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 978-0-521-10848-5 - Poems of Al-Mutanabbi  
 A. J. Arberry  
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## INTRODUCTION

My *Arabic Poetry* was intended as an initiation into a study of a great and abundant, but as yet still comparatively unexplored literature, so that the Western reader might hopefully be stimulated to explore farther, being by now a little more oriented towards the ideals at which the Arab poets aimed, the themes of which they sang, the images they invented and elaborated, and the conventions they observed. That anthology comprised specimens of the work of thirty-one poets, ranging in time from the sixth to the twentieth century, and in space from Persia to Morocco. Now in this volume it is intended to present for examination the best and most interesting (at least to the compiler's taste) of the output of the man universally esteemed the greatest of all the Arab poets, and thereby to advance a little nearer towards understanding the art of poetry as practised by the most poetical people of mankind.

Abu 'l-Ṭaiyib Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusain al-Mutanabbi was born in al-Kūfa, thriving city of commerce and learning, in the year 303/915. His father is said to have been a water-carrier of the quarter of Kinda, an impoverished descendant of an ancient Yamanī tribe, the Banū Ju'fī; hence the son bore the place-name al-Kindī and the clan-name al-Ju'fī, and grew up to boast of noble and heroic ancestry. Our sources represent the boy and youth as receiving a careful education in Arabic and the Arab sciences, including a period in Damascus and a prolonged study-leave in the desert amongst the traditional Bedouin guardians of pure speech and the old ideals. Some biographers relate that as a young man he involved himself, and deeply, with one or other of the Shī'ite conspiracies which were perennial features of those disturbed times, when the authority of the caliphate was in the decline; it is even said that he claimed 'Alid descent, and that he joined the notorious Carmathian movement, a revolutionary group which was in those years terrorising southern

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Iraq and Arabia. The climax of his youthful ambitions came when he pretended to be a prophet with a new Koran, and himself led an insurrection in al-Samāwa; from this serious escapade, which finished in defeat and imprisonment in 322/933, he received that nickname of ridicule which his poetical talents converted into a title of immortal glory—al-Mutanabbī, the man who set himself up as a prophet.

Al-Mutanabbī's first aspiration, before his ill-starred adventure into politics, had been to achieve fame and a comfortable livelihood as a poet, modelling his style and his career on the greatest writers of the past, in particular Abū Tammām (d. 231/845) and al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897); pieces from this early period have been preserved, and some feature in the present selection. After his release from prison he resumed his quest of a patron worthy and properly appreciative of his pen; such a man he found at last in 337/948, when he was appointed chief panegyrist to the Ḥamdānīd ruler of Aleppo, the heroic and bountiful Saif al-Daula. That prince, son of the governor of Mosul and Mesopotamia, and heir to part of his estates, in 333/944 had wrested Aleppo from al-Ikhshīd of Egypt and so established himself as independent ruler of the territories bordering on Byzantium. Saif al-Daula thus emerged as the principal champion of Islam against its great Christian adversary, and in a series of bloody campaigns fully lived up to the title he bore, "The Sword of State". Al-Mutanabbī enjoyed his munificent patronage and shared in his martial campaigns for nine years, during which his genius reached full maturity; the odes which he composed in praise of Saif al-Daula rank amongst the greatest masterpieces of Arabic literature.

For whatever reason—whether owing to the poet's own pride and sensitivity bordering on arrogance, or the machinations of envious rivals, or Saif al-Daula's suspicious temperament or princely whim—in 346/957 al-Mutanabbī stole away from Aleppo and, after a brief stay in Damascus, betook himself to Egypt, there to sample the recommended patronage of Kāfūr, born a Nubian slave who had risen to supreme power as guardian of the young successor to Muḥammad al-Ikhshīd. For a time all

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went well, and the poet lavished splendid paeans on the lavish negro; but then all went awry, and in 350/960 al-Mutanabbī fled in a flurry of abusive lampoons the hard way through the desert to Baghdad. For three years the capital held him, lecturing and courting the great. He then proceeded further into Būyid territory, first to please the vizier Ibn al-‘Amīd in Arrajān, then to applaud the powerful Sultān ‘Aḍud al-Daula in Shiraz. But this happy encounter proved to be the brief Indian summer of his adventurous life. On his way back to Baghdad, a journey whose motivation remains obscure, he fell among thieves near Dair al-‘Āqul and was slain fighting, together with his son, in Ramaḍān 354 (August 965).

I was once informed by a man I consider trustworthy, that when al-Mutanabbī was killed on the Ahwāz road there were found, in a saddle-bag he had with him, copies of the *Diwāns* of the two Ṭā’ī poets in his own handwriting, and on the margins of the leaves he had marked every verse whose meaning he had taken and put into different words.

Even during his lifetime, al-Mutanabbī had given rise to fierce controversy between his admirers and his critics. The ferocious competition for the favours of patrons was bound to fan the flames of partisanship in a society which prized poetry above all other arts, and in which the rewards for success were very great; al-Mutanabbī moreover added political aspirations to his literary ambitions, and so exposed himself to attacks on two fronts. Further, his origins were very humble, his pride correspondingly extreme; the well-born literati understandably resented the parvenu’s arrogance. It is a measure of his outstanding genius that the quarrel between his supporters and his opponents has continued down to the present day, when non-Arab has joined with Arab in a universal appraisal of his merits and demerits.

The smear cited above comes in the opening pages of a book entitled *al-Ibāna ‘an saraqāt al-Mutanabbī* (“Exposé of al-Mutanabbī’s Plagiarisms”), the author Abū Sa’d Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-‘Amīdī, a high civil servant in Fāṭimid Egypt who composed a number of studies in literary criticism and died in

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433/1042. By the “two Ṭā’ī poets” al-‘Amīdī meant Abū Tam-mām and al-Buḥturī, recognised masters of the panegyric, models upon whom al-Mutanabbī might well shape his own work. Al-‘Amīdī thereafter proceeds with a long catalogue of verses in which he claims that al-Mutanabbī plagiarised his numerous predecessors, whom he names and cites; having previously quoted al-Marzubānī as having drawn on the collections of nearly a thousand poets, and al-Jurjānī as accusing al-Buḥturī “despite his eminence” of having burned the *Diwāns* of five hundred poets of his day “out of envy, lest their verses should become celebrated”. The determined plagiarist thus had ample scope for perpetrating his thefts, and the clever plagiarist might well hope to escape detection. Indeed, the charge of plagiarism sprang readily to the lips of the Arab critic from earliest times, and was preferred freely against even the greatest of the Jāhili poets; so what chance of exemption had the later practitioners? The nature of Arabic poetry itself, with its attachment to approved themes and conventional images—on which I have touched in the introduction to my primer—rendered imitation and repetition inevitable; the theorists were at pains to classify the varieties of plagiarism, and to discuss which kinds were venial and which reprehensible.

Purloining other men’s ideas and, in extreme instances, their very phrases was, however, not the only accusation brought against al-Mutanabbī by his depreciators. One of the earliest and most influential of his critics was al-Ṣāhib Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Abbād, the famous vizier to the Būyids Mu‘aiyad al-Daula and Fakhr al-Daula, himself a distinguished scholar and author, who died in 385/995. Amongst his surviving works is a treatise entitled *al-Kashf ‘an masāwī’ al-Mutanabbī* (“The Unveiling of the Defects of al-Mutanabbī”), the record of a discussion with “one concerned with literature and poetry”.

“He asked me about al-Mutanabbī, and I said: ‘His aim was far-ranging, and his poetry frequently hit the mark in its composition; except that sometimes he produced a brilliant verse coupled with an abominable expression.’” In illustration of this

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charge, which infuriated the other, Ibn ‘Abbād composed the present treatise in which he listed some instances of al-Mutanabbi’s infelicities. The catalogue is headed by a verse which gave rise to much discussion.

بليت بلى الأطلال إن لم أقف بها وقوف شحيح ضاع في التراب خاتمه

“I have become worn away like the traces of an encampment, even though I did not halt by them as a miser halts whose sealing has been lost in the dust.”

“This statement”, comments Ibn ‘Abbād, “is of the vilest sort that occurs to stripling poets and child writers.” He apprehended that the comparison used by the poet was random and inapposite. The point is further emphasised by al-Jurjānī (d. 392/1001) in his judicious *al-Wasāʾa bain al-Mutanabbī wa-khuṣūmih* (“Mediation between al-Mutanabbī and his Adversaries”) with particular reference to Ibn ‘Abbād; a ring, he remarks, is not a thing likely to remain hidden in the dust, or to be difficult to find when searched for, so that if the poet was intending to imply a very prolonged halt, he could hardly have chosen a more unhappy illustration. However, the famous free-thinker and poet Abu ‘l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1057), who had an unbounded admiration for al-Mutanabbi’s poems, on which indeed he wrote a commentary, supplied an ingenious defence even for this unpromising verse. “How long”, he was asked, “does a miser halt over a ring?” “Forty days”, he replied. “From whence did you know that?” “Solomon son of David”, al-Ma‘arrī explained, “halted in search for his ring forty days.” “And what is the source for your knowing that he was avaricious?” “The words of Almighty God:

Give me a kingdom such as may not befall anyone after me.

(Koran xxxviii. 34).

What would it disadvantage him that God should give His servants many times his kingdom?”

The second example cited by Ibn ‘Abbād is criticised on stylistic grounds. (It is verse 2 of poem 9 in the present selection.)

نحن من ضايق الزمان له فيسك وخاتمه قريك الأيام

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“We are the ones time has been miserly towards respecting you, and the days cheated of your presence.”

“A spell against scorpions”, remarks Ibn ‘Abbād, “is closer to the understanding than this line. As for the phrase *له فيك*, if it had occurred in the expressions of al-Junaid and al-Shiblī, the Ṣūfis themselves would have wrestled with it a long while.” When al-Tha‘ālībī (d. 429/1038) in his *Yatīmat al-dabr* (“Pearl of the Age”) came to tabulate al-Mutanabbi’s virtues and faults, he did not fail to include a section on the poet’s “imitation of the idioms of the Ṣūfis” where this verse is quoted along with eight other instances. Yet the commentators found little difficulty in construing the line, and its meaning is by no means obscure.

Ibn ‘Abbād’s third citation is more lengthy, and is intended to prove that al-Mutanabbi was lacking in decent manners. The offending piece is an elegy composed on the death of the mother of Saif al-Daula; the poem is no. 10 in the present selection, the verses singled out for comment being 16, 8, 10, 30 and 36. The word criticised in verse 16 is *مستطير* (“stretched long”), a root connected with camels and lions stretching themselves to race or to spring, also connoting a long-necked bird and a corpulent woman, or a slaughtered beast stretching itself to die—echoes of meanings which seem to justify the critic’s comment. “What do you think of a man who addressed a king bereaved of his mother in such language?” The commentators however in general find no fault with the verse with the exception of Abu’l-Faḍl al-‘Arūḍī, who alleged that the original wording of al-Mutanabbi was the commonplace *مستطيل* (which is in fact recorded as a variant reading), and that Ibn ‘Abbād himself substituted the offensive *مستطير* in order to have another stick with which to beat the poet.

So Ibn ‘Abbād piles up one attack on another, until the reader is left wondering what grounds there are for al-Mutanabbi’s exalted reputation. He turns to al-‘Amīdī’s *al-Ibāna* with its long catalogue of carefully documented accusations of plagiarism, and asks himself in the end whether al-Mutanabbi possessed any

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originality at all. In order to redress the balance, he must read al-Jurjānī's admirably candid and fair-minded monograph, available in the good edition (Cairo, 1364/1945) of Muḥammad Abu 'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm and 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī; following up this with the section on al-Mutanabbī in al-Tha'ālibī, as now edited (Cairo, 1366/1947) by Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. Of the latter account a good summary has been given by R. A. Nicholson in his *Literary History of the Arabs*; of the former work no such convenient description is available, a lack which it is hoped presently to remedy. Meanwhile, commentary succeeded commentary as al-Mutanabbī's fame and popularity continually increased, until he became the most extensively studied and most frequently cited of all Arab poets. The following list illustrates his supreme position amongst the schoolmen of the Muslim Middle Ages:

(1) Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002), famous grammarian, pupil of the Baṣran Abū 'Alī al-Fārisī, high official at the Būyid court, composed two commentaries; see Brockelmann 1 88, Suppl. 1 142. His work was criticised by Ibn Fūrāja (b. 330/941) in two works, *al-Tajannī 'alā Ibn Jinnī* (Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*) and *al-Fatḥ 'alā Abi 'l-Fatḥ*. An abridgement of Ibn Jinnī's commentary was made by al-Barbarī (d. 607/1210).

(2) Abū Ṭālib Sa'd ibn Muḥammad al-Azdī, called al-Waḥīd (d. 385/995).

(3) Abu 'l-Qāsim al-Iqlīlī (al-Ifīlī) (d. 441/1049), see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

(4) Kamāl al-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Muḥammad ibn Ādam al-Harawī (d. 414/1023).

(5) Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Khuwārizmī (d. 425/1034).

(6) Abu 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1057) wrote a commentary entitled *al-Lāmi' al-'Aẓẓī*, dedicated to 'Azīz al-Daula of Aleppo; see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

(7) Ibn Sida (d. 458/1066), author of the lexicon *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ*, commented on the difficult verses only; see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

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(8) Abu 'l-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1075), best known as an exegete of the Koran; his commentary was printed by F. Dieterici (Berlin, 1861); see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

(9) Abu 'l-Ḥasan Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Ḥamdān al-Dulafī al-'Ijlī (d. 460/1068).

(10) Abū 'Abd Allāh Salmān ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥulwānī (d. 494/1101).

(11) Abū Zakariyā' al-Ṭibrizī al-Khaṭīb (d. 502/1108), author of numerous esteemed commentaries, authority on metrics; see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

(12) Ibn al-Qaṭṭā' of Sicily (d. 514/1120), noted grammarian and prosodist; see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

(13) Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyausī (d. 521/1127) of Andalusia, theologian and grammarian.

(14) 'Abd al-Qāhir ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥalabī, called al-Wa'wa' (d. 613/1216).

(15) Abu 'l-Baqā' al-'Ukbarī (d. 616/1219), eminent authority on the Koran and Traditions, frequently printed; see Brockelmann, *loc. cit.*

The foregoing list is by no means exhaustive; the Egyptian scholar 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barqūqī, who published an admirable annotated edition of the *Dīwān* in 1348/1930, counted more than fifty commentaries. Included amongst these is the learned and much appreciated commentary of the famous Lebanese scholar and author Nāṣif al-Yāzījī (1800-71) entitled *al-'Urf al-ṭaiyib* ("The Excellent Perfume"), edited by his son Ibrāhīm (Beirut, 1888) and since republished. As for more recent Arab writings, the millenary celebrations of al-Mutanabbi's death, observed in 1354/1935, gave rise to the publication of numerous books and articles by leading scholars and authors, notably 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām's *Dhikrā Abi 'l-Ṭaiyib* and Ṭaha Ḥusain's *Ma'a 'l-Mutanabbī*. The same occasion was marked by the appearance of a volume of essays by European scholars entitled *Al-Mutanabbī, Recueil publié à l'occasion de son millénaire* (Beirut, 1936), and by R. Blachère's masterly *Un Poète arabe du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire* (Paris, 1935).



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The popularity of Mutanabbī [wrote R. A. Nicholson in his *Literary History of the Arabs*, first published in 1907] is shown by the numerous commentaries and critical treatises on his *Dīwān*. By his countrymen he is generally regarded as one of the greatest of Arabian poets, while not a few would maintain that he ranks absolutely first. Abu 'l-'Alá al-Ma'arrí, himself an illustrious poet and man of letters, confessed that he sometimes wished to alter a word here and there in Mutanabbī's verses, but had never been able to think of any improvement. "As to his poetry," says Ibn Khallikán, "it is perfection." European scholars with the exception of Von Hammer, have been far from sharing this enthusiasm, as may be seen by referring to what has been said on the subject by Reiske, De Sacy, Böhlen, Brockelmann, and others. No doubt, according to our canons of taste, Mutanabbī stands immeasurably below the famous Pre-islamic bards, and in a later age must yield the palm to Abú Nuwás and Abu'l-'Atáhiya. Lovers of poetry, as the term is understood in Europe, cannot derive much aesthetic pleasure from his writings, but, on the contrary, will be disgusted by the beauties hardly less than by the faults which Arabian critics attribute to him.

Nicholson then summarises—"let us try to realise the Oriental point of view and put aside, as far as possible, our preconceptions of what constitutes good poetry and good taste"—the assessment *pro* and *contra* as instituted by al-Tha'ālibī. Before entering upon the general discussion of al-Mutanabbī's place in literature, it will be convenient here to rehearse the points made by al-Jurjānī in his *al-Wasāṭa*, composed a generation earlier than the *Yatīmat al-dahr*, by an undoubtedly superior and more subtle critic.

Abu 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Jurjānī was a man of many talents and received a broad education in the Islamic sciences; he wrote much fine poetry, and was a skilled calligrapher, his hand resembling that of the famous Ibn Muqla. He rose in the administration of the law, until he became Chief Qāḍī of the important city of Raiy (ancient Rhages) in the days of al-Ṣāhib Ibn 'Abbād. His judicial skill comes out well in the pages of *al-Wasāṭa*, in which he succeeded brilliantly in his purpose of holding the scales of justice between al-Mutanabbī's too fervid admirers, and his far too prejudiced critics. In doing so, he laid down principles of literary criticism which have stood

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the test of time, and are still relevant to the evaluation of Arabic poetry.

Al-Jurjānī begins by making the point that perfection is beyond the attainment of any man, it being human to err; extravagant idolisation of al-Mutanabbi is as much an injustice against literature, as extravagant vilification is against the poet himself. No poet, whether Jāhili or Islamic, has been wholly free from fault, and in every *qaṣīda* one finds one or more lines open to criticism, on the grounds either of construction, meaning or syntax. Even Imra' al-Qais nods sometimes, equally with Labīd, Zuhair, al-Farazdaq and the other masters. The poets differ however in their natural gifts and according to their temperaments, some composing in a hard and rugged style (this being typical of the arduous Bedouin), whilst others, especially under the influence of the settled life of the cities, tend towards a softer and simpler manner of speech. The latter school of poets in time came to ape the language of the nomads, introducing the element of artificiality in their diction until it became deliberately obscure, thus destroying much of its natural beauty; al-Jurjānī singles out in this respect the work of Abū Tammām, who further complicated matters by indulging freely in the use of rhetorical figures.

The enjoyment of such poetry is spoiled by the intellectual effort needed to understand its meaning; sometimes it requires the acumen of a Hippocrates or an Aristotle to penetrate Abū Tammām's intention. This is not said to belittle the fame of a great poet, whose superior merits al-Jurjānī yields to none in acknowledging; but truth requires that his faults should be exposed. The critic is not demanding absolute simplicity to the point of weakness; in objecting to over-complication, he is aiming at a middle way, a nice blend of the natural poetic style with the contrived. If Abū Tammām stands for the contrived, al-Buḥturī is the supreme example of the natural poet, and Jarīr is outstanding for sweetness of diction.

Al-Jurjānī proceeds to detail on rhetorical figures. Metaphor has been employed from earliest times; and examples are quoted