hani al-Hakami, called Abu Nuwas. He was half Persian and his poetry has left its marks on both sides of his heritage. Where most poets of his time spoke

longingly of a Bedouin past they could not remember, Abu Nuwas became known for his praise of modernism. He had a reputation of wit and humor, and themes of his most well known poems are often things specifically forbidden by Islam, such as drinking. Later in life he appeared to have repented and wrote a number of devout, religious poems. Whether the change of heart was true or not is debatable.

The poem I have chosen to translate is one of his *khamriyyat*, or wine poems. It is, about the glories of wine and the experience of drinking, though the poet displays his talents by weaving in seamless references to other genres, such as homoeroticism and classical love poetry. This kind of poetry is, essentially, the drinking song of the time. It is face paced and would have been accompanied by music. The lyrics of many wine poems can be bawdy and include explicit descriptions. I chose a less controversial poem, to better focus on other issues.

#### **4.1 My Translation**

- (1) Censure me not for your censure but tempts me  
and the cure of my ills is the cause of it all.
- The sad cannot linger long here in wine's courtyard,  
where even the cup it is sipped from rejoices.
- Served by the hand of a woman in garb of a man,  
whose androgyny captivates all those who see her.
- As she stood with her jug through the dregs of the night,  
her face was the glimmer that lit up the courtyard.
- (5) She poured from her jug a wine that was clear  
as if the mere sight of it could numb the mind.
- You thinned out the wine far beyond what was seemly...  
Yes, thinned it, for water is coarser than wine.
- Were you to blend it instead with pure light,  
it would blaze with a brilliance engendered alone.
- She walked 'midst the youth, to whom time was indebted,  
to whom nothing befalls, save what they so wish.
- For her do I cry, not for Asma and Hind,  
those often praised beauties, who always depart.

- (10) Had you built a wine-tent for them such as this,  
for the camels and even the sheep to repose...  
Tell him who would preach to the world his ideals:  
Some things you may know, but the others elude you.  
If you take offence to my state, keep your silence.  
To deprive my oblivion, that would be blasphemy.

#### **4.2 Previous Translations and Discussion**

I found only one other translation of this poem, from Kennedy's (1997) book on Abu Nuwas. Because the poem is short, I provide both Kennedy's translation and my own previous rendition in the appendix, rather than point out individual lines as I require them. Except in those cases where I specifically disagree with Kennedy, his translation can be taken as a literal one.

This poem is very different, both in theme and style, from the al-Mutanabbi poem. Where that poem was made to be declaimed in a court, to entice the favor of a ruler, this is a drinking song. Abu Nuwas' wine poetry was, as this poem, fast-paced, funny and cleverly written. It was written about the joys of drinking and would have been sung on those occasions when those gathered were indulging themselves in drink. That is the image I kept in mind when I was translating this poem, and what influence most of my decisions.

The poetic device I found focused on in this poem was a meter. Not only did the lines lend themselves easily to a combination of anapestic and dactylic feet, but it seemed appropriate given the intent of the original. Because of the shorter length, I was able to maintain a mostly consistent meter throughout. The almost song-like rhythm of the meter suits the poem in its role as a wine song, where it would not have done justice to the gravity of the al-Mutanabbi declamation. Though I feel that the gains in terms of the effect of the poem outweigh the losses in the meaning, there are some places in which my latest rendition of the poem is not as clear as

my previous translation, in those cases where I favored the form over making implied actions explicit. Here is an example of the meter, from the first line:

x / / x / / x / / x /  
Censure me not for your censure but tempts me  
/ / x / / x / / x / / x  
and the cure of my ills is the cause of it all.

One important way to preserve the meaning of a poem is to keep repetitive images or themes consistent. Abu Nuwas praises three separate concepts in this poem: the beauty of wine, the attractiveness of the wine-server, and the state of intoxication. I highlighted the last of those concepts in lines 5 and 11. In line 5, Abu Nuwas speaks of wine as giving sleep, or rest, to the eye. This could either be taken as a comment on the beauty of the wine, or on the strength. My understanding supported the latter. I decided to substitute *to be numb* for *sleep* in this line based both on my understanding of the poem and on the Kennedy translation, which uses *sedative* to convey the meaning. In the final line, the word I translated as oblivion ('-f-w) can also mean forgiveness. In other words, the poet can either be pleading not to be kept from God's forgiveness, or not to be kept from his wine. Keeping in mind the image of this poem as a drinking song, the meaning of *oblivion* seemed more appropriate. I had originally inserted the phrase *my state* to tie the line in with my understandings of lines 5 and 11, but when I fit the poem to a meter, that was no longer viable. In this case, I honored the form of the poem over making a reference clear, but not over the actual meaning of the original.

There is one issue that I wished I could have included, but was unable to: personification of wine as a woman. This is interesting, because, along with the open admiration with which the poet speaks of wine, it creates a feeling of being almost a love poem. Abu Nuwas never refers to wine specifically, but rather describes it with epithets such as [the] pale [one] or clear [one]. In Arabic, the word for wine can be either male or female, but in this poem Abu Nuwas consistently

refers to the wine as *she*. In English we do not grant gender to all of our objects, animate or inanimate, the way Arabic does. When I tried to personify the wine, the *she* was ambiguous; it seemed to refer to the serving-woman.

There are references made in the poem are not easily understood. Some are classical references that hold meaning for those familiar with the literary history of Arabic; others may have been as obscure when they were first declaimed as they appear today. One line whose meaning is unclear, without being a classical reference, is on line 2. I sought an explanation for this line a long time, wondering what rock the wine would touch. I decided it could either be referring to the wine jug, a wine glass or the pouring of wine onto the ground, either accidental or intentional. All of those could be correct understandings. In the end, I decided to make explicit the understanding that both supported my interpretation of the poem as a whole.

Another unclear reference is to the so called “lovers” of the serving woman. Islam considers there to be 3 kinds of copulation<sup>3</sup>: between a married man and his wife, between an unmarried man and woman (fornication) and between two men (sodomy). Thus the line informs the reader that the woman appeals to both those men who prefer women and those who prefer men. The terms fornicator and sodomite in this case are not enough to give the whole meaning to someone unfamiliar with Islamic traditions, as we do not commonly have the same connotations with the words in our culture.

One example of a classical reference is that of the two women mentioned in line 9. Asma’ and Hind are the names of the two objects of affection of another famous poet, Ibn Al-Rabiyya. When the Arab world was still mostly a nomadic society, poets such as al-Rabiyya would admire women from afar, but were not tied to them in any binding way. The poet would write love poetry about his “beloved” and, when her families left, would write of the remains left

---

<sup>3</sup> This information came out of a discussion I had with professor Kim about the cultural context of the original.

in the place of her previous dwelling and of the pain of losing her. Even when the poem was not to be about love, it became the norm to begin a poem with a few lines about the loved one and her leaving. Asma' and Hind are two of the most famous women thus written about and, as such, bring to mind the entire story with only the mention of their name. A reader unfamiliar with Arabic literature would not even necessarily know that Asma' and Hind are women's names. I elected to clarify this line, because I could do so without detracting from the meaning.

There is one example of a reference that I chose not to make more explicit, because it detracted from the form, in line 9. The sudden talk of tents and sheep often gave my readers some confusion, so in my earlier translation I added the phrase "...they might have stayed", to explain how the line fit in with the previous one. When I fit the poem to a meter, that addition made the line too long. I decided to remove my explanation, to better fit the meter.

As with the previous poem, Professor Kim was a great help in understanding the nuances of meaning, but there were also instances where we disagreed. In line 5, he wanted a translation that was closer to Kennedy's version, that spoke of the beauty of the wine rather than its potency. I understood his reasoning, but chose to remain with my translation as it was closer to my own understanding of the poem and, thus, of the understanding I wanted to impart to the reader.

## **5 Conclusion**

The definition of a good translation varies depending on the intent of said translation. A good literary translation is not the same as a good scholarly rendition. Even so, there are general issues that should concern every translator. Based on the assumption I articulated earlier, that the purpose of a translation is to provide an insight to an otherwise unknown culture, these are the issues I found most important and the ways I have decided that those issues should interact. Poetry is a form of literature that is as dependent on the ways in which the meaning is conveyed

as it is on the meaning itself, therefore both should be honored in a translation. Not all devices should be translated, nor could they be. Instead, only those most appropriate to the poem and that allow the most freedom should be chosen. The devices used to convey the form should only add to the experience of reading the poem, without detracting from the meaning. In those occasions where the translation strays from the literal meaning of the original, it should be done to remain faithful to the sense of the text, by providing the reader with a deeper understanding. Form takes precedence over explaining references, because it is an intrinsic part of the original, while the explanations are imposed. Form and meaning are much closer in importance, but, in the end, meaning must be given more consideration. The form will affect the impression the readers make of the poem, and it will determine whether or not they perceive it as poetry, but the meaning carries the heart of the culture.

These concepts were the basis of the decisions I made in both of my translations, though they manifest in different ways. Attending to all of these issues (rather than only one or two), as well as the way they interact, is what distinguishes my translations from the previous versions. I have done my best to create translations that are good, by my definition of the word. I can only hope they had the intended effect.

## Appendix I – renditions of the Abu Nuwas poem

Kennedy's (1997) rendition of the poem:

- (1) Censure me not, for censure but tempts me; cure me rather with the cause of my ill—  
A pale wine, whose house is not visited by sorrows, imparting joy even to the rock that touches it.  
Received from the palm of a woman clad as a man, whose lovers are two: the fornicator and the sodomite.  
As she stood with her wine-jug on a dark night, her face emitted a pearly light,
- (5) Casting pure [wine] from the lip of the grail—a sedative for the eye to behold.  
More gentle than water, which ill suits her delicate [nature]. How coarse water is!  
If you were to mix light into [the wine] it would be pliant in the mixing and become irradiant.  
She circled amongst men to whom Time was indebted—men afflicted by Time only as they pleased.  
For her do I cry, not the spot at which Asma' and Hind once alighted—
- (10) No tent is set up for the wine to be visited by camels and sheep!  
Tell him who would claim philosophy as part of his knowledge: "You have learnt some things, but much more escapes you;  
Do not deprive [me] of God's forgiveness, if you are a man who would shame me; to deprive me of this is a blasphemy."

My own rendition of the poem, without meter:

- (1) Do not censure my state, for your blame is temptation  
and the cure of my ills is the cause of it all.  
Sadness cannot linger here in wine's courtyard,  
where even the cup it is sipped from rejoices.  
Served by a woman in the garb of a man,  
whose androgyny appeals to all those who see her.  
As she stood with her wine jug through the last dregs of the night,  
the glimmer of her face shone in the courtyard.
- (5) She poured a wine from the mouth of her jug, clear  
as if the mere sight of it would numb the mind.

You thinned it with water beyond that was seemly...  
Yes, thinned, for water is sparser and dryer than wine.

Were you to blend it instead with pure light  
it would blaze with a brilliance of its own.

She circled amongst the youth, who feel that time owes them,  
whom nothing befalls, save what they so wish.

For her do I cry, not for Asma' and Hind,  
those often praised women, whose fate was to depart.

(10) Had you pitched a wine-tent such as this  
for the camels and sheep, they might have stayed.

Tell him who preaches his philosophy to the world:  
You may have learned some things, but others elude you.

If you take offence, do not keep my from my oblivion.  
To deprive me would be blasphemous.

## Appendix II – Original Poems

### Al Mutanabbi

|  |   |
|--|---|
| واحر قلبا باه مـن قلبه شـبـم<br>سـقـم<br>مـا لـي اـكـتـم حـبا قـد بـرى جـسـدي<br>الأمم<br>إن كان يجمـعـنا حـب لـغـرتـه<br>نـقـتـسـم<br>قـد زـرتـه و سـيـوف الـمـنـد مـغـمـدة<br>دـم<br>فـكـان أحـسـن خـلـق الـلـه كـلـهـم<br>لـشـيـم<br>فـوت الـعـدو الـذـي يـمـمـتـه ظـفـر<br>نـعـم<br>قـد نـاب عـنـك شـديـد الـخـوف و اصـطنـعـت<br>الـبـهـم<br>ألـزمت نـفـسـك شـيـئـا لـيـس يـلـزمـها<br>أكلـم ا رمت جـيـشـا فـانـثـنى مـرـبا<br>الهمم<br>كـمـزمهم فـي كـل مـعـتـركـعـلي | عـنـده و مـن بـجـسـمـي و حـالـي<br>و تـدعـي حـب سـيـف الـدولـة<br>فـلـيت أنـا بـقـدر الـحـب<br>و قـد نـظـرت إلـيـه و الـسـيـوف<br>و كـان أحـسـن مـافـي الـأحـسـن<br>فـي طـيـه أسـف فـي طـيـه<br>لـك الـمـهـابـة مـالـا تـصـنـع<br>أن لـا يـواريـهم بـحـر و لـا عـلم<br>تـصـرـفت بـك فـي آثـاره<br>و مـا عـلـيـك بـهـم عـار إذا انـهـزـموا |
|--|---|

|                                |                             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| أما ترى ظفرا حلوا سوى ظفر      | تصافحت فيه بيض              |
| الهندو اللمم                   |                             |
| يا أعدل الناس إلا في معاملتني  | فيك الخصام و أنت الخصم      |
| والحكيم                        |                             |
| أعيذه نظرات منك صادقـة         | أن تحسب الشحم فيمن شحمه ورم |
| الذي بنظرهوما انتفاع اخي       | إذا استوت عنده الأنوار و    |
| الظلم                          |                             |
| سيعلم الجمع ممن ضم مجلسنا      | بانني خير من تسعى به        |
| قـدم                           |                             |
| انا الذي نظر العمى إلى ادبي    | و أسمعت كل ماتني من به      |
| صمم                            |                             |
| انام ملء جفوني عن شواردها      | ويسمر الخلق جراه و يختصم    |
| حكوي و جاهل مده في جهله ض      | حتى اتته يد فراسة و فم      |
| إذا رايت نيوب الليث بارزة      | فلا تظن ان الليث            |
| يبتسم                          |                             |
| و مهجة مهجتي من هم صاحبه       | أدركته بجواد ظهره حرم       |
| رجلاه في الركض رجل و اليدان يد | وفعله ماتريد الكف           |
| والقدم                         |                             |
| ومرهف سرت بين الجحفلين به      | تى ضربت و موج الموت ح       |
| يلتطم                          |                             |
| الخيل والليل والبيداء تعرفني   | والسيف والرمح               |

والقرطاس و القلم

صحبت في الفلوات الوحش من فردا

القور و الأكـم

يا من يـعز عليـنا ان نفارقهم

عدم

رمة ما كان أخلقنا منكم بتكـ

إن كان سركم ما قال حاسدا

و بيننا لو رعيتم ذاك معرفة

نم

كم تطلبون لنا عيبا في عجزكم

والكرم

شرفي ما أبعد العيب و النقصان عن

الشيب و الهرم

ليت الغمام الذي عندي صواعقه

الديم

أرى النوى تقتضينني كل مرحلة

الرسـم

لئن تركن ضميرا عن ميامنا

إذا ترحلت عن قوم و قد قدروا

شر البلاد مكان لا صديق به

يصم

حتى تعجب مني

وجداننا كل شيء بعدكم

لو ان أمركم من أمرنا أمر

فما لجرح إذا أرضاكم ألم

غن المعارف في اهل النهى

و يكره الله ما أتون

أنا الثريا و ذان

يزيلهن إلى من عنده

لا تستقل بها الوحادة

ليحدثن لمن ودعتهم ندم

تفارقهم فالراحلون هم أن لا

و شر ما يكسب الإنسان ما

شبه البزاة سواء فيهِ و

وشر ما قنصته راحتني قنص

الرخم

تجوز عندك لا عرب ولا

بأي لفظ تقول الشعر زعنفة

عجم

<sup>4</sup>مقدض من الدر إلا أنه لكل

هذا عتابك إلا أنه مقفة

---

<sup>4</sup> I typed the version of the poem that was published along with the Jayyusi-Middleton translation.

|                                       |                           |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| دعُ عنك لومي فإنَّ اللومَ إغراءُ      | وداويني بالتي كانت هي     |
| الداءُ                                |                           |
| صفراءُ لا تنزلُ الأحزانُ ساحتها       | لومسَّهما حجراً مَسَّتْهُ |
| سرَّاءُ                               |                           |
| قامتُ بإبريقها والليلُ مَعْتَكِرُ     | فلأح من وجهها في          |
| البيت لألءُ                           |                           |
| هَفَأَرسَلتُ من فمِ الإبريق صافي-     | لأنَّما أخذها             |
| بالعَينِ نِ. إغفاءُ                   |                           |
| رقَّتْ عن الماءِ حتَّى ما يلائمُها    | لَطافَةً وجَفَا عن شئكلها |
| الماءُ                                |                           |
| فلو مزجتَ بهما نوراً لَمَازَجَها      | حتَّى تَوَلَّدَ أنوارُ    |
| وأضواءُ                               |                           |
| دارتُ على فِتيَةٍ دانَ الزمانُ لَهُمُ | ما ي-صيبُهُمُ إلَّا بـماف |
| شـاؤوا                                |                           |
| لـتلكَ أبكي ولا أبكي لمنزلةٍ          | كانت تَحُلُّ بهما مند     |
| وأسماءُ                               |                           |
| حاشا لـدرّةٍ أن تُبنى الـخيـامُ لها   | وأن تروحَ عليهما الإبلُ   |
| والشـاءُ                              |                           |

حفظت شئاً

فقل لمن يدعي في العلم فلسفةً

غابت عنك أشياء و

فإن حظركه

تحظر العفو إن كنت امرأً رجلاً

بإلديين إزاء

---

<sup>5</sup> I typed the version of the original as it appeared in Kennedy's appendix.

## Bibliography

- Arberry, A. J. 1950. *Modern Arabic poetry; an anthology with English verse translations* London,: Taylor's Foreign Press.
- Arberry, A. J. ed. 1965. *Arabic poetry; a primer for students*: Cambridge [Eng.] University Press.
- Sperl, Stefan & C. Shackle. 1996. *Qasida poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa* Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill.
- Huart, Clément & Mary Loyd. 1903. *A history of Arabic literature* New York: D. Appleton and company.
- Kennedy, Philip F. 1997. *The wine song in classical Arabic poetry : Abu Nuwas and the literary tradition* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, Bernard. 1980. Translation from Arabic. In *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*: American Philosophical Society.
- . 2001. *Music of a distant drum : classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew poems* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Maling, Joan Mathilde. 1973. *The Theory of Classical Arabic Metrics*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. 1930. *A literary history of the Arabs* Cambridge [Eng.]: The University press.
- Stetkevych, Jaroslaw. 1967. Some Observations on Arabic Poetry. In *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stoetzer, Willem. 1982. Some Observations on Quantity in Arabic Metrics. In *Journal of Arabic Literature*: Brill.
- Tuetey, Charles Greville. 1985. *Classical Arabic poetry : 162 poems from Imrulkais to Ma\*arri* London ; Boston: KPI ;.