Book Review

Al-Muḥassin b. ʿAlī al-Tanūkhī, *Stories of Piety and Prayer: Deliverance Follows Adversity*. Edited and translated by Julia Bray. Library of Arabic Literature (New York: New York University Press, 2019), xxxi + 352 pp. ISBN 978-1-4798-5596-4. Price: $35 (cloth).

András Hámori
Princeton University (Emeritus)

(hamori@princeton.edu)

This volume is the first installment of a complete edition and translation of al-Tanūkhī's *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda* by Julia Bray, the Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, and contains the first three of the fourteen chapters of the work. The edition, Bray notes (p. xxiii), adopts "the substance of al-Shāljī's text."[1] She has examined several manuscripts that were not consulted by al-Shāljī, but as she points out, for this volume they yielded only a small number of variants or additions. "In subsequent volumes, the proportion will be higher" (p. xxiv). This, I think, will come from the increasing complexity of the stories in the later chapters.

Published by the Library of Arabic Literature, with the Arabic and the English printed in clear type on facing pages, the book is a pleasure to hold in one's hands. The translation is dazzling.

Brimming with life, the *Faraj* is by far the most enjoyable Abbasid collection of anecdotes. It is also a rich source for the history of Abbasid society and administration, and for the study of Arabic narratology. Because of al-Tanūkhī's ground plan for the book, the first two chapters are devoted largely, although not exclusively, to brief or elaborate recommendations of trust in God's mercy, Qurʾanic verses and prayers guaranteed to rescue believers from a tight spot, and exemplary stories of the religious worthies of the past. The third chapter contains anecdotes of menace and deliverance experienced by characters entangled in the social and political realities of Abbasid society, offering the reader a narrative thrill and a taste of the volumes to come.

1. Al-Muḥassin b. ʿAlī al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj baʿd al-shidda*, ed. ʿAbbūd al-Shāljī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978).

In composing his *Faraj*, al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994) took up a narrow genre already in existence and turned it into one of delightful variety. In the preface he tells us of three books on the subject. The first, by al-Madāʾinī (who died in the second quarter of the third/first half of the ninth century), was very short. It was no doubt similar in conception to the longer work by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894). This second *Faraj baʿd al-shidda*, which has been published, is described by al-Tanūkhī as being "about twenty folios long" and consisting "mostly of reports about the Prophet . . . and accounts of the Companions and Successors . . ." (p. 5).[2] Judging by al-Tanūkhī's quotes, the third book, by the *qāḍī* Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Azdī, must have been no less limited in scope. Al-Tanūkhī still writes about deliverance after adversity—he was familiar with adversity himself—but, as Bray makes clear in her introduction, his catchment area is far broader (p. xvi):

> His predecessors had thought of deliverance in conventionally devotional terms. Al-Tanūkhī's notion of deliverance embraced most kinds of human situation and many ways of writing about them. There are few limits to what qualifies as a rescue story in the *Deliverance.* Under the story-telling rules that emerge as one reads, deliverance must be earned, sometimes heroically, or deserved, sometimes by the truly deserving; but often it takes only a very little faith or hope for someone to be plucked from misery, and luck in all its forms, including that of unexpected human kindness, plays a major part.

This approach allows al-Tanūkhī to range from stories of government functionaries known to history who escaped imprisonment, torture, or worse, through accounts of anonymous characters such as the man delivered from a murderous cook, to stories of the wonderful, as in the "I-only-am-escaped" story of the man who, to his good fortune, had sworn not to eat elephant. In all this, al-Tanūkhī presents himself as an anthologist. He cites his sources. At times he records several versions of the same story, and literary elaboration becomes apparent. This still does not tell us much about his own role in the writing, although when a story begins with "a trustworthy friend related to me," the vagueness of attribution may arouse the reader's suspicions.

In the first three chapters there are (at least) three principal stylistic registers. If the feel of the Arabic is to be conveyed, each register presents the translator with demands peculiar to it, and Bray's admirable versions are spot-on. First, there are intricate periods whose English equivalent, if it is to be readable, must adapt syntax and occasionally idiom, and still convey a sense of the architectonic qualities of the original: retardations, forward drive, syntactic connections at a distance. Two examples will suffice. The first is found on pp. 2–5:

> *Wa-wajadtu aqwā mā yafzaʿu ilayhi man anākha al-dahru bi-makrūhin ʿalayhi qirāʾata al-akhbāri allatī*

2. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad, *al-Faraj baʿd l-shidda*, edited by Ḥasan b. ʿAbd al-ʿĀl and ʿImād Fārih (Ṭanṭā: Maktabat al-Ṣaḥāba, 1405/1985).

tunabbī ʿan tafaḍḍuli allāhi ʿazza wa-jalla ʿalā man ḥaṣala qablahu fī maḥṣalihi wa-nazala bihi mithlu balāʾihi wa-muʿḍilihi bimā atāḥahu lahu min ṣunʿin amsaka bihi al-armāqa wa-maʿūnatin ḥulla bihā min al-khināqi wa-luṭfin gharībin najjāhu wa-farajin ʿajībin anqadhahu wa-talāfāhu, wa-in khafiyat tilka al-asbābu wa-lam tablugh mā ḥadatha min dhālika al-fikru wa-l-ḥisābu . . .

To those enduring fate's injuries, nothing, I find, affords more powerful solace than reading accounts of God's graciousness, Mighty and Glorious is He, toward those who have previously suffered the same plight and undergone the same tribulations and perplexities, for they show how those at their last gasp have been preserved through the working of His ordinance, those sore beset succored, or saved by an extraordinary grace, or freed by a marvelous deliverance that made all come right again. How these things came to pass may not be evident; what happened may not be susceptible to reasoning or calculation . . .

One might have opted for "favor" rather than "His ordinance," but there is no quarreling with the important choices. Literal translation of the metaphors (especially of the temptingly concrete-seeming *ḥulla bihi min al-khināqi*) is renounced in favor of an English sentence rhythm that gives us a flavor of the Arabic—indeed, a syntax that reproduces the slowly emergent pleasure given by its Arabic counterpart. A literal translation could have achieved nothing like this.

Another passage, pp. 96–97:

Wa-sayyidunā al-qāḍī adāma allāhu taʾyīdahu anwaru baṣīratan wa-aṭharu sarīratan wa-akmalu ḥazman wa-anfadhu maḍāʾan wa-ʿazman min an yatasallaṭa al-shakku ʿalā yaqīnihi aw yaqdaḥa iʿtirāḍu al-shubahi fī murūʾatihi wa-dīnihi fa-yalqā mā iʿtamadahu allāhu min ṭāriqi al-qaḍāʾi al-maḥtūmi bi-ghayri wājibatin min farḍi al-riḍā wa-l-taslīmi.

Your Excellency the Judge, may God ever sustain you, has a discernment too enlightened, is too pure-hearted, too perfectly resolute, and has too lively a strength of purpose for doubt to get the better of your assurance or niggling uncertainties to impair your manly honor and faith and prevent you from meeting with the requisite consent and resignation the ineluctable decree that God has determined shall come to pass.

This is a fine interpretation of the ceremonial, cumulative composition of the Arabic.

The second stylistic register I have in mind is that of elevated religious admonition. For example, pp. 40–41:

Qamaʿa al-jāḥidīna wa-l-mushrikīna wa-qatala ulāʾika al-kafarata al-māriqīna wa-l-muʿānidīna wa-ghayrahum min al-mukadhdhibīna al-kādhibīna alladhīna kānū ʿan al-ḥaqqi nākithīna wa-bi-l-dīni mustahziʾīn . . .

He subdued the infidels and the idolaters and slew the renegade and obdurate miscreants, those liars who

> had called Muḥammad a liar, who broke their word and mocked the faith . . .

Consider the options for *al-kafara*. To pair "infidels" with "unbelievers" would be feeble. The case for "miscreants" is not only that the word originally meant "unbeliever" and only that, but also that the whole Latinate phrase "renegade and obdurate miscreants" is of a piece, reproducing the pulpit gravity of the Arabic. A somewhat similar example is found on p. 88–89: ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib is teaching a Bedouin how to ask for God's forgiveness. He begins: *Akhliṣ niyyataka wa-aṭiʿ rabbaka wa-qul . . .* Bray translates: "Make sincere your intent, bend yourself to the will of your Lord, and say . . ." Why not go by the dictionary and just say "obey your Lord?" The penitential prayer that follows, much too long to cite (and also beautifully translated), is cast in the high style of art prose, with characteristic complexities of syntax, including the decorative variation of prepositional phrases. "Bend yourself to the will of your Lord" takes the reader to the stylistic register proper to the setting, a solemn homiletic style patinated by centuries of sermons. (A simple Google search turns up, in the *Works* of Robert Harris, president of Trinity College in Oxford, published 1654: "Truth of life, is whereby a man bends himself to please God, and to be conformable to his will in all things.")[3]

The "ordinary speech" of dialogue in *oratio recta* and of unadorned to-the-point narration is the third register for which an English match needs to be found. I put quotation marks around "ordinary speech" because the language is book-Arabic deployed to produce the illusion of living speech. I do not know whether a formal analysis of al-Tanūkhī's "ordinary style" would find in it anything peculiar to him. He does, after all, claim, as does everyone up to the moment when al-Ḥarīrī admits to being a writer of stories, that he is only a transmitter of what he has read or heard. In any event, in his narratives speech and scene work together. Sharply focused exchanges in stories of bureaucratic intrigue or discussions of financial chicaneries strike the reader as only too plausible. But plausibility is not a requirement: a character's deadpan narration of the extraordinary can also suggest linguistic immediacy. Such is the case with a man's recollection, free of any marks of literariness, of how he was startled awake by an oppressive weight on his chest, only to see his wife kneeling on him, a straight razor in her uplifted hand. Frequently, the unmediated is suggested by a single brush stroke. In one passage (pp. 164–165) the malefactor defies the victim to go on complaining to God, and the narrator, remembering the mockery, also remembers his enemy's country accent: *Fa-qāla lī kun ʿalā al-ẓulāmi* [written *ʿalā al-ẓulāmati*] *. . . yukarriruhā dafaʿātin wa-yukassiru al-mīma bi-lisāni ahli al-Kūfa*. It is the illusion of ordinary speech in specific settings that the translator must match. Bray does this with a light and pitch-perfect touch.

3. Robert Harris, *The Works of Robert Harris . . . : Revised, Corrected, and Now Collected into One Volume, with an Addition of Sundry Sermons, Some Not Printed in the Former Edition, Others Never Before Extant* (London: James Flesher for John Bartlet the elder and John Bartlet the younger, 1654), 204.

In one story, al-Mutawakkil lays this to a man's charge: *Kullu mā dabbarahu Ītākh fa-min raʾyihi* (pp. 148–49). The meaning of *min raʾyihi* is as plain as can be, but which translation preserves the snappy rhythm—the stylistic soul—of the original? Anything with "opinion," "advice," or even "consultation" would end up clunky. I do not see how Bray's "He is the brains behind all Ītākh's plotting" could be bettered. The test is this: Would the conversation come alive on the stage? It would. A similar issue comes up later in the same story (pp. 152–153). The narrator is subject to a confiscatory fine. Torture is applied. A friend advises him to pledge a huge sum he does not have. The narrator is puzzled, but the friend explains: *Anā aʿlamu annaka ṣādiqun wa-lākin uḥrus nafsaka ʿājilan . . .* "I know. Of course. The thing is to buy safety for now . . . " "To buy safety for now" fits the context perfectly and also moves the story along at the pace the urgency of the moment requires. Try a more dictionary-bound translation of *uḥrus nafsaka ʿājilan*, and you will see how much is lost. The colloquially authentic rendering of the introductory part of the sentence is also just right. I much prefer it to a classroom version like "As for me, I know that you're telling the truth . . ." There is nothing wrong with the latter except that it sinks like lead.

In another passage (pp. 204–205) a father and a son are in prison and bribe the guards to let them send a letter. The son relates:

> *Fa-qultu li-l-muwakkalīna fī ʿashiyyi dhālika al-yawmi: qad wajabat lakum ʿalaynā ḥuqūqun fa-khudhū hādhihi al-darāhima fa-ntafiʿū bihā fa-mtanaʿū.*
>
> That evening, I said to the guards, "We are much obliged to you. Please accept this money for yourselves," but they refused.

Fa-ntafiʿū bihā does not mean "so use it." It could be supplemented ("spend it on yourselves," "use it as you like"), but Bray's solution is far better, replacing the imperative with a phrase that might accompany a nice tip to a taxi driver.

Let me finally add an example where Bray offers the tonally perfect English for an expression whose precise sense is not perhaps immediately obvious: "There are three places where a man reveals himself: in his bed, in his wife's arms, and in the saddle" (p. 227). "In his wife's arms" renders *idhā khalā bi-ʿursihi.* There can be no better translation. This is how al-Suyūṭī in his commentary on the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim explains *aʿrasa*, which in the *ḥadīth* clearly means "to have sexual intercourse": *aʿrasa al-rajulu idhā khalā bi-ʿursihi ayy zawjatihi*.[4] Bray's translation is true to both the sense and sensibility of the decorously reticent original.

There are hardly any passages in which I disagree with Bray's interpretation. I will mention one, and that only because if I am right the memorable moment that gives the pious anecdote its hook into reality is so delicious. In one version of a story (pp. 210–13), cited from al-Madāʾinī, Yazīd b. Abī Muslim threatens to kill the hero before he, Yazīd, finishes a bunch of grapes

4. Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *al-Dībāj fī sharḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj*, edited by Fatḥī Ḥijāzī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2006), 3:64, at *ḥadīth* no. 3020.

but is himself killed before the grapes are gone. In a second, cannier version, the hero prays that God should destroy Yazīd in the twinkling of an eye. Narrating his adventure, he recalls: *Jaʿaltu aḥbasu ṭarfī rajāʾata l-ijāba.* Having recently paid a visit to the ophthalmologist, I think the meaning is perhaps not so much "I covered my own eyes in the hope that my prayer would be answered," but rather "I made an effort to keep my eyes from blinking."

I have offered a sampling of Bray's method. But translating a thousand-year-old book is not just a matter of philology and style, and Bray also makes it accessible in a variety of ways. There are helpful explanatory translations, as in *Kāna badʾa khurūjī ilā al-Shāmi anna al-Mutawakkil . . .* , "This is how my posting to Syria came about. The caliph al-Mutawakkil . . ." (pp. 176–177). Or *Kuntu fī waqtin min al-awqāti (yaʿnī fī awwali amrihi) . . .* , "Once upon a time (that is, at the start of his career) . . ." (pp. 124–125). Technical expressions whose meaning is no longer readily apparent are put in context and clarified. On pp. 50–51, for example, X demands that Y pay him five thousand dirhams, "which he owed him according to a tax-farming contract he held from him"; *ṭālabahu bi-khamsati ālāfi dirhamin kānat ʿalayhi min ḍamānin ḍaminahu ʿanhu.* Extremely useful to all readers is a generous glossary (pp. 247–304) identifying persons, places, and also administrative and cultural matters such as "*shurṭa*," "reading back for verification (*qirāʾah ʿalā*)," "tax (or revenue) farming," "seven heavens," etc.

There are delights here for the specialist no less than for the reader with no Arabic. Al-Tanūkhī has found his translator. One cannot read this book without a sense of exhilaration and gratitude.