

favor of *mukhālaḥa*, can be used to generate new knowledge only if we have much more, more detailed, and more reliable surrounding information, and if it is properly applied. For real advances to succeed and win acceptance, the methodology itself and the way in which it is applied need more solidity.

The short subject index—really a general index—is incomplete: it lacks, e.g., Rabīʿa and Ḥamīs (p. 38). Muqātil is absent from the bibliography.

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Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī, *The Life and Times of Abū Tammām*. Edited and translated by BEATRICE GRUENDLER. Library of Arabic Literature. New York: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. Pp. xxx + 421. \$40.

Beatrice Gruendler opens her introduction to the volume under review with a quotation from Virginia Woolf's diary. Recalling Katherine Mansfield's reaction to Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf wrote that, regardless of how subjective they may be, such reactions "should figure [. . .] in the history of literature" (p. xiii). And what constitutes the history of literature more than the reaction it elicits from its readers, writers, and critics, from both contemporaries and those who continue to discover it across time? Abū Tammām, the Abbasid poet and anthologist, and probably one of the most controversial poets of his era, provoked extreme reactions from his readers and critics. His contribution as a poet and rewriter of his poetic tradition was a counterpoint in the life of Arabic poetry. Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī's (d. 335/947) *Akhhbār Abī Tammām*, published now as *The Life and Times of Abū Tammām*, is a book as much about the impact of Abū Tammām's poetry on contemporaries as it is about the ongoing intervention of his project in the life of Arabic poetry to this day.

This edition and translation is another welcome addition to the Library of Arabic Literature, a series funded by a grant from the New York University Abu Dhabi and published by NYU Press. The volumes published thus far range in topic from religion, science, poetry, history, and historiography, and some have already received considerable recognition and celebration. In the field of Arabic poetry and poetics in general, and classical Arabic poetry and criticism in particular, I expect the impact of this project to be groundbreaking. The study of Arabic poetry, both modern and classical, has the potential of being significantly affected by the introduction of voices like al-Ṣūlī's, especially when presented in fresh and timely translations as is the case here.

The editor and translator, Beatrice Gruendler, has succeeded in communicating the urgency of al-Ṣūlī's work; its ninth-century Abbasid context has been smoothly transposed to readers in the twenty-first century. The discourse on modernizing trends in the Arabic poetic tradition, and their relationship to and their effect on that tradition, will benefit from this publication, as will scholars of modern Arabic poetic forms, such as the free verse poem and the prose poem. Not only has a relatively understudied poet been introduced widely, but the volume illuminates a foundational moment in Arabic criticism in the aftermath of the clash between the modernist (*muḥdath*) poet, Abū Tammām, and a critical tradition struggling to make sense of him.

Abū Tammām gave rise to a whole critical culture and set the ground for new poetic sensibility. Most controversial of all was his ability to channel the Arabic poetic tradition in such a way that he made it seem unrecognizable and even threatening to some of his contemporaries: his poetry "echoed the tradition but gave it a new feel, so much so that it shocked" (p. xv). Views on Abū Tammām diverge starkly and al-Ṣūlī's *Akhhbār* is probably the most passionate defense we have of him. Written in the last two decades of al-Ṣūlī's life, this account allows its readers a window into the "heart of the classical Arabic literary and court culture" (p. xix), for it is probably the closest we have to the heated debates around Abū Tammām and his fellow modernizers. The work is a compilation of snapshots, each capturing "one situation from one specific angle and together with the others creat[ing] a kaleidoscope" (p. xviii). The final product is a biography, a critical treatise, a passionate endorsement, and a trailblazing poetic statement, all at the same time. Al-Ṣūlī was a companion of caliphs, as well as a compiler

and critic, and he took it upon himself to defend Abū Tammām and argue for different critical practices, those able to keep up with his poetry as opposed to weighing it down. He accused the detractors of the Abbasid *muḥdath* poets of insolence and vanity (p. 5) and of superficial knowledge (p. 10). Like every modernizing movement that provokes its tradition and propels it forward, the Abbasid modernists were bound to be misunderstood, al-Ṣūlī argued. He made a strong argument against normative criticism; the poets who reinvented their traditions and reset poetic and critical standards required a new critical sensibility. “Since poets who live later sail in the wake of their predecessors [. . .] it is rare for them to take a motif and not do it well” (p. 19). He lamented the “partisanship and prevailing ignorance” (p. 33) of critics and wished that Abū Tammām had been put to the test by experts in poetry or people who properly understood it (p. 41).

Al-Ṣūlī’s opus is preceded by an introductory letter that he addressed to al-Muzāhīm ibn Fātik, a little-known patron. This epistle probably exceeds in importance the account of Abū Tammām’s life and poetry that follows. Here al-Ṣūlī presented his reasons for writing the book and portrayed himself as Abū Tammām’s staunchest defender. One of the most significant positions expressed in this letter is al-Ṣūlī’s challenge of the authority of the ancients and their poetry. Critics could easily claim knowledge of the ancients, he wrote, due to a long tradition of commentaries, recensions, and criticism that not only made this corpus more accessible and familiar but upheld it as exemplary, while the poetry of the moderns required effort and was more taxing—rejecting it was the easier thing to do (p. 15). Abū Tammām’s poetry truly exposed the inadequacies of the critics.

Al-Ṣūlī’s *Akhbār* presents accounts of Abū Tammām’s life under a number of subheadings, beginning with “The Superiority of Abū Tammām” (pp. 65–158), by far the longest. Here he zealously quotes favorable opinions of him from other poets and critics (p. 69), including ‘Alī ibn al-Jahm (pp. 69–71) and al-Buḥturī, who is considered by later critics as his rival (e.g., al-Āmidī, in *al-Muwāzana*). Al-Buḥturī acknowledges Abū Tammām’s role as a model and inspiration: “He is the leader and master. He is the sole reason I can earn my daily bread” (p. 75); “I have not uttered a single verse without having his poetry in my mind” (p. 79). In this section, al-Ṣūlī also addresses Abū Tammām’s ability to “seek out motifs and lift them” from other poets, contemporaries and ancients, making them entirely his own and becoming more deserving of them than the others (pp. 71–73). Al-Ṣūlī praises Abū Tammām for taking risks, and excelling when he got it right (p. 77). He also provides several accounts of Abū Tammām’s wit, attesting to his ability to respond and dumbfound his critics and detractors, including the oft-quoted incident in which Abū Tammām responds to the question, “Why don’t you compose poetry that can be understood?” with “And you, why can’t you understand the poetry that is composed?” reducing the questioner to silence (p. 81).

The sections that follow trace Abū Tammām’s relationships with various patrons, including Aḥmad ibn Abī Du’ād (pp. 158–78), al-Ḥasan ibn Rajā’ (pp. 188–209), and Abū Sa’īd al-Thaghri (pp. 238–56). A short section titled “Criticisms of Abū Tammām,” in which al-Ṣūlī notes negative opinions about the poet without commenting on them, makes the disagreements with Abū Tammām appear trivial and unfounded, especially when contrasted with the earlier long and detailed case for his superiority. This is followed by a section on Abū Tammām as a source upon whose authority a collection of accounts has been related (pp. 287–99), a sketch of the poet, with accounts of his appearance, manners, and lineage (pp. 300–17), a section on Abū Tammām’s death (pp. 318–19), and, finally, an account of verses written to lament him (pp. 320–28).

Although Abū Tammām has been the focus of studies, most notably Suzanne Stetkevych’s *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the Abbasid Age* (Brill, 1989), Gruendler notes that he remains an understudied poet in English, with a reputation for being difficult (p. xiii). What better way to remedy that than through al-Ṣūlī’s *Akhbār Abī Tammām*? For the first time in English translation we have one of the most impassioned cases for Abū Tammām by a critic who claims objectivity but does not feign neutrality—“Abū Tammām [. . .] pushed his talent to the limit and forced himself to be innovative in most of his poetry. I swear, he did so and did so well!” (p. 41), he extols, only later to quote another’s opinion: “By God he is perfect!” (p. 69).