

*Al-Jāhīz: In Praise of Books*. By JAMES E. MONTGOMERY. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Arabic Literature, vol. 2. Edinburgh: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. Pp. vi + 586. \$160, £95.

“The book, what a treasure and helpful means it is! What a great companion and support! What a pleasant object of leisure and recreation. [. . .] The book is a receptacle filled with knowledge, a container crammed with good sense, and a vessel full of lightheartedness and earnestness. [. . .] Where will you find a companion like a book?” (my translation of al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, ed. ‘A. M. Ibn Hārūn, 7 vols. [Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938–1958], 1: 38–39). These sentiments in praise of the written word are part of the introductory section of the monumental Arabic anthology *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*. This encyclopedic work, seven volumes in print, was composed in the ninth century by ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāhīz, one of the most prolific classical Muslim writers and author of numerous works of belles-lettres, rationalist theology, and politico-religious polemics. Al-Jāhīz, the “father of Arabic prose,” as he is sometimes called, lived in Basra and Baghdad during the first century of the Abbasid dynasty, an era of remarkable cultural and intellectual brilliance that transformed medieval Arabo-Islamic civilization into a learning society with the written word as the basis of knowledge.

James Montgomery’s set of two monographs, *In Praise of Books* and *In Censure of Books*, is dedicated to a close examination of al-Jāhīz’s intellectual and textual world. The first volume, the focus of this review, is also the first full-fledged analysis of al-Jāhīz’s masterpiece, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*. In his erudite study, Montgomery acquaints the reader with major questions such as how al-Jāhīz “viewed, represented, encouraged and discouraged his society’s responses to the paper book,” while thereby “touching all aspects of intellectual life—from interpreting the Quran to reading Aristotle in Arabic” (p. 3).

In the West, al-Jāhīz’s *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* has thus far been known chiefly as “The Book of Animals,” a viable and literal translation of the Arabic title. Montgomery, however, has wisely opted to render the title as “The Book of Living.” His main argument for this is that the principal subject of this capacious work is in fact “God’s creation and the place of man in that creation” (p. 60). This conceptual background is manifest in the thematic spectrum and overall structure of this magnum opus, which enjoins us to recognize that God’s creation is as beautiful as it is diverse, and that humankind is highly privileged to live in this wondrous world. To this extent, the significance of the work is encountered not solely in the text. Rather, if we apply the ideas of the literary theorist John Farrell (*The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory beyond the Intentional Fallacy* [Cham: Macmillan, 2017], esp. chap. 5, “Authorship and Literary Value”), its special literary value seems to stem from the surprising nature of what he would term its performance.

Curiously, however, al-Jāhīz presents a summary catalogue of this extensive work only in its penultimate volume (Montgomery provides a translation on pp. 65–68), in which he instructs the reader on the multitude of topics and the organization of his magnum opus, which is worth outlining in brief here: Volumes one and two begin with contemplations on the universality and usefulness of scripts, finger counting, human gestures, expression of tongue and pen, and the benefits and prevalence of verbal expression. Volume three studies a selection of animals, including pigeons, flies, crows, and beetles. Here, too, the author formulates certain key ideas of his work, calling on the reader to discern, from his discussions of these animals, “what mighty skills God the Exalted has invested them with, the uncustomary kinds of knowledge which God the Exalted has given them as their innate intelligence, what abundant benefits and immense tribulations He brings about by means of them, and such malady and remedy as He has placed in them.” Al-Jāhīz thus invites us to realize that “the value of living things is not determined by whether we think them pleasing or by consideration of monetary worths.” Volume four continues with descriptions of more animals, including ants, monkeys, pigs, snakes, and ostriches. It also discusses fire, “even if fire is not a living thing.” Volume five offers “the rest of the speech on fire,” along with statements on other animals ranging from rats to lice, and from sheep to sand-grouse. Finally, volumes six and seven deal with various winged insects and flightless crawlers, but also with gazelles and camels, wolves and lions, leopards, tigers, and the like. These volumes also include chapters on, for example, the superiority of man to all other living things; the superiority of all animals to plant life, and of the latter to everything that is inanimate; the distinction between male and female, and

between man and woman in particular; and the superiority of the angels to man, and of man to the jinn (although the last two chapters are, sadly, lost to posterity). These themes in al-Jāhiz's unique medieval compilation are evocative, allowing Montgomery to view *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* as a series of presentations on numerous different subjects, in which the contents of the individual sections and chapters are "not discrete or hermetically sealed, [but] interlocking and interwoven" (p. 68).

Also well worth highlighting in Montgomery's analysis is his intriguing premise that the objective and outline of *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* are more deeply rooted in the textual environment and the politico-religious context of al-Jāhiz's time than has been previously thought. The historical background to this idea is that, while Abbasid society was characterized by a tremendous economic and cultural upswing, numerous rulers—most prominently the caliph al-Wāthiq bi-llāh (He who trusts in God, r. 842–847)—were certain that the end times were fast approaching. Furthermore, al-Wāthiq's successor, al-Mutawakkil 'alā llāh (He who relies on God, r. 847–861), is known for having banned debate on the Quran, making it a dangerous pursuit to openly apply the dialectical method to ascertain truths. The Mu'tazili theologian al-Jāhiz, by contrast, believed that the rationalist search for truth is essential for the religious well-being of Muslim society. Hence, in response to the imminent eschatological danger, al-Jāhiz apparently saw in his "comprehensive inventory" of God's creation (p. 55)—his opus—a way of fulfilling his duty as a scholar and a member of the Muslim community. In other words, al-Jāhiz appears to have felt morally obligated to respond to the energy set free by the apocalyptic anxieties; and he did so by writing a book that expresses gratitude to God for his creation and promotes a salvific understanding of it. Seen against this politico-religious background, the idea of *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* apparently emerged and was implemented due to the desire of one of the most brilliant classical Arabic writers "to speak for and on behalf of his society" (p. 176). The illumination of these aspects, so central to al-Jāhiz's life and work, in a comprehensive analytical study, is certainly one of the most intriguing features of Montgomery's new book.

Montgomery's volume takes to a new level the research of the French Arabist Charles Pellat (d. 1992), whose groundbreaking publications on al-Jāhiz and his world of thought paved the way for several later researchers who are likewise fascinated by him, including Lale Behzadi, Abdallah Cheikh-Moussa, Thomas Hefter, and Jeannie Miller, to mention only the authors of some relatively recent studies.

Two further aspects of *In Praise of Books* are worth noting. One relates to its excellent layout, as seen in its six chapter titles: Physiognomy of an Apocalyptic Age; The Book of Living; The Jāhizian Library under Attack; The Salvific Book; The Architecture of Design; and Appreciating Design. The main text of this volume is rounded out by an insightful introduction to al-Jāhiz's life and work, and a technical apparatus. Montgomery is thus able to demonstrate both the results of his in-depth research and an intimate knowledge of the Arabic primary sources in a manner that is accessible and engaging even to nonspecialist readers. In this regard, he even seems to follow in the footsteps of al-Jāhiz, whose literary and scholarly work has come to be appreciated by modern academia as an elegant, sophisticated embodiment of the humanistic concerns of classical Arabo-Islamic civilization. The other noteworthy feature of Montgomery's study is its thematic richness. This is notable especially in those passages that offer a general study of the politico-religious and intellectual circumstances of ninth-century Arabo-Islamic society, which are often complemented by revealing historical details and translated passages from original Arabic sources supplementing the master narrative. Yet it is also seen in the sections devoted more specifically to an analysis of al-Jāhiz's ideas, literary style, and methods of portrayal, which likewise capture the reader's full attention.

Montgomery reminds the reader that "the sequence of ideas, parsing the argument, grasping the train of thought: perceiving the interlocking of the minuscule as a way of comprehending the totality of the totalizing work" constitute challenges and obstacles encountered in any reading of al-Jāhiz's writings (p. 64). One might add that al-Jāhiz's contemporaries struggled with this very problem, as evidenced in a statement from the prominent Muslim polygraph Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), who, although admiring al-Jāhiz for his vast knowledge and complete mastery of the Arabic language, bitterly criticized him for his inquisitive and dialectical mind and style of writing. He described him as "a mocker of the forefathers; [. . .] the cleverest in constructing arguments and the subtlest in making the small

great and the great small,” calling him even “one of the biggest liars of the community” (*Kitāb taʿwīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, ed. M. Z. al-Najjār [Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1393/1972], 59–60; see also my “Praise to the Book! Al-Jāhīz and Ibn Qutayba on the Excellence of the Written Word in Medieval Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 [2006]: 125–43, esp. 133). Although expressed as disapproval and criticism, these words also serve to underscore yet again both al-Jāhīz’s great passion and his lasting impact as a littérateur and scholar who, on the one hand, voiced ideas of the political and cultural elite and, on the other, crossed swords in debate with the leading religious and intellectual figures of his day. Thus, *In Praise of Books* not only takes a very welcome fresh look at al-Jāhīz’s world of ideas, but perceptively uncovers arguments, beliefs, and values that characterize ninth-century Arabo-Islamic intellectual culture at large.

As Montgomery himself admits (p. 175), certain passages may make “too many demands” on the patience of his readers. He sometimes follows paths that “make for tough going” or may lead to a point that “forces [the reader] back to the beginning” of the argument. These observations, however, have perhaps less to do with Montgomery’s style of writing, which is admirably engaging, than with his very close reading of al-Jāhīz—a fascinating classical Muslim scholar who, in his day, “perceives the cohesiveness of his society to be endangered” and “presents *The Book of Living* as the way to preserve that cohesiveness” (p. 176).

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*Doubts on Avicenna: A Study and Edition of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Masʿūdī’s Commentary on the Ishārāt.* By AYMAN SHIHADÉH. *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science, Texts and Studies*, vol. 95. Leiden: BRILL, 2016. Pp. viii + 289. \$126, €97.

Because of—not in spite of, as one might imagine—its complex, and even somewhat enigmatic, character, *Ishārāt* became in the later Islamic tradition the most commented, and hence most successful, text of Avicenna’s rich oeuvre. The oldest extant commentary, unedited until now, is *al-Mabāḥiṭh wa-l-shukūk ‘alā Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* by Sharaf al-Dīn al-Masʿūdī (fl. twelfth century). As becomes evident from Ayman Shihadeh’s study, its significance surpasses the simple fact of being the “first” of a long series of commentaries. Before dealing with the study, however, I turn to Shihadeh’s critical edition of the text.

Sharaf al-Dīn’s commentary is preserved in four manuscripts—three in Istanbul (Hamidiye 1452, Ayasofya 4851, and Pertev Paşa 617) and one in Shiraz (Madrassa-yi Imām-i ‘Aṣr [no number]). Shihadeh offers good evidence for not recording variants specific to the Ayasofya and Pertev Paşa manuscripts: they both appear to be—apparently independently of each other—copies of the much older Hamidiye manuscript. He also justifies why he does not treat one of the two remaining manuscripts as a base text, but simply collates them. Because of the presence of two marginal notes and an insertion, he believes that the copyist of the Ayasofya manuscript collated his copy with a holograph (pp. 170–71). Although I do consider plausible, as Shihadeh argues, that the insertion (fols. 135b–136a) is based on Sharaf al-Dīn’s autograph, in spite of there being no explicit mention of this in the Hamidiye manuscript, his claim that the insertion replaces a long omission and is hence an indication that Sharaf al-Dīn revised his original work, requires further investigation. According to Shihadeh (p. 255), the insertion does not fit the context. Since it starts in the middle of a sentence, it is reasonable to suppose that it follows the expression *fa-maʿnāhu al-mulakkhaṣṣanna* of the text (p. 254, 11), in which case the author’s suggestion of a different version is undoubtedly plausible. However, one would still expect the omitted section to end on line 2 of p. 258, since the beginning of line 3 (*fa-in . . . dhatān*) is clearly needed to maintain the coherence of the exposition. Moreover, the insertion is presented as a “correction” (indicated by a triple *ṣahḥa*). Finally, central to the insertion is the notion of nonbeing (*adam*), namely, the nonbeing of the need for a cause, whereby it is stressed that pure nonbeing does