

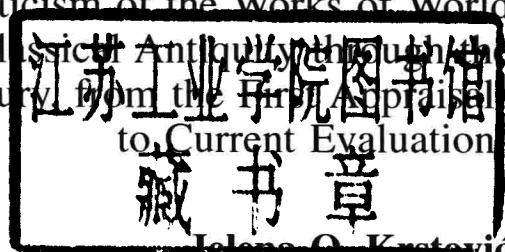
CLASSICAL
AND MEDIEVAL
LITERATURE
CRITICISM



CMLC 66

CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL LITERATURE CRITICISM

Criticism of the Works of World
Authors from Classical Antiquity through the
Fourteenth Century from the First Appraisals
to Current Evaluations



Jelena O. Krstović

Project Editor



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Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism, Vol. 66

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Preface

Since its inception in 1988, *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)* has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on the works and authors of antiquity through the fourteenth century. The great poets, prose writers, dramatists, and philosophers of this period form the basis of most humanities curricula, so that virtually every student will encounter many of these works during the course of a high school and college education. Reviewers have found *CMLC* “useful” and “extremely convenient,” noting that it “adds to our understanding of the rich legacy left by the ancient period and the Middle Ages,” and praising its “general excellence in the presentation of an inherently interesting subject.” No other single reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to classical and medieval literature as thoroughly as *CMLC*.

Scope of the Series

CMLC provides an introduction to classical and medieval authors, works, and topics that represent a variety of genres, time periods, and nationalities. By organizing and reprinting an enormous amount of critical commentary written on authors and works of this period in world history, *CMLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments.

Each entry in *CMLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author’s career, an individual work of literature, or a literary topic, and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions. Early commentary is offered to indicate initial responses, later selections document changes in literary reputations, and retrospective analyses provide the reader with modern views. The size of each author entry is a relative reflection of the scope of the criticism available in English.

An author may appear more than once in the series if his or her writings have been the subject of a substantial amount of criticism; in these instances, specific works or groups of works by the author will be covered in separate entries. For example, Homer will be represented by three entries, one devoted to the *Iliad*, one to the *Odyssey*, and one to the Homeric Hymns.

CMLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Organization of the Book

A *CMLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Bourne, Ella. "Classical Elements in *The Gesta Romanorum*." In *Vassar Medieval Studies* edited by Christabel Forsyth Fiske, 345-76. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923. Reprinted in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*. Vol. 55, edited by Lynn M. Zott, 81-92. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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al-Mutanabbi

915-965

(Full name Ahmad ibn al-Husayn Abu al-Tayyib al-Jufi al-Kindi al-Mutanabbi) Syrian poet.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most acclaimed of the classical Arab poets, al-Mutanabbi is the author of the tenth-century *Diwan*, a collection of poems featuring numerous skillfully crafted panegyrics or praiseful verses, written for the poet's patrons to extol their generosity and celebrate their bravery in battle. His mastery of the genre helped to advance Arab poetry from its classic *qasida* form.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Al-Mutanabbi was born in Kufu in 915; his father, although of noble ancestry, was a water-bearer. Al-Mutanabbi was well-educated, studied for a time in Damascus, and from a young age offered himself as a panegyrist to various men of modest rank. He completed his education in the desert, practicing his craft with the Bedouin. His consummate skill at writing verse enabled him to pass himself off as divinely inspired; his popular name, al-Mutanabbi, means "he who passes himself off as a prophet." With numerous Bedouins joining him, he led a failed uprising in al-Samāwa, Syria, for which he was imprisoned in 933. From 948 to 957, al-Mutanabbi served as poet in the court of the Arab prince Saif al-Daula of Aleppo but ultimately, after falling victim to court intrigue, fled to Egypt. There, he wrote numerous panegyrics for the ruler, Kāfūr. When his hoped-for reward of a government position was denied him, al-Mutanabbi left Egypt in 962 and wreaked revenge on Kāfūr by making him the object of biting satire. Further searches for patrons led al-Mutanabbi to Iraq and Iran. Returning to Iraq in 965, he and his party were accosted by thieves. According to legend, al-Mutanabbi's first impulse was to escape, but then he was reminded of some of his verses glorifying bravery in warfare, turned back to fight against his attackers, and was killed.

MAJOR WORKS

Al-Mutanabbi's fame rests on one work, the *Diwan*. It is divided into five sections: the first part consists of poems written in Syria; the second part contains 161

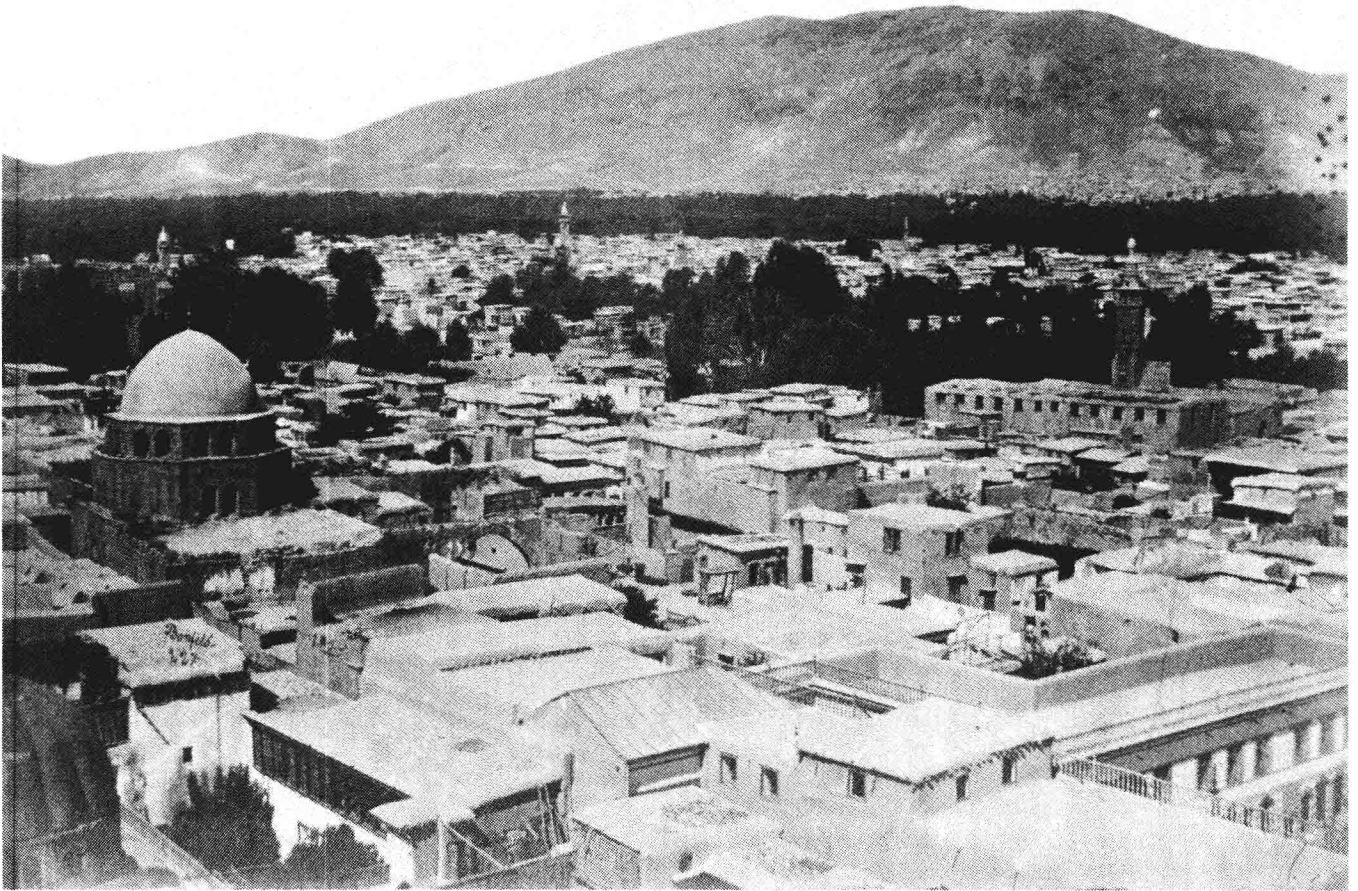
poems, most dedicated to Saif al-Daula; the third part contains numerous poems written for a variety of occasions; the fourth part consists of five poems written for Ibn al 'Amid; and the fifth and final part consists of seven poems for the Prince of Southern Persia, 'Adud al-Daula. In all, the *Diwan* encompasses 287 individual poems, ranging in length from a couple of lines to sixty stanzas.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Al-Mutanabbi has received much praise in past centuries for the careful structure of his poems' opening lines, transitions between sections, and endings. A. J. Arberry notes that al-Mutanabbi's detractors, however, charge him with plagiarism, ill manners, and inadequate stylistic skill. Arberry regards the controversy about al-Mutanabbi's merit as a poet, which continues to the present day, to be "perhaps the surest proof of his universal greatness." Andras Hamori further examines the arguments of both admirers and detractors of al-Mutanabbi. Hamori, beyond noting that al-Mutanabbi's aphorisms are quotable and forceful, adds: "His images can be astonishingly bold and, within a mannerist system of perception, beautifully precise." Elsewhere, Hamori examines the question of how al-Mutanabbi's contemporary audience would have read and reacted to his poems. Hamori cites critical evidence that "the medieval reader could indeed see past the single line and notice larger aspects of composition." J. Derek Latham offers critical analysis of one of al-Mutanabbi's most famous poems, written on the battle of al-Hadath, in which he finds a logically developed poetic scheme that results in a "coherent and harmonious whole." Arthur Wormhoudt provides a close reading of several poems from the *Diwan*, discussing their background, meaning, and stylistic traits. While Arberry deems that "the odes which [al-Mutanabbi] composed in praise of Saif al-Daula rank amongst the greatest masterpieces of Arabic literature," critics unanimously agree that it is difficult if not impossible for readers not raised in an Arab culture to fully appreciate his work.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Diwan (poetry) 10th century



A bird's-eye view of Damascus, Syria.

Principal English Translation

Poems of al-Mutanabbī [translated by A. J. Arberry]
(poetry) 1967

CRITICISM

Reynold A. Nicholson (essay date 1907)

SOURCE: Nicholson, Reynold A. "Poetry, Literature, and Science in the 'Abbásid Period." In *A Literary History of the Arabs*, pp. 285-364. London: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

[In the following excerpt from a work originally published in 1907, Nicholson examines al-Mutanabbī's critical reputation, particularly objections made to his work by his near-contemporary, Tha'ālibī.]

Sayfu 'l-Dawla's cousin, Abú Firás al-Ḥamdání, was a gallant soldier and a poet of some mark, who if space permitted would receive fuller notice here.¹ He, however, though superior to the common herd of court poets, is overshadowed by one who with all his faults—and they are not inconsiderable—made an extraordinary impression upon his contemporaries, and by the commanding influence of his reputation decided what should henceforth be the standard of poetical taste in the Muḥammadan world.

Abu 'l-Ṭayyib Aḥmad b. Ḥusayn, known to fame as al-Mutanabbī, was born and bred at Kúfa, where his father is said to have been a water-carrier. Following the admirable custom by which young men of promise were sent abroad to complete their education, he studied at Damascus and visited other towns in Syria, but also passed much of his time among the Bedouins, to whom he owed the singular knowledge and mastery of Arabic displayed in his poems. Here he came forward as a prophet (from which circumstance he was afterwards

entitled al-Mutanabbí, i.e., 'the pretender to prophecy'), and induced a great multitude to believe in him; but ere long he was captured by Lu'lu', the governor of Ḥimṣ (Emessa), and thrown into prison. After his release he wandered to and fro chanting the praises of all and sundry, until fortune guided him to the court of Sayfu 'l-Dawla at Aleppo. For nine years (948-957 A.D.) he stood high in the favour of that cultured prince, whose virtues he celebrated in a series of splendid eulogies, and with whom he lived as an intimate friend and comrade in arms. The liberality of Sayfu 'l-Dawla and the ingenious impudence of the poet are well brought out by the following anecdote:—

Mutanabbí on one occasion handed to his patron the copy of an ode which he had recently composed in his honour, and retired, leaving Sayfu 'l-Dawla to peruse it at leisure. The prince began to read, and came to these lines—

*Aqil anil aqti'ihmil 'alli salli a'id
zid hashshi bashshi tafaddal adni surra šili.²*

*Pardon, bestow, endow, mount, raise, console, restore
Add, laugh, rejoice, bring nigh, show favour, gladden, give!*

Far from being displeased by the poet's arrogance, Sayfu 'l-Dawla was so charmed with his artful collocation of fourteen imperatives in a single verse that he granted every request. Under *pardon* he wrote 'we pardon thee'; under *bestow*, 'let him receive such and such a sum of money'; under *endow*, 'we endow thee with an estate,' which he named (it was beside the gate of Aleppo); under *mount*, 'let such and such a horse be led to him'; under *raise*, 'we do so'; under *console*, 'we do so, be at ease'; under *restore*, 'we restore thee to thy former place in our esteem'; under *add*, 'let him have such and such in addition'; under *bring nigh*, 'we admit thee to our intimacy'; under *show favour*, 'we have done so'; under *gladden*, 'we have made thee glad'; under *give*, 'this we have already done.' Mutanabbí's rivals envied his good fortune, and one of them said to Sayfu 'l-Dawla—"Sire, you have done all that he asked, but when he uttered the words *laugh, rejoice*, why did not you answer, 'Ha, ha, ha'?" Sayfu 'l-Dawla laughed, and said, "You too, shall have your wish," and ordered him a donation.

Mutanabbí was sincerely attached to his generous master, and this feeling inspired a purer and loftier strain than we find in the fulsome panegyrics which he afterwards addressed to the negro Káfúr. He seems to have been occasionally in disgrace, but Sayfu 'l-Dawla could deny nothing to a poet who paid him such magnificent compliments. Nor was he deterred by any false modesty from praising himself: he was fully conscious of his power and, like Arabian bards in general, he bragged about it. Although the verbal legerdemain which is so conspicuous in his poetry cannot be reproduced in another language, the lines

translated below may be taken as a favourable and sufficiently characteristic specimen of his style.

How glows mine heart for him whose heart to me is cold,
Who liketh ill my case and me in fault doth hold!
Why should I hide a love that hath worn thin my frame?
To Sayfu 'l-Dawla all the world avows the same.
Tho' love of his high star unites us, would that we
According to our love might so divide the fee!
Him have I visited when sword in sheath was laid,
And I have seen him when in blood swam every blade:
Him, both in peace and war the best of all mankind,
Whose crown of excellence was still his noble mind.

Do foes by flight escape thine onset, thou dost gain
A chequered victory, half of pleasure, half of pain.
So puissant is the fear thou strik'st them with, it stands
Instead of thee, and works more than thy warriors' hands.
Unfought the field is thine: thou need'st not further strain
To chase them from their holes in mountain or in plain.
What! 'fore thy fierce attack when'er an army reels,
Must thy ambitious soul press hot upon their heels?
Thy task it is to rout them on the battle-ground:
No shame to thee if they in flight have safety found.
Or thinkest thou perchance that victory is sweet
Only when scimitars and necks each other greet?

O justest of the just save in thy deeds to me!
Thou art accused and thou, O Sire, must judge the plea.
Look, I implore thee, well! Let not thine eye cajoled
See fat in empty froth, in all that glisters gold!⁴
What use and profit reaps a mortal of his sight,
If darkness unto him be indistinct from light?

My deep poetic art the blind have eyes to see,
My verses ring in ears as deaf as deaf can be.
They wander far abroad while I am unaware,
But men collect them watchfully with toil and care.
Oft hath my laughing mien prolonged the insulter's sport,
Until with claw and mouth I cut his rudeness short.
Ah, when the lion bares his teeth, suspect his guile,
Nor fancy that the lion shows to you a smile.
I have slain the man that sought my heart's blood many a time,
Riding a noble mare whose back none else may climb,
Whose hind and fore-legs seem in galloping as one;
Nor hand nor foot requireth she to urge her on.
And O the days when I have swung my fine-edged glaive
Amidst a sea of death where wave was dashed on wave!
The desert knows me well, the night, the mounted men,
The battle and the sword, the paper and the pen!⁵

Finally an estrangement arose between Mutanabbí and Sayfu 'l-Dawla, in consequence of which he fled to Egypt and attached himself to the Ikshídite Káfúr.

Disappointed in his new patron, a negro who had formerly been a slave, the poet set off for Baghdád, and afterwards visited the court of the Buwayhid 'Aḍudū 'l-Dawla at Shíráz. While travelling through Babylonia he was attacked and slain by brigands in 965 A.D.

The popularity of Mutanabbí is shown by the numerous commentaries⁶ and critical treatises on his *Díwán*. 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 had sometimes wished to alter a word here and there in Mutanabbí'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,⁷ have been far from sharing this enthusiasm, as may be seen by referring to what has been said on the subject by Reiske,⁸ De Sacy,⁹ Bohlen,¹⁰ Brockelmann,¹¹ and others. No doubt, according to our canons of taste, Mutanabbí 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 æsthetic 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. Admitting, however, that only a born Oriental is able to appreciate Mutanabbí at his full worth, 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. Fortunately we possess abundant materials for such an attempt in the invaluable work of Tha'álibí, which has been already mentioned.¹² Tha'álibí (961-1038 A.D.) was nearly contemporary with Mutanabbí. He began to write his *Yatíma* about thirty years after the poet's death, and while he bears witness to the unrivalled popularity of the *Díwán* amongst all classes of society, he observes that it was sharply criticised as well as rapturously admired. Tha'álibí himself claims to hold the balance even. "Now," he says, "I will mention the faults and blemishes which critics have found in the poetry of Mutanabbí; for is there any one whose qualities give entire satisfaction?—

Kafa 'l-mar'a faql^{am} an tu'adda ma'áyibuh.

'Tis the height of merit in a man that his faults can be numbered.

Then I will proceed to speak of his beauties and to set forth in due order the original and incomparable characteristics of his style.

The radiant stars with beauty strike our eyes
Because midst gloom opaque we see them rise.

It was deemed of capital importance that the opening couplet (*maṭla'*) of a poem should be perfect in form

and meaning, and that it should not contain anything likely to offend. Tha'álibí brings forward many instances in which Mutanabbí has violated this rule by using words of bad omen, such as 'sickness' or 'death,' or technical terms of music and arithmetic which only perplex and irritate the hearer instead of winning his sympathy at the outset. He complains also that Mutanabbí's finest thoughts and images are too often followed by low and trivial ones: "he strings pearls and bricks together" (*jama'a bayna 'l-durrati wa-'l-ájurrati*). "While he moulds the most splendid ornament, and threads the loveliest necklace, and weaves the most exquisite stuff of mingled hues, and paces superbly in a garden of roses, suddenly he will throw in a verse or two verses disfigured by far-fetched metaphors, or by obscure language and confused thought, or by extravagant affectation and excessive profundity, or by unbounded and absurd exaggeration, or by vulgar and commonplace diction, or by pedantry and grotesqueness resulting from the use of unfamiliar words." We need not follow Tha'álibí in his illustration of these and other weaknesses with which he justly reproaches Mutanabbí, since we shall be able to form a better idea of the prevailing taste from those points which he singles out for special praise.

In the first place he calls attention to the poet's skill in handling the customary erotic prelude (*nasib*), and particularly to his brilliant descriptions of Bedouin women, which were celebrated all over the East. As an example of this kind he quotes the following piece, which "is chanted in the *salons* on account of the extreme beauty of its diction, the choiceness of its sentiment, and the perfection of its art":—

Shame hitherto was wont my tears to stay,
But now by shame they will no more be stayed,
So that each bone seems through its skin to sob,
And every vein to swell the sad cascade.
She uncovered: pallor veiled her at farewell:
No veil 'twas, yet her cheeks it cast in shade.
So seemed they, while tears trickled over them,
Gold with a double row of pearls inlaid.
She loosed three sable tresses of her hair,
And thus of night four nights at once she made;
But when she lifted to the moon in heaven
Her face, two moons together I surveyed.¹³

The critic then enumerates various beautiful and original features of Mutanabbí's style, e.g.

1. His consecutive arrangement of similes in brief symmetrical clauses, thus:—

She shone forth like a moon, and swayed like a morning-bough,
And shed fragrance like ambergris, and gazed like a gazelle.

2. The novelty of his comparisons and images, as when he indicates the rapidity with which he returned to his patron and the shortness of his absence in these lines:—

I was merely an arrow in the air,
Which falls back, finding no refuge there.

3. The *laus duplex* or 'two-sided panegyric' (*al-madh al-muwajjah*), which may be compared to a garment having two surfaces of different colours but of equal beauty, as in the following verse addressed to Sayfu 'l-Dawla:—

Were all the lives thou hast ta'en possessed by thee,
Immortal thou and blest the world would be!

Here Sayfu 'l-Dawla is doubly eulogised by the mention of his triumphs over his enemies as well as of the joy which all his friends felt in the continuance of his life and fortune.

4. His manner of extolling his royal patron as though he were speaking to a friend and comrade, whereby he raises himself from the position of an ordinary encomiast to the same level with kings.

5. His division of ideas into parallel sentences:—

We were in gladness, the Greeks in fear,
The land in bustle, the sea in confusion.

From this summary of Tha'álíbí's criticism the reader will easily perceive that the chief merits of poetry were then considered to lie in elegant expression, subtle combination of words, fanciful imagery, witty conceits, and a striking use of rhetorical figures. Such, indeed, are the views which prevail to this day throughout the whole Muḥammadan world, and it is unreasonable to denounce them as false simply because they do not square with ours. Who shall decide when nations disagree? If Englishmen rightly claim to be the best judges of Shakespeare, and Italians of Dante, the almost unanimous verdict of Mutanabbí's countrymen is surely not less authoritative—a verdict which places him at the head of all the poets born or made in Islam. And although the peculiar excellences indicated by Tha'álíbí do not appeal to us, there are few poets that leave so distinct an impression of greatness. One might call Mutanabbí the Victor Hugo of the East, for he has the grand style whether he soars to sublimity or sinks to fustian. In the masculine vigour of his verse, in the sweep and splendour of his rhetoric, in the luxuriance and reckless audacity of his imagination we recognise qualities which inspired the oft-quoted lines of the elgist:—

Him did his mighty soul supply
With regal pomp and majesty.

A Prophet by his *diction* known;
But in the *ideas*, all must own,
His miracles were clearly shown.¹⁴

One feature of Mutanabbí's poetry that is praised by Tha'álíbí should not be left unnoticed, namely, his fondness for sententious moralising on topics connected with human life; wherefore Reiske has compared him to Euripides. He is allowed to be a master of that proverbial philosophy in which Orientals delight and which is characteristic of the modern school beginning with Abu 'l-'Atáhiya, though some of the ancients had already cultivated it with success (*cf.* the verses of Zuhayr, p. 118 *supra*). The following examples are among those cited by Bohlen (*op. cit.*, p. 86 sqq.):—

When an old man cries 'Ugh!' he is not tired
Of life, but only tired of feebleness.¹⁵

He that hath been familiar with the world
A long while, in his eye 'tis turned about
Until he sees how false what looked so fair.¹⁶

The sage's mind still makes him miserable
In his most happy fortune, but poor fools
Find happiness even in their misery.¹⁷

Notes

1. See Von Kremer's *Culturgeschichte*, vol. ii, p. 381 sqq.; Ahlwardt, *Poesie und Poetik der Araber*, p. 37 sqq.; R. Dvorak, *Abú Firás, ein arabischer Dichter und Held* (Leyden, 1895).
2. Mutanabbí, ed. by Dieterici, p. 493. Wáhidí gives the whole story in his commentary on this verse.
3. Mutanabbí, it is said, explained to Sayfu 'l-Dawla that by *surra* (gladden) he meant *surriyya*; whereupon the good-humoured prince presented him with a slave-girl.
4. Literally, "Do not imagine fat in one whose (apparent) fat is (really) a tumour."
5. *Díwán*, ed. by Dieterici, pp. 481-484.
6. The most esteemed commentary is that of Wáhidí († 1075 A.D.), which has been published by Fr. Dieterici in his edition of Mutanabbí (Berlin, 1858-1861).
7. *Motenebbi, der grösste arabische Dichter* (Vienna, 1824).
8. *Abulfedæ Annales Muslemici* (Hafniæ, 1789, &c.), vol. ii, p. 774. *Cf.* his notes on Ṭarafa's *Mu'al-laqa*, of which he published an edition in 1742.
9. *Chrestomathie Arabe* (2nd edition), vol. iii, p. 27 sqq. *Journal des Savans*, January, 1825, p. 24 sqq.
10. *Commentatio de Motenabbio* (Bonn, 1824).

11. *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (Weimar, 1898, &c.), vol. i, p. 86.
12. I have made free use of Dieterici's excellent work entitled *Mutanabbi und Seifuddaula aus der Edelperle des Tsaâlibi* (Leipzig, 1847), which contains on pp. 49-74 an abstract of Tha'âlibî's criticism in the fifth chapter of the First Part of the *Yatîma*.
13. Mutanabbî, ed. by Dieterici, p. 182, vv. 3-9, omitting v. 5.
14. The author of these lines, which are quoted by Ibn Khallikân in his article on Mutanabbî, is Abu 'l-Qâsim b. al-Muẓaffar b. 'Alî al-Ṭabasî.
15. Mutanabbî, ed. by Dieterici, p. 581, v. 27.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 472, v. 5.
17. Mutanabbî, ed. by Dieterici, p. 341, v. 8.

A. J. Arberry (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: Arberry, A. J. Introduction to *Poems of Al-Mutanabbi*, edited by A. J. Arberry, pp. 1-15. London: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

[In the following essay, Arberry surveys al-Mutanabbi's literary merits and shortcomings and offers an explanation for his popularity despite his many flaws as a poet.]

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-Mutanabbî 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 Yamanî tribe, the Banū Ju'fî; hence the son bore the place-name al-Kindî and the clan-name al-Ju'fî, 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 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-Mutanabbî, the man who set himself up as a prophet.

Al-Mutanabbî'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-Buḥturî (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 Ḥamdānid 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-Ikhshîd 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-Mutanabbî 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-Mutanabbî 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-Ikhshîd.

For a time all 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 court-riding 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 433/1042. By the “two Ṭā’ī poets” al-‘Amīdī meant Abū Tammām 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 Jāhilī 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’ayyad 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 charge, which infuriated the other, Ibn ‘Abbād composed the present treatise in which he listed some instances of al-Mutanabbī’s infelicities. The catalogue is headed by a verse which gave rise to much discussion.

“I have become worn away like the traces of an encampment, even though I did not halt by them as a miser halts whose seal-ring 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-Wasāṭa 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-Mutanabbī’s poems, on which indeed he wrote a commentary, supplied an ingenious defence even for this unpromising verse. “How long”, he was