

Book Review

Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, ‘Abd Allāh. *In Deadly Embrace: Arabic Hunting Poems*. Edited and translated by James E. Montgomery. The Library of Arabic Literature. New York: New York University Press, 2023. ISBN 9781479853182. xxx + 193 pp. \$30 cloth.

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In Arabic historiography, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mu‘tazz (d. 296/908) is often remembered as “the caliph of a day and a night” (*khalīfat yawm wa-layla*), but his legacy extends beyond the tragic brevity of his political career. He was proclaimed caliph by a faction within the palace to replace the young al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32) on 20 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 296 (22 December 908). However, the palace guards rejected Ibn al-Mu‘tazz as an alternative, and he was deposed the following day and ultimately killed shortly thereafter. Though Ibn al-Mu‘tazz had the pedigree and education for political power, he was more a man of letters than of politics and was reportedly reluctant to take the throne.

Raised by his grandmother Qabiḥa—literally, “the ugly woman,” which appears to be an apotropaic name—he was placed in the care of prominent scholars and received a comprehensive education. He was an accomplished poet and literary critic, best known for his seminal treatise on poetics *Kitāb al-Badī‘*, a work that explores stylistic and rhetorical techniques in Abbasid poetry, highlighting that these techniques could also be found in earlier Arabic poems as well as in the Islamic scripture and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. He also authored *Ṭabaqāt al-shu‘arā’ al-muḥdathīn fī madḥ al-khulafā’ wa-l-wuzarā’*, ranking poets who praised caliphs and viziers, and *Fuṣūl al-tamāthīl fī tabāshīr al-surūr*, a study on appropriate courtly behavior and bacchanalia. Additionally, he addressed proper etiquette in another work, *Kitāb al-Ādāb* or *Fuṣūl qiṣār* (no longer extant), a collection of wisdom literature from various traditions, showcasing Ibn al-Mu‘tazz’s integration of Abbasid, Sasanian, and Arab cultural elements. He also produced a substantial *dīwān* (collection of poetry) covering various themes, including hunting poetry (*ṭardiyya*, pl. *ṭardiyyāt*), describing different aspects of the hunt.

James E. Montgomery, the Sir Thomas Adams's Professor of Arabic at the University of Cambridge, has edited and translated Ibn al-Mu'tazz's *ṭardiyyāt* in a new book titled *In Deadly Embrace: Arabic Hunting Poems*, part of the Library of Arabic Literature series. This volume also includes an introduction that presents the poet, his prose works, and his poetry, and then explores the semiotic relationship between the *ghazal* (love lyric) and *ṭardiyyāt*, concluding with a discussion of the manuscript used in editing the Arabic poems.

As Montgomery notes, hunting poetry was a significant genre in Arabic literature, celebrating the skills and adventures of hunters. It typically followed a narrative arc: the early-morning departure, a description of nonhuman hunters, the chase and kill, and the communal feast. Hunts often began in the dead of night and concluded with early-morning expeditions to avoid the heat of the day. These outings involved saluki hounds, raptors, and pellet bows, culminating in a feast where the game was cooked and shared, often accompanied by drinking. Hunting poetry vividly depicted these events, showcasing the coordination of the hunt, the prowess of the hunters and their animals, and the communal celebration that followed. The portrayal of the hunt in poetry served not only to illustrate the participants' skill and heroism, but also to embed the hunting scene within broader themes of power and leadership. This genre highlighted the elite's prowess and served as a potent symbol of leadership, bravery, and military capability. Ibn al-Mu'tazz's hunting poems exemplify this tradition, often composed or recited during post-hunt festivities, reinforcing both the poet's princely persona and the cultural values of his time.

In terms of the semiotic relationship between the two genres, *ṭardiyyāt* and *ghazal*, Montgomery observes that they both explore themes of mastery and desire, though in hunting poetry the poet triumphs over his prey, while in *ghazal* the poet's desire remains unfulfilled, emphasizing vulnerability. This duality illustrates the complex representation of elite masculinity in Abbasid poetry, where the poet oscillates between the roles of victor and victim, control and ensnarement.

In addition to providing an excellent translation of fifty-nine poems, Montgomery also edited these poems using a manuscript copy of the *dīwān* compiled by Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947), a court companion of Ibn al-Mu'tazz. This manuscript, housed in Istanbul's Laleli Library (1728), is incomplete, containing only the third and fourth volumes of al-Ṣūlī's recension, which organized the poems thematically, with *ṭardiyyāt* appearing in the fourth volume. The Laleli manuscript was previously edited by Bernhard Lewin (Istanbul: Staatsdruckerei, 1945 [4th volume] and 1950 [3rd volume]). This manuscript's significance lies in being the oldest surviving *dīwān* of the poet, completed in 372/983. Montgomery's meticulous edition, based on this early manuscript, greatly enhances the value of the translation.

In a brief description of his translation methodology, Montgomery notes that his primary goal is clarity, with a particular focus on capturing the "immediacy" of Ibn al-Mu'tazz's poems in English. He observes that these poems are "concise, often pointillist" (p. xxix), and he has successfully conveyed these qualities in his translation. Rather than translating the poems line by line, Montgomery approaches the longer poems by translating them in episodic units while ensuring that the intended meaning and imagery of the original are preserved. The concise and economical wording in Ibn al-Mu'tazz's poems is skillfully

rendered into English, resulting in an elegant poetic translation. For example, poem 41 (pp. 114–15), which describes a saker (from Arabic *ṣaqr*, a type of falcon), reads in Arabic:

قَاسٍ عَلَى سَفْكِ الدِّمَاءِ فَظُّ
مَا بَيْنَهُ وَبَيْنَهُنَّ وَعَظُّ
يُعْطِي يَدَيْهِ مَا أَرَادَ اللَّحْظُ

A literal translation could be:

Such a cruel (saker), brutal at shedding blood
No warning between him and his victims
His talons give what eyes desire.

However, Montgomery’s translation more effectively captures the immediacy and pointillism of the original poem:

Brutal and hard.
Blood shed
Without warning.
What its eyes see
Its talons take.

This level of elegance in rendition is consistently maintained throughout Montgomery’s translation of the fifty-nine poems in the collection, which describe dogs, horses, tiercels, hawks, goshawks, sakers, cheetahs, geese, crows, peregrines, and waterfowl, in addition to natural phenomena and hunting gear. In translating aspects of falconry and hawking, Montgomery notes that he delved into the rich English vocabulary associated with these sports, allowing the reader to encounter terms like “in yarak,” as in “A saker in yarak, well-trained, | keen eyes that see for miles” (p. 35). A glossary provided at the end of the translation is particularly helpful for readers unfamiliar with such specialized terminology: “when a falcon or a hawk is described as ‘in yarak,’ it is in a fit and proper condition for flying—that is, hunting” (p. 171).

In Deadly Embrace offers an engaging exploration of Arabic hunting poetry during the Abbasid era through the lens of Ibn al-Mu‘tazz’s *ṭardiyyāt*. Montgomery’s elegant translations, meticulous edition of the Arabic poems, and insightful introduction make this addition to the Library of Arabic Literature a valuable resource for students of Arabic literature while remaining accessible to general readers. A brief comparison with Lewin’s edition might have been beneficial for specialists, but this omission does not detract from the overall value of Montgomery’s work. A bibliography and reading list (pp. 172–74) provide useful guidance for those interested in exploring further the genre of hunting poetry and the figure of Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, the *khalīfat yawm wa-layla*.