

The last article of the volume, “Astronomy a Temptation? On Early Modern Encounters across the Mediterranean Sea,” a paper presented at a conference focusing on the question “whether astronomy turned during the early modern period into a discipline providing other areas of intellectual enterprise with guidance”, examines this question from six different angles and concludes by stating that “no straightforward, unequivocal picture emerges from the narratives, the practices, and the objects as to whether astronomy indeed provided travelers to the Ottoman and Safavid Empires with guiding principles for what they should look for, buy, ask for, talk about, and observe” (42).

The present volume is necessary reading for historians of science, especially those latter-day intellectual heirs (such as Toby Huff) of still-influential figures such as Ernst Renan and Goldziher, who continue to repeat the grand but flawed and prejudiced narrative the nineteenth century, formulated in the departing glory of the Empire. Although all of these papers have been published elsewhere, their collection in one volume makes them a valuable source for any future historian of science who wishes to write a critical and nuanced history of science in Islamic civilization, an overdue task which awaits a competent scholar.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL
Center for Islam and Science
Canada



Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muḥammad*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010; PB; xx+306 pp; ISBN: 978-0-253-22206-0.

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and Adjunct Professor of Comparative Literature at the Indiana University, is clearly at the cutting edge of the field. In her latest work, she has extended her expertise in pre-Islamic poetry to the poetry of the Prophetic era and beyond, and she has done so with a sensitivity that is hard to find in academic discourse on Islam. *The Mantle Odes* is a feast for the general reader, a storehouse of ideas and research leads for the scholar, and a valuable addition to literature on poetics and literary theory. The three Mantle Odes translated in this book span several centuries of Islamic history, from the Prophetic time to the medieval Mamlūk period (late 13th century) to the colonial era. *The Mantle*

Odes combines poetic insights with scholarly vigor, a rare combination in the academic world today.

The book is divided into three numbered sections: section 1 is devoted to Ka'b b. Zuhayr's (d. 24/662) *Bānat Su'ād* (Su'ād Has Departed); section 2 to al-Būṣīrī's (d. ca. 694/1294) *al-Kawākib al-Durriyyah fī Madhī Khayr al-Bariyyah*, famously known simply as *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* (the Mantle Ode); and section 3 to Aḥmad Shawqī's (1868-1932) *Nahj al-Burda* (the Way of the Mantle). Each section contains an introductory discussion on the poet, his life and times, his literary context, and his place within the larger poetic tradition of which he is an integral part. An appendix provides the Arabic texts of the three odes as well as those of the three pre-Islamic poets which are used to contextualize the Mantle Odes: 'Alqamah's "A Heart Turbulent with Passion"; al-Nābighah's "Ode of Mayyah"; and Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā's "The Tribe Set Out".

The Mantle Odes is situated at the outermost boundary of Western academic scholarship on Islam—a line beyond which are purely Islamic texts, steeped in the faith tradition which they explicate and which gives birth to them; these works belong to a scholarly tradition which is radically different from the non-Muslim, mostly Western, academic scholarship on Islam in both its outer garment as well as in its basic premises about fundamental aspects of faith and how the author relates to them. The keystone of this arch is the belief regarding Muḥammad, the son of 'Abd Allāh, whom the Islamic tradition considers the last of Allah's Messengers sent to humanity with the last of the revealed Books, the Qur'ān, which commands believers to bless and seek peace for him whenever his name is mentioned—a practice Muslims have followed since the day Q 33:56 was revealed, telling them: *Indeed, Allah and His angels send blessings on the Prophet, O you who believe, send blessings and peace upon him* (Q 33:56). Non-Muslims have no such obligation and the Western academic tradition has historically been exceedingly harsh in its treatment of the Prophet who is revered by millions of human beings and whose love inspired the praise poems which *The Mantle Odes* presents in translation with annotation and notes. The author of *The Mantle Odes* includes the traditional salutation, albeit in an abbreviated form ("pbuh")—a usage Imām al-Nawawī emphatically forbade—on the grounds that "the full repetition of the honorific of the Prophet Muḥammad, *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallama* ("God bless him and give him peace") proves cumbersome to the English reader" (xvii). Actually it is not the "English reader", but a non-Muslim reader for whom this may prove cumbersome, as language has nothing to do with the matter; it all depends on the reader; for the believers it is an immensely rewarding practice as "blessing the Prophet brings a blessing to our lives, and stillness to the heart," Abdal Hakim Murad notes in the introduction to his recent translation of al-Būṣīrī's *Burda*. "'Whoever blessed me once,' [the Prophet] says, 'shall be blessed tenfold by God'" (The Quilliam Press Ltd, 2009).

The presence of this thin layer of the Muslim understanding of the

Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, is perhaps a poetic indicator of how far the author has ventured into the domain of Islamic understanding of the person to whose person and station these odes celebrate; it is also an indication of her understanding of the function of poetry in Islamic tradition. She seems to stand just at the threshold of the literary tradition which takes poetry as a medium through which mortals aspire to unveil, encounter, and come into direct contact with that which cannot be unveiled: the Absolute Reality, *Ḥaḡiqatul ḥaḡiqa*, about which al-Ḥallāj, in his *Divān* as well as in *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*, said that it is an unfathomable vale, full of deathtraps, where one must tread with absolute care lest one perishes. This proximity to the sacred brings a certain flavor of sanctity to Stetkevych's work and she can thus partake of the inner joy, longing, and the self-sacrificing effervescence of the poets whose works she presents in *The Mantle Odes*—even though she stops short of sharing their hopes fully: they presented these Odes to the Prophet, seeking his pleasure, not for any worldly reward but for the sake of the immortal garden, as Ḥassān b. Thābit, may Allah be well-pleased with him, said:

I will never cease desiring to praise him, for perhaps thereby
 I will dwell in the immortal garden forever.
 With al-Muṣṭafā, God's chosen, I desire by this praise
 to dwell in his protection,
 And for the reward of that day, I strive and strain.
 (Ḥassān b. Thābit's "At Ṭaybah Lies a Trace",
 from p. 68 of *The Mantle Odes*)

The praise poem to the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, Stetkevych argues, functions precisely like a gift in traditional societies, establishing mutual bonds and a relationship that comes with its own obligations. What the poet anticipates in response for his labor of love, is nothing less than prophetic intercession. While Stetkevych's introductory note (38) on the tripartite structure of the pre-Islamic panegyric ode, which Ka'b b. Zuhayr, may Allah be well-pleased with him, followed in the composition of his celebrated *Su'ād Has Departed* (*Bānat Su'ād*), reflects her penetrating understanding of the poet's passage from the state of Ignorance (*Jāhiliyya*) to that of Islam, her discussion pays insufficient attention to the role of the Qur'ān in the transformation of pre-Islamic poetry, which kept its outward forms and patterns but which was now not a lover's lament for a departed beloved but longing for the One whose love inspired the poets to write verses, seeking His pleasure. They described their longing for the promised meeting with their Lord in the company of the Prophet whom they took as intercessor; thus the Mantle Ode kept the form of the pre-Islamic panegyrics presented to the kings in hope of some worldly reward, but its content was totally transformed. Stetkevych recognizes this difference,

as she cursorily notes: “given the Islamic context in which this *qasīdah* has come down to us, the closing verses of its *nasīb* are striking for two elements of diction that have an eminently Qur’ānic resonance” (41). The impact of the Qur’ān on the poetic imagery of the poet, however, remains undervalued. That said, one cannot let these points of emphasis stand in the way of full appreciation of her perceptive notes, especially those which explain the Praise section (*madīh*) of the Burda.

It is in her translations, however, where Stetkevych falls short and where one’s enchantment with her scholarly undertaking diminishes, especially as the translation sometimes degenerates into colloquialisms:

32. My slanderers at her two sides
 denounced me saying,
 “You, O Son of Abū Sulmā, are
 as good as dead.”
33. And every trusted friend in whom
 I put my hopes
 Said, “I cannot help you, I am occupied
 with other things.”
34. So I replied, “Out of my way,
 you bastards!”
 For all that the All-Merciful decrees
 will come to pass!
35. For every man of woman born,
 though he be long secure,
 Will one day be borne
 on humpbacked bier.
36. I was told God’s Messenger
 had threatened me,
 But from God’s Messenger
 pardon is hoped.
37. Go easy, and let Him be your guide
 who gave to you
 The gift of the Qur’ān in which
 are warnings and discernment! (46-47)

Mashghūl, translated here as “occupied with other things”, could have been better rendered as “occupied with other matters/affairs”; “go easy” for *mahlan* is a poor colloquial choice; “out of my way, you bastards” for “*khallū ṭarīqī lā abā lakum*” is certainly not elegant, and is far less in harmony with the spirit of the original where it draws attention to the principle that “For all that the All-Merciful decrees/will come to pass!”

Stetkevych’s translation of al-Būṣīrī’s Burda will inevitably be judged in

comparison to the other existing translations, especially the two most recent, by Hamza Yusuf and Abdal Hakim Murad, both gifted translators. Even without such comparison, however, her translation is often marked by unfortunate decisions unreflective of the broader spirit of the *Burda*. For instance, she translates verses 29 and 30 as:

I have profaned the Path of him whose night prayers brought the
darkness to life
Until his feet complained of pain and swelling.

To translate *ahyā-azzalāma* as “brought the darkness to life” is contrary to what the verse is actually saying, and night prayers bringing darkness to life is rationally incongruous. Abdal Hakim Murad skillfully renders this as the “revival of the black nights”; he further has “I’ve wronged the example of him who” and “feet complaining of painful swelling,” instead of Stetkevych’s “I have profaned the Path of him” and “feet complained of pain and swelling,” in which “*min*” is incorrectly rendered as “and”.

Verse 31, translated by Stetkevych as “Haughty mountains of pure gold sought to tempt him/ But, oh, with what disdain he turned them down” misses the point altogether by ignoring or misunderstanding the play on *al-shumm* and *shamam* in the original; Murad’s translation is not only more elegant, it is closer to the original’s spirit:

High mountains sought to tempt him by
turning to gold, but he showed them
lofty height upon height!

In verse 55, it is inaccurate to translate *zalla* as sin and there are just too many words in used here; this significantly contributes to its failure to capture the terseness of the original; compare Stetkevych’s translation with that of Murad’s:

O my soul, do not despair of pardon for a sin, however grave,
For mortal sins in God’s forgiveness are like venial ones. (144)

Murad’s precise rendering is:

O soul! Despair not of a major fault!
Great sins resemble little ones,
in God’s forgiveness.

Considerations of space and time prevent an examination of the third *burda* of *The Mantle Odes*; let it suffice to say that Stetkevych’s translation and notes on

this popular burda by Aḥmad Shawqī, formally imitating the rhyme and meter of al-Būṣīrī's Burda, extends the scope of her work to analysis of the particularly modern uses of poetry for political ends, combining powerful historical tradition with the ethos of reawakening that gripped the Arab world during the fading light of the colonial era.

Despite its shortcomings in translation, this book is a valuable and welcome addition to critical studies of Arab-Islamic literature, especially for its notes and contextual work.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL
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