Early Modern Women:
An Interdisciplinary Journal
2011, vol. 6

How Gulbadan Remembered: The *Book of Humāyūn* as an Act of Representation

Rebecca Gould

How do memory and history interact in the first female-authored account of life at the Mughal court, the *Book of Humāyūn* (*Humāyūnnāma*) by Princess Gulbadan (d.1603), third daughter of Bābur, founder of the Mughal dynasty (1526–1707)? One powerful prelude to an answer to the question concerning memory may be inferred from the only poem cited in this short text:

در اینه گرچه خود نمائی باشد
پیوسته ز خویشتن جدای باشد
خود را بمثلای غیر دیدن عجب است
این بوالعجبی کار خدا باشد

Although the self may be reflected in a mirror
the mirror image will not match the self.
What a miracle to see oneself reflected
through an other; this miracle is given by God.[1]

As with the poem, so with the text in which it is embedded. The self (*khūd*) in the mirror is not the self within, although surface appearances suggest otherwise. Likewise, though the *Book of Humāyūn* resembles an historical chronicle in structure, it is much more than that. Although best classed as historiography, the *Book of Humāyūn* is a genre-crossing historiographic memoir. It dwells not on battles and royal genealogies, as did its male-

Electronic copy available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1931061

authored predecessors, but rather on domestic scenes of birth, death, anger, love, and other aspects of daily life, especially as experienced by women.

Nor is the authorial self reflected in the mirror of the text written by the historical Gulbadan. The author systematically eludes the reader looking for a record of her selfhood. Though scholars inevitably ransack the text for autobiographical content, the text yields little in this domain. Gulbadan is concerned with lives other than her own, and she narrates them to the exclusion of herself. At one level, she obeys an unwritten rule governing much premodern historiography that a woman should be seen, not heard. A later female poet at the Mughal court, Zeb un-Nisāʾ Begam, the daughter of Pādishāh Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), echoes precisely this belief when she articulates her ideal of female subjectivity:

در سخن صحفی شدم مانند بو در برگ گل
میل دیدن هر که دارد در سخن بیند مرا

I am the page of speech, much like the rose petal's scent.
Whoever wishes to see me, must look to my poetry.[2]

Zeb un-Nisāʾ had taken for herself the nom de plume *makhfī*, meaning "one who is concealed." As this citation indicates, her nominal self-evasion in poetry is anything but singular in meaning. Even in the act of self-negation, Zeb un-Nisāʾ asserts her voice through verse, treating poetry as a discourse specific to herself and to which her listeners must attend if they wish to understand her speech.

This same dynamic of strategic self-negation is evident in the *Book of Humāyūn* in the domain of memory. Memory and history work together in the *Book of Humāyūn* to create a distinctive strategy of representation; more than simply obscuring our author, Gulbadan's embrace of these two genres opens her text to registers of experience missing from other court chronicles. This work of textualized memory suggests a new trajectory for navigating the contentious history/memory divide. Rather than choosing one method over the other, Gulbadan chooses both, as Taymiyya Zaman perceived when she argued that the *Book of Humāyūn* functions "as a space within which the line between history and memory comes to be blurred

Electronic copy available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1931061

and questioned."[3] Gulbadan's male predecessors in the field of Mughal historiography, including Bābur and Abū'l Fazl — authors of the *Bāburnāma* and the *Akbarnāma*, respectively — could not so easily bridge the memory/history divide. As official representatives of the Mughal court, Bābur and Abū'l Fazl were more heavily invested in political discourses that rendered the past through chronicles of conquest. Memory figures into their narratives, but only in ancillary fashion, as a means of consolidating an image of sovereign power.

As the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Bābur created a homology between political and personal history in his autobiographical *Bāburnāma*. As the powerful and devoted secretary to Ākbar Pādishāh, Abū'l Fazl scripted a text that cast its monumental shadow over the remaining centuries of Mughal rule, Gulbadan concentrated on scenes of domesticity to narrate her account of Mughal sovereignty. Her aims were more modest than those of either Bābur or Abū'l Fazl, but they were no less revisionary. One scholar has stressed this difference by observing that, in the *Book of Humāyūn*, "Even the emperor's [i.e., Humāyūn's] travels are charted through the minds of the women in his household. We watch with them from the ramparts as the men ride away to war and anxiously scan the horizon for them to return."[4] This narrative strategy, of representation through female perspectives, predetermines the reader's relation to all Gulbadan's protagonists, male and female. Gulbadan's chronicle is structured by the births (of the Pādishāhs Humāyūn and Ākbar) and deaths (of her father Bābur; of Mahīm Begam, her adopted mother and wife of Bābur; of Mirza Hindal, her martyred brother) of her family members, as though the self (including the narrating self) were wholly a product of its domestic relations.

Sovereignty in the *Book of Humāyūn*, as Zaman astutely notes, "must adhere to familial custom to reaffirm itself."[5] Thus a new ethics is born along with Gulbadan's narrative representation. The politics of memory in this female-authored chronicle is not based on the violent conquests that attracted male chroniclers such as Bābur. Unlike her predecessors in the field of historiography, Gulbadan's new ethics of court life is not premised on personal gain or glory. Whereas Bābur's text is unambiguously autobiographical, and necessarily inclines towards self-glorification, Gulbadan's memoir seems immune to such tendencies. It is less interested in narrating the self as an autonomously discursive subject, independent of its familial contexts, than in narrating the passage of time through generations, and the transformations of selves more collectively constituted than individually defined. We should not forget that, among other factors ostensibly motivating this narrative strategy, Gulbadan had already lived through many generations; she was sixty-five years old when she began to write the *Book of Humāyūn*, and lived to the age of eighty-two.

As one might expect in a text which is neither wholly personal memoir nor historical chronicle, there are moments when the narrative's interest in otherness yields to an authorial interest in the self. Midway through the narrative, when Gulbadan reaches the death of her adopted mother Mahīm Begam, she breaks with her customary self-evasion and focuses directly on her personal reaction to this tragedy. "[Mahīm Begam] passed from this transitory world to the realm of eternity," Gulbadan writes, "and once again the children of His Majesty my father the Pādishāh were seared with the brand of orphanhood [*dagh-i yatīmī tāzeh shod*], *particularly I, who had been raised by her. I was amazingly upset and afflicted*" (19, emphasis added).

Perhaps because so much of the *Book of Humāyūn* evades self-representation, scholarship has tended to focus on Gulbadan's text as a cipher for social reality and to mine it for historical information rather than treating it as a textual act of representation. There is much to motivate a social-history approach to this text. Gulbadan is, after all, a theorist and chronicler of domestic life; she wants to establish how sovereign power is secured through family connections and how such power reverberates across generations. Social history hermeneutics, however, risks missing the value of this text qua text; the *Book of Humāyūn* is most valuable when, in addition to helping us ascertain the social texture of life at the Mughal court, it illuminates life, death, and birth as experienced by the texts' protagonists — when it enriches, in other words, our understanding of early modern subjectivity.

The text's very existence is a matter worth probing. Why did Gulbadan write down her memories of Humāyūn and Mughal court life? Gulbadan opens her text by invoking the titles ascribed to the Mughal sovereigns with whom her text is concerned "I have been commanded to write what

I know of the lives of 'He Whose Place is Paradise' [*Firdaws-Makānī*, i.e. Bābur] and 'He Whose Nest is Heaven' [*Jannat-Āshīānī*, i.e., Humāyūn]" (1). Should we take her at her word and assume that she wrote only to please her nephew Ākbar, the current sovereign at the time of her writing? Such reference to a prior command from a social superior as a justification for writing is commonplace in Persian historiography. Whether male or female, an author could not begin a text simply by expressing a wish to write. Within this tradition, one had to write for someone, whether that someone was a patron, a king, or a friend. One did not write — at least, not explicitly — for oneself. By way of confirmation, consider the opening to another contemporaneous chronicle written at the Mughal court, Bāyazid Bayat's *History of Humāyūn* (*Tārīkh-i Humāyūn*): "His Majesty Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Ākbar Pādishāh *commanded* that any servants of court who had a taste for history should write." [6] The author implies in his opening sentence that the only justification for his having undertaken to write a chronicle is the sovereign imprimatur. Gulbadan and Bāyazid Bayat share a relation to sovereign power more elaborate and more mediated than their counterparts, which helps account for their common narrative strategies. An illiterate servant of Ākbar Pādishāh, and later gatekeeper to his harem, Bayazid Bayat dictated his chronicle to one of Abū'l Fazl's scribes.[7]

This early modern vogue for historiographic self-evasion in texts based primarily on memory (rather than written sources) has implications in the realm of historical methodology and its interaction with memory. To undertake to represent the life and times of a pādishāh is to engage in an act of representation; it is not primarily to reflect, as in a mirror, reality.[8] Narrative verisimilitude has already been called into question by Gulbadan in the telling poetic prooftext cited above. Relying both of necessity and by choice largely on memory, Gulbadan was alienated from formal historiographic conventions to a greater extent than Bābur or Abū'l Fazl. Although her narrative formally evades self-representation, it does not hesitate to register the politics of memory across generations. Gulbadan's act of inscribing life narratives into a text supposedly commissioned by Ākbar asserts an ethics of sovereignty via a theory of domesticity. Gulbadan aims to record the passage of time across generations. Her family history concomitantly chronicles changing forms of political power.

In seemingly unprecedented fashion in this early Mughal text, female domesticity becomes a locus of political sovereignty. This transformation is enabled largely by Gulbadan's strategic merger of memory with history. In spite of the text's seeming linguistic transparency — a stylistic feature accentuated by the author's relation to Persian as a second language and her consequent reliance on a simple, straightforward lexicon — the *Book of Humāyūn* does not monochromatically reproduce the empirical conditions of Mughal early modernity. Instead, through its complex engagement with dominant notions of female and male subjectivity, the *Book of Humāyūn* rewrites the empirical conditions for Mughal sovereignty, adding in the process new woman-centered forms of thinking and living, and thereby shaping, through these additions, future memories and their attendant political formations.

Notes

1. *Humāyūnāma* in *Three Memoirs of Humāyūn*, ed. and trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2009), 32. All citations are taken from this critical edition and translation, which also includes Bayazid Bayat's *History of Humāyūn* (*Tārīkh-i Humāyūn*), cited below. Future references will be provided parenthetically. I have largely followed Thackston's translation, with minor modifications. Other translations from Persian are my own.

2. These lines were penned by Zeb un-Nisā' in response to a command from an erstwhile lover that she conceal herself from public view. As with the poem cited from the *Book of Humāyūn*, the poet-lover's command draws on the discourse of self-representation (*khūd namā'yī*):

> خود نمائی میکنی ای شمع محفل خوب نیست
> من همی خواهم که در یک پروین بینم ترا
>
> It is not good that you display [to others] the candle of your self;
> I want the sight of you to be my victory alone.

Although the female poet formally agrees with her male interlocutor, she shifts the discursive terms of their conversation away from self-negation, towards self assertion through poetry. Both citations may be found in Meherjibhai Nosherwanji Kuka, *The Wit and Humour of the Persians* (Bombay: Education Society's Steam Press, 1894), 17.

3. Taymiya R. Zaman,"Inscribing Empire: Sovereignty and Subjectivity in Mughal Memoirs" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2007), 207.

4. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 BCE to the Present.* Vol. 1 (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 99.

5. Zaman, "Inscribing Empire," 97.

6. Tarīkh-i Humāyūn in *Three Memoirs of Humāyūn*, 1, emphasis added.

7. For background on Bayazid Bayat's life, see Thackston's introduction to *Three Memoirs of Humāyūn*, xii.

8. Perhaps for this reason Ruby Lal, the scholar who has most recently engaged deeply with Gulbadan's legacy, offers an incomplete reading of the *Book of Humāyūn* as a textual artifact. Lal does, however, help us to recover a social history of Mughal domesticity through her readings of this and other texts. See Ruby Lal, "Historicizing the Harem: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir," *Feminist Studies* 30 (2004): 590–616, and Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).