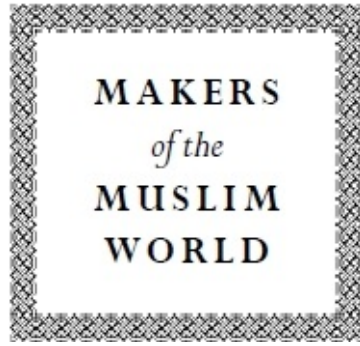


**Al-Mutanabbi**  
Voice of the 'Abbasid  
Poetic Ideal

*Margaret Larkin*



ONE WORLD



Al-Mutanabbi

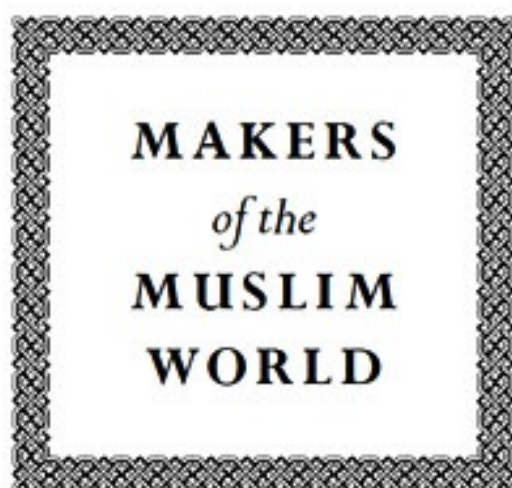
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# Al-Mutanabbi

Voice of the 'Abbasid Poetic Ideal

MARGARET LARKIN



O N E W O R L D

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AL-MUTANABBI

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FOR MY PARENTS, ORIGINAL AND SURROGATE

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## PREFACE

Even al-Mutanabbi, renowned for his pride, ambition, and inflated aspirations, would have to acknowledge that time has given him his due. Few, if any, Arab poets' work has survived to be celebrated so long and by so many as the work of this tenth-century poet, generally acknowledged to be the last of the great poets in the classical Arabic tradition, and considered by some to be the greatest Arab poet. Born too late to participate in the grand literary efflorescence of imperial Baghdad during the eighth and ninth centuries, Abu'l-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (d. 965 CE) assimilated the prevailing strains of the Arabic poetic corpus and distilled them in an *oeuvre* that would, for centuries remain the model for Arab poets composing in the classical style. Among them were scores of poets in Islamic Spain from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, who strove, Arabs and Jews alike, to emulate what they saw as the culmination of classical Arabic poetic culture. Those among them who excelled at their craft became known as the "Mutanabbi of the West." Modern poets writing in Arabic have continually invoked not only al-Mutanabbi's poetry but also his person as inspiration for their own verse and sense of identity as poets and have continued to refer to him, in the fashion of his eleventh-century successors, simply as "the poet." For them, his irrepressible personality and defiant individuality, which reshaped a poetry hemmed in by the constraints of convention would become the seed of artistic and psychological liberation that helped prepare the way for modernist Arabic poetry. More intriguing still, given the cavernous split between high Arabic and its elite literature on the one hand, and the vernacular dialects with their popular expression on the other, is the fact that al-Mutanabbi's verses have become woven into the fabric of everyday Arab life and are regularly quoted not only by aficionados, but also by more modestly educated people. An anecdote related by one of my former teachers, the late Professor Jeanette Wakin, in a graduate seminar at Columbia University helps to convey the kind of power al-Mutanabbi's poetry holds in Arab culture, even today.

Jeanette (RIP) was an American-born child of Lebanese immigrants to the U.S. Like most immigrants, Jeanette's parents were keen to see their children prosper in their new country, and so when they found their daughter spending all her time on Arabic and Islamic studies, they were a little concerned about her future prospects, and her father did his best to re-direct his daughter's interests toward a more obviously promising career. He repeatedly asked her what she was going to do with all this Arabic, where it was going to get her, what kind of a job it would equip her for, and, try though she might, she was unable to convince him of the worth of her interests until one day she decided to memorize a few verses of al-Mutanabbi's poetry. The next time her father questioned her choice of studies, Jeanette did not try to reason with him or explain her choice, she simply recited the poetry for him, and watched as her father's eyes welled up with tears. The pragmatic immigrant, who had never been at a loss for arguments against the study of Arabic, fell silent and never again questioned his daughter's career path or her dedication to Arabic studies.

That is the emotional power that al-Mutanabbi's poetry has always had over speakers of Arabic. Both for privileged members of the educational and cultural elite, and for ordinary citizens with a more modest mastery of the Arab cultural tradition, the many gnomic verses sprinkled throughout the

poet's *oeuvre* punctuate the events of their daily lives and seem eloquently to sum up the essence of life's struggles and emotions. Considered by many to represent the quintessence of Arab culture, al-Mutanabbi and his poetry have been the focus of numerous popular modern plays, and the poet even became the subject of an Iraqi television series in 1984. In 2001, the Baalbek International Festival in Lebanon (a world-renowned music festival, featuring Arab as well as western music and dance), which attracted over 40,000 people that year, opened with a musical – *Abu Tayeb al-Mutanabbi* – by Mansour Rahbani, one of Lebanon's best-known musical artists, which featured some hundred dancers and performers.

Al-Mutanabbi and his poetry have been extensively studied, especially by Arab scholars. Kurkis and Mikha'il 'Awwad's extensive bibliography of editions, translations, and studies of al-Mutanabbi's poetry, *Guide to the Study of al-Mutanabbi*, covers over four hundred printed pages. Works such as Taha Husayn's *With al-Mutanabbi* and Mahmud Shakir's *Al-Mutanabbi* (by two of the leading literary scholars in the Arab world) are works of seminal importance for understanding not only al-Mutanabbi's poetry, but also the rich operations of intertextuality in the Arabic literary tradition. Among studies in western languages, Régis Blachère's 1935 *Un Poète arabe du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire (X<sup>e</sup> siècle de J.-C): Abou t-Tayyib al-Motanabbi* stands out as a masterful combination of biography and literary history. More recent works, which are listed at the end of the book in "Suggestions for Further Reading," have built on Blachère's foundation to add more in-depth historical and textual analysis to the communal stock of al-Mutanabbi studies. This work is the offspring of this communal legacy, on which it gratefully relies. More commentaries exist on al-Mutanabbi's *Diwan (Collected Poetry)* than on probably any other poet in the Arabic poetic tradition. Citations in the present text are taken from the commentary by al-Wahidi (abbreviated as "W.") (d. 1075 CE), which presents the poetry in chronological order. The poems themselves, which in Arabic do not carry actual titles, are referred to as they are in the Arabic, by the initial phrase of the first line. Since space limitations preclude the inclusion of entire odes in this work, poetry citations are usually limited to brief sections of much longer works that serve to illustrate the stylistic features under discussion. A number of modern scholars, including A.J. Arberry, Régis Blachère, Andras Hamori, Geert Jan van Gelder, James Montgomery, Suzanne Stetkevych, Julia [Ashtiany] Bray, and others, have translated poems by al-Mutanabbi, most in the context of studies of his work. I have made use of these in producing my own translations, sometimes adopting them almost verbatim. These sources are all listed in the "Suggestions for Further Reading" at the end of the book, and readers seeking lengthier poems in the entirety are urged to consult them.

In this book, I will analyze the main features of al-Mutanabbi's poetic style in the context of the diverse stages of his life and career, in the hope of explaining to some extent the generations-long mystique the poet has enjoyed. Some orientalist scholars unable to fathom the appeal of al-Mutanabbi's verse have peevishly questioned the taste of generations of Arabic speakers. The starting point for this book, in contrast, is my own unabashed admiration of his poetry.

It would be impossible to appreciate al-Mutanabbi's poetry without an understanding of the rich tradition of poetry that he inherited and the state of Arab culture and letters that he was born into. This, therefore, will be provided in chapter one. After a presentation in chapter two of al-Mutanabbi's family and educational background, as well as the early formative stage of his life and political activities, we will focus in chapter three on the heyday of his career as the court poet of the Hamdani prince, Sayf al-Dawlah. The poetry al-Mutanabbi composed after he fled the intrigue-laden Hamdani court, for patrons he deemed less desirable than Sayf al-Dawlah, forms the focus of chapter four. Chapter five discusses the intense critical debates concerning the merits and faults of his style among contemporary Arab critics. Before a brief conclusion, chapter six discusses the legacy of al-Mutanabbi's poetry in the centuries immediately following his death and in modern times, and

suggests some reasons why it became such powerful intertextual currency for so many poet successors.

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Sincere thanks go to Patricia Crone for inviting me to undertake this volume. I am likewise grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities for an ACLS/SSRC/NEH International and Area Studies Fellowship that provided support during part of the time I spent working on this book, and to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Berkeley for a Sultan Fellowship that also contributed to the process. Special thanks go, as always, to Hussein for his patience and encouragement. Most of all, I thank al-Mutanabbi, for it was the sure knowledge that if I went to law school I would never again make time to read his magnificent poetry that kept me from taking what, for me, would have been a less fulfilling, if more lucrative, path in life.



## OUT OF ARABIA

### ARABIAN ORIGINS

For classical Arabic poetry, everything goes back to the desert. The earliest examples of Arabic poetry date from the late fifth or early sixth century, a little over a hundred years before the advent of Islam, though their formalized and sophisticated nature bespeaks a long history of earlier development. Orally transmitted and publicly performed compositions, this pre-Islamic poetry served, as the well-known expression goes, as “the register of the Arabs.” The poets and their audiences were members of a tribal elite: rich, probably semi-sedentary, and politically and militarily dominant. The poetry constituted not only the record of tribal feuds and alliances, but also the vehicle for constructing a favorable public image for the poet’s tribe and for reinforcing shared social and moral values. The importance of the poet in pre-Islamic tribal life is vividly described by Ibn Rashīq (1000–1063 or 1071 CE):

Whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, the other tribes would come and congratulate them. They would prepare food and the women would get together to play the lute, as they do at weddings, and the men and boys would announce the good news to one another. For a poet meant protection of their honor and defense of their reputations, memorializing of their glorious deeds and singing of their praises.

(*al-‘Umda*, vol. 1, 6)

### POETIC FORMS – THE ODE

While the monothematic “occasional” poem was more abundant in pre-Islamic Arabia, the most prestigious form of poetry was the polythematic *qasidah*, or ode, the structure of which has remained more or less constant up to the present day. These poems consisted of monorhymed verses, usually thirty to about one hundred, divided into two half-lines or hemistichs, and employed any one of some sixteen quantitative Arabic meters throughout the composition.

More striking even than the regularity of its structure was the predictable stock of subjects treated in the pre-Islamic ode. Most often an ode would start with the scene of the poet stopping, sometimes with his companions – conceived to refer either to people or to the poet’s sword and mount – at the site of his beloved’s abandoned campsite. Features of the physical environment, such as traces like tattoos in the sands, evoked the memory of the woman who had once camped there with her tribe and

the experience of loss occasioned by the tribe's departure. The lost beloved was then usually described in great detail. These amatory preludes and following paeans to the beautiful women are the only love poetry that we have from the pre-Islamic period. The poet-lover moved from the mood of loss and nostalgia evoked by this elegiac preface to a detailed description of his camel or horse, sometimes accompanied by descriptions of desert animals such as the oryx and the wild ass, and a depiction of an arduous desert journey. The mount, described as possessing consummate stamina, loyalty, and beauty, was often presented as a kind of alter ego for the wounded poet-lover, who recaptured his sense of strength and manhood through an extended and detailed homage to his animal. This process of recuperation came to fruition in the final movement of the poem, a series of verses in which the poet boasted the merits of his tribe and his named ancestors. The tribe was described as possessing all the qualities deemed praiseworthy in pre-Islamic nomadic society. It would be lauded for its unfailing generosity, its prowess and bravery in battle, and its sense of communal responsibility that demanded it provide protection to weaker tribes and individuals such as orphans and widows who sought support and protection. Poems composed in honor of the Ghassanid and Lakhmid kings, who ruled the Byzantine and Sassanian buffer states, concluded with a panegyric to the patron, and it is this poetry that most closely resembles the court poetry that was to dominate during later periods.

Recited publicly among groups of different tribes at caravan gathering sites, these compositions served as both an important vehicle for reinforcing the shared values and customs that held Bedouin society together and a potent form of propaganda and publicity for the various tribes. Poetry – in its content and performance context – constituted a communal voice, and the poet was little more than a representative, albeit a heroic one, of his tribe. Competition among the poets was keen, and, in keeping with the communal nature of the art, poets frequently borrowed from the compositions of others. This emphasis on intertextuality has remained one of the hallmarks of Arabic poetry, and we will discuss later how this inclination manifested itself in connection with the poetry of al-Mutanabbih.

## INVECTIVE AND ELEGY

In addition to the boasting about the merits of specific tribes and their renowned members that was a standard feature of the polythematic ode, these compositions often included insults to members of enemy or rival tribes. Such verses, which also occurred as (usually) short compositions separate from the ode, generally consisted of a collection of coarse insults about not only the subject, but also the female members of his family. The public recitation and repetition of these poems was a key part of their functioning, since their purpose was to spoil the reputation and besmirch the honor of their target.

Poems of lament for the dead were also prevalent during the pre-Islamic period. Derived from women's rhymed prose wailing for members of their family, these compositions were somewhat less rigidly conventional than the ode. Among their frequently occurring features was that of the poet addressing her eyes and encouraging them to find relief in tears. The focus of the poem was praise of the deceased for his adherence to tribally sanctioned values such as bravery, generosity, and forbearance, followed by pronouncements about fate and the inevitability of death. The heart of the pre-Islamic social and moral code was belief in fate and its vehicle, time – or “the days” or “the night” – as the unseen, unfathomable arbiter of life, death, and everything in between in the desert environment.

Very little of the complete corpus of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic poetry has come down to us. Any narrative we can produce about this poetry therefore necessarily involves filling in the blanks, as best we can on the basis of what we do know. There are certain questions we will probably never be able to answer.

able to answer: for example, was there a body of poetry of a more popular nature than the prestigious ode form – perhaps poems composed in *rajaz*, the simplest of the sixteen recognized Arabic meters, such as the songs of the camel drivers? We simply do not have enough information to answer such questions fully. Though it is difficult to determine with any certainty how much of the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry was composed by the more sedentary members of Arab society – or indeed by overzealous forgers during later periods – the essential ethos of nomadic life, its precariousness and its changeability, is nonetheless reflected in the themes and motifs of the surviving poetry.

## POETS ON THE FRINGE

Not every poet of the pre-Islamic period was tribally enfranchised, and a body of compositions by *sa'alik* or “outlaw” poets (poets who had in some way fallen out with their tribe either because of the disillusionment with it or its disapproval and subsequent rejection of them) has also survived. For these poets, the tribal value system and communal ideals provided the overarching social and moral paradigm that they either rebelled against or defended from what they deemed the lax attention of tribal leaders. Some poets, such as Ta'abbata Sharran, who probably lived during the first half of the sixth century, manifested a primitive individuality that distinguished their compositions from the main corpus of tribal poetry. These poems presented the image of a “man’s man” tough enough to go it alone and face the elements of nature, finding companionship in the wild animals of the desert rather than his tribal comrades. The figure of rugged manliness they portrayed found impassioned reprise in many of the compositions of al-Mutanabbi, who obviously saw a kindred spirit in the world-weary tough guy that Ta'abbata Sharran described:

I do not say when a friendship has been cut off  
“Woe to me,” out of longing and compassion  
No! my weeping – if I am brought to weeping –  
is for a man skilled in acquiring praise, who is always ahead,  
Bare of flesh on the shins, the sinews of his arms standing out,  
often venturing out on nights that are inky black and pouring with rain.  
Such is the sort of man I care for and want [at my side].  
He is the one to whom I turn for help when I seek help –  
shockheaded and hoarse.

(Jones, 1992, vol.1, 213–21)

## ISLAM’S EFFECT ON POETRY

In its emphasis on the uniqueness of the Qur’an and the nature of Muhammad’s message, the Qur’an text repeatedly denies any relationship to poetry. Even though the new religion did not encourage poetry, the advent of Islam in the early seventh century provided an inadvertent spur to the field. Despite the ambivalence toward poetry expressed in the Qur’an and *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), poetry was viewed as a treasure trove of information about the Arabic of the sacred text and the fields of philology and lexicography blossomed. The text of the Qur’an emphasized the Arabness of the event of revelation and the kindness God had shown in revealing the sacred text in “clear Arabic” language. The need for linguistic information inspired the diligent collection and recording of poetry that, prior to Islam, had been preserved exclusively in the memory of professional transmitters attached to individual poets and conveyed orally. Islamic religious identity was thus very much Arab – Arab because the Qur’an had been revealed to an Arabian prophet, and Arab because the

sacred text was in the Arabic language.

The connection between the word of God and the Arabic language persists today in the Muslim belief that although translations are acceptable to facilitate understanding among diverse groups of Muslim believers, only the Arabic text is the actual word of God. The notion, derived from specific verses of the Qur'an, that the text of the Qur'an is itself stylistically inimitable added to the emphasis on the language and, in part, shaped Arab attitudes toward rhetorical excellence in general. Thus, in the centuries immediately following the advent of Islam, pre-Islamic poetry increased greatly in prestige and became seen as the unquestioned model of excellent poetry. In later centuries astute critics, such as Ibn Qutaybah (828–889 CE) in his *Kitab al-Shi'r wa'l-shu'ara'*, rebelled against this notion that the more ancient the poetry, the better it necessarily was, but the overall thrust of conviction weighed in the direction of looking to the past.

After the death of Muhammad, Islam did not immediately expand beyond the confines of the Arabian peninsula. Leadership of the community remained in the hands of the close associates and successors of the prophet, who were themselves products of the same Arabian culture. Tribal affiliations and loyalties remained the well-spring of society. The new religion created a new bond that brought diverse tribes together in a community whose ties superseded the old tribal system, but old alliances and ancient animosities did not evaporate overnight. Indeed, the stature and circulation of pre-Islamic poetry, which exalted the tribal system with its loyalties and entrenched values, contributed to their perpetuation.

## CENTRALIZATION UNDER THE UMAYYADS

After the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty (661 CE) – the first Muslim empire after the death of the prophet – things started to change for the young community. Muhammad left no instructions regarding the leadership of the Muslims after his death, so his succession became a thorny and divisive issue. Though even their leadership was not accepted without question, the first four, so-called “rightly guided,” caliphs had the distinction of a personal relationship with the prophet to justify their authority. The Umayyad dynasty, initiated by the governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah, ushered in a distancing from the Arabian environment in which the religion had arisen. This was manifested physically by the transfer of the capital from Madina to Damascus, while Madina remained the center of religious scholarly activity. Meanwhile, Mecca, the birthplace of the prophet and the site of Muslim pilgrimage, was awash in new-found wealth and luxury.

For the first time, under the Umayyads, Arab tribes had to submit to the authority of a central imperial government. Wars of expansion into the former lands of the Byzantine empire in Syria and Iraq yielded spoils, and the mechanism of their distribution, in the form of money, became a bone of contention between the various provinces and the central government in Damascus. Arab Muslims involved in the campaigns of expansion came in contact not only with other Muslims from diverse tribes in the garrison towns established in conquered territories, but also with indigenous communities with their own religious and cultural traditions. The Arab tribal tradition of offering protection to tribes or individuals who became “clients” of powerful tribes continued with non-Arab converts in the conquered territories. This enhanced familiarity facilitated cultural assimilation, and the complacency of an ethnically homogeneous society was gradually disappearing. At the same time, the young community of believers was still sorting out what it meant to be a Muslim and what kind of organization the community should have now that its founder and prophet was no longer among them. The factionalism that challenged the community was as often religious and political in nature as it was tribal.

Despite – or perhaps partly because of – this general opening up of Arabian tribal society and the many social, political, and economic transformations it was undergoing, Arab poets in the century following the death of Muhammad clung to essentially the same poetic conventions as had prevailed in pre-Islamic Arabia, especially where the polythematic ode was concerned. There were developments toward a more straightforward and simple language in the occasional, monothematic poem, and both the love poem and the wine-song blossomed at this time. The major change that took place in the ode was in its performance context. With the exception of panegyric poems in honor of the pre-Islamic kings of Hira (the Arab buffer state bordering western Mesopotamia), pre-Islamic odes were generally performance pieces in which praise was reserved for the poet's tribe or outstanding individual members of the tribe. Now for the first time praise poetry was composed and performed in honor of kingly rulers who paid for the good press that these compositions provided. As in the pre-Islamic period, poetry served as propaganda; the big difference was that the publicity now often served the purpose of bolstering the image of the central Muslim authority and legitimizing the caliph and his evolving Muslim world-view. Traditional tribal values were being re-cast in religious and political terms befitting the new Islamic communal realities, including their tensions and controversies.

## **DIVERSITY UNDER THE 'ABBASIDS**

This trend became even more pronounced during the 'Abbasid era, the first two centuries of which (early eighth to the early tenth century) represent the heyday of Arabic letters, including poetry. This dynasty, which claimed legitimacy on the basis of descent from al-'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, the uncle of the prophet Muhammad, capitalized on a widespread frustration with the Umayyad rulers. Accusations of authoritarianism, nepotism, and lack of piety had undermined Umayyad rule and united Arabs and non-Arabs in the goal of ousting them. The challenge of shaping a unified Muslim polity from the diverse communities that were included in the now far-flung Muslim empire was beyond Umayyad moral and political abilities. By now, the majority of Muslims were non-Arab and urban, the desert and its tribal ethos little more than a distant memory. Under the 'Abbasids, the old Arab families that had spearheaded the Muslim military drive for expansion no longer received the preferential treatment they had enjoyed under the Umayyads, and the many Arabized Persians and others who had converted to Islam were more integrated in 'Abbasid life. The social and political structure of 'Abbasid government was centralized around the caliph and an extensive bureaucracy that was essentially run by Persians and Aramaeans. With the establishment of the capital at Baghdad in 762 CE, the Muslim community not only gained a grand imperial court but also a vibrant cultural center, in which virtually all fields of scholarship and art were sponsored. The golden days of 'Abbasid patronage reached their height under Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809 CE), whose era boasted some of the most outstanding poets of the time, including Abu Nuwas (ca. 755–813 CE) and Abu 'l-'Atahiyah (748–826 CE).

In the multi-cultural environment of the 'Abbasid caliphate, where many of the outstanding poets were of Persian origin, the poet's stock-in-trade was his ability to produce compelling panegyric poems that served to legitimize and aggrandize the caliph and his officials or whoever was wealthy enough to engage the poet's services. Despite the powerful claim of genealogical ties to the prophet, the 'Abbasid caliphate, which had been brought to power by the Persians of Khurasan, needed to present itself to the Muslim public as a faithful adherent to ancient Arab tribal values. Some of the grander odes of this period, produced by poets such as Abu Tammam (ca. 805–845 CE), portray the 'Abbasid caliph as possessing traditional Arab heroic qualities, such as generosity and bravery, and



also attributes associated with Sassanian and ancient Near Eastern models of kingship. In these mythologizing descriptions, the caliph was often depicted as having power over the natural world, so complete was his appointment from God. Where fate had been the explanation for everything in the pre-Islamic poetic universe, Islam now took over that role. In that sense, 'Abbasid panegyric poetry in honor of caliphs was not just publicity for the individual ruler, but also an expression and public reinforcement of a shared Islamic world view, and played a vital role in furthering social cohesion.

## CONSERVATISM IN POETIC TASTE

Despite profound changes in the ethnic makeup of the Islamic empire during the eighth and ninth centuries, the fact that the major practitioners of the traditional Arab art of poetry were Persians, and most of them urbanites who had rarely, if ever, set foot in the desert, poets were expected to cling to the sacrosanct conventions of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, only minimally adjusted to accommodate the new reality of their audience. The tripartite ode, still the dominant poetic form, usually opened with an amatory prelude with the customary stopping at the abandoned campsite of the lost beloved, usually followed by a journey section in which the poet's mount was painstakingly described. The catalogue of travails encountered during this journey over harsh terrain was meant, in the 'Abbasid ode, as an incentive to increased generosity on the part of the patron who had commissioned the work. The traditional praise section of the pre-Islamic ode was retained during the 'Abbasid era in the form of exaggerated praise of the patron, in which his tribal origins were elaborately vaunted. It mattered little whether the patron actually possessed the enumerated virtues, for praise poetry was a ritual performance that did not have to meet the test of truth. Many a member of the new middle class of merchants that had emerged during the 'Abbasid era found himself portrayed as a greater-than-life hero in poetry he was happy to reward generously. A number of outstanding poets, foremost among them Abu Nuwas, rebelled against this oppressive adherence to tradition and mocked the stultifying conventions derived from desert society.

The premise of the prevailing conservatism in poetry was the belief that the ancient poets had said just about everything there was to say, leaving the so-called "moderns" with nothing to do but find clever and appealing ways of expressing the same ideas. "Ideas," as the ninth century polymath, al-Jahiz, so succinctly put it, "are strewn in the road." This was not a new sentiment: pre-Islamic poets such as 'Antarah and Imru' l-Qays wondered in their poetry whether their predecessors had left anything for them to say. In the 'Abbasid era, the situation was much more acute. The inevitable result of this thinking was an era of manneristic poetry, in which poets composed works that focused primarily on novelty of expression rather than meaning. In poems that can best be likened to the work of the English metaphysical poets, 'Abbasid poets employed an abundance of rhetorical figures and emphasized abstract, and sometimes far-fetched, conceits. This self-consciously clever poetry did not escape the criticism of the critics; poets such as Muslim ibn al-Walid, Bashshar ibn Burd, and Abu Tammam were criticized for their extravagant use of punning, double entendre, and antithesis, among other figures. This was the age of Hellenist-inspired rationalism, and many of the important poets of the era were clearly influenced by the methods of the Muslim speculative theologians. Evidence of infatuation with logic and manipulation of philosophical concepts in their poetry was often sufficient to invite censure or even charges of heresy. One of the more far-reaching innovations of the practitioners of the so-called "new style" (*badi'*) poetry was their tendency to manipulate figures such as antithesis as structural features organizing entire poems. Since, as the poet and critic Ibn al-Mu'tazz (861–908 CE) pointed out in his treatise on this poetry, the same rhetorical figures can be found in the Qur'an and in the poetry of the "ancients," they were not, in and of themselves, novel.

Rather, it was the modern poets' excessive dependence on them that roused the ire of some of the 'Abbasid critics.

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## LATE 'ABBASID DISINTEGRATION

The Islamic world into which al-Mutanabbi was born in 915 differed greatly from the golden age of the 'Abbasid caliphate. Al-Mutanabbi appeared on the scene during the breakup of the 'Abbasid caliphate and the disintegration of Arab absolutism. Gradually undermined by foreign armies employed by the caliph, the 'Abbasids lost virtually all authority over the vast lands of the once-unified Islamic empire. With the decline of the strong agricultural base of the economy, which had traditionally thrived on the "black" soil of lower Iraq, the 'Abbasids were unable to retain control of their expansive territories and support their elaborate central administration. Persistent unrest – in the form of rebellions among the black slaves who worked the agricultural land, among the 'Alids, who felt that only 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (a descendant of Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law) should lead the Muslim community, and the Qarmatians, pretenders to the caliphate who were wreaking havoc in Syria and Iraq – disrupted the peace and security of the empire and placed military demands on the caliphate that it could not meet. Little by little, the Muslim empire was shrinking, its territories either parceled out in fief-like chunks by the 'Abbasids as temporary solutions to large financial problems, or usurped by the armies of more powerful independent principalities. The caliph reduced by the early tenth century to the status of little more than a figurehead, was increasingly unable to defend the empire against the Byzantines, who were constantly trying to regain territories lost to the Muslims.

The implications for Arabic letters were enormous. The breakup of the 'Abbasid caliphate led to a proliferation of new local courts that served as important hubs of culture sponsoring diverse types of literature, with Arabic as the language of high culture and court administration. Although the death of Baghdad as a cultural center lagged behind its political and military demise, the dissolution of the 'Abbasid core of power in Baghdad represented the loss not only of an important cultural and intellectual melting-pot where scholars of any ilk could meet, study, and collaborate, but also the loss of a potent symbol of Arab cultural unity. The idea of the Arab hero uniting a vast and multi-cultural empire of believing Muslims was gone forever. For example, when the Buyid dynasty, which ruled the most influential confederation of principalities born out of the 'Abbasid ashes, exalted Arabic poetry – which it did vigorously in many of its provincial courts – it was none the less a Persian dynasty, which paid little more than lip service to the 'Abbasid caliphate, celebrating the Arab cultural tradition. Though al-Mutanabbi was to find, in the Buyid prince 'Adud al-Dawlah, the kind of deference, indulgence and generosity that he required, along with sincere admiration of his poetry, he remained discontented with this essentially Persian environment that lacked a deep-seated sense of identification with Arab culture and values. In truth, al-Mutanabbi was temperamentally suited to an earlier age – to an age that was not just Islamic, but also essentially Arab.

The economic ramifications were also serious for poets. In an era when the dominant poetic mode was panegyric, and when poets made their living by eulogizing wealthy and influential patrons, the diminishment of the powerful cultural center of Baghdad was significant. Baghdad still had its poets, and continued to exert a measure of influence over the course of their careers, but the situation was a far cry from what it had been. Gone were the days when a talented self-starter could find his way to Baghdad and there, with the support of powerful patrons and influential scholars, find both fame and fortune; the aspiring poet now had to cast his hopeful net more widely to find the necessary support for his art.

For al-Mutanabbi, the psychological ramifications were tremendous. This tenth-century poet was deeply attached to the image of the Arab hero who represented the perfect combination of tribal values of bravery and generosity, battling in the name of Islam against its non-Muslim enemies. It was not that the age he lived in provided al-Mutanabbi with diminished opportunities for wealth and prestige but that it lacked the heroic patron he so longed for. Sayf al-Dawlah (r. 945–967 CE), the leader of the northern Syria branch of the Hamdanid dynasty, would eventually represent for al-Mutanabbi the longed-for ideal Arab hero he had thought was no longer to be found. But until that association came into being, he had to make a living, and that required seeking out rich patrons whose reputations would be enhanced by being panegyricized by a talented poet. Al-Mutanabbi's early professional life was a series of frustrations, as he travelled around seeking a long-term and satisfying relationship with a patron. During his days as an itinerant panegyrist, he lauded numerous wealthy bourgeois, but failed to establish a sustained relationship with anyone he deemed a worthy sponsor. Even during his early days, al-Mutanabbi had a clear sense of his own greatness and imagined himself a great Arab hero of the type he would later glorify in his poetry. But before we take a look at the frustrations and adventures of al-Mutanabbi's early career, we need to paint a clearer picture of his background, his education, and the social and political environment that shaped him.

## GROWING PAINS

### ORIGINS AND EARLY FORMATION

The Iraqi city of Kufa had had a long history of religious and political dissent by the time Abu'l-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Ju'fi al-Mutanabbi was born there in 915 CE. Since its brief stint as caliphal capital under the fourth caliph, 'Ali, the city had been a stronghold of Shi'ite support. In the ninth century, it had been the site of one of the two main schools of philology, and a center of both Islamic and pre-Islamic tradition collection. In short, it was an intellectually dynamic environment, with a strong history of religious and intellectual independence, to which al-Mutanabbi would contribute dramatically.

Though the chain of al-Mutanabbi's genealogy breaks off fairly early, and doubts about the purity of his origins have been raised, the poet's family seems to have stemmed from a south Arabian tribe who were Shi'ite in leaning. This Yemenite origin was a source of pride to al-Mutanabbi and, pointing to the excellence and south Arabian origin of his renowned predecessors, Abu Tammam (d. 845 CE) and al-Buhturi (d. 897 CE), he even suggested that the Yemenites possessed an innate and unique talent for poetry. Little is known about the poet's mother, who seems to have died very early in his life, for he was raised by his grandmother.

Al-Mutanabbi's family was poor. The accusations that his father was a lowly water-carrier may have some validity, since he lived near a district in Kufa that was inhabited by weavers and water-carriers. Given this supposed poverty, it is curious that the school al-Mutanabbi attended was a Shi'ite-leaning one known to be patronized by the best families in Kufa. This, along with the attention the family received from a well-known 'Alid patron, has led some to give credence to claims that the poet was connected to the 'Alid nobles of Kufa and therefore a member, if at some remove, of what would be considered a noble caste in Kufan culture.

Al-Mutanabbi was a *Wunderkind*. His obvious natural talents were matched by a studious personality, and he became famous for his prodigious memory. In a primarily oral scholarly culture, the ability to memorize texts – not just poetry, but also diverse scholarly treatises – was highly valued and the medieval sources provide numerous anecdotes about people with impressive memories, including al-Mutanabbi. On one occasion, tradition has it, al-Mutanabbi was in a bookseller's shop when the owner of a treatise by the philologist al-Asma'i came in to arrange to sell the book. While he was negotiating with the bookseller, al-Mutanabbi started reading the work, and when he demonstrated that he had memorized the thirty-page treatise during the brief time the owner was

speaking with the bookseller, the owner gave it to him as a gift in recognition of his impressive memory. Al-Mutanabbi's poetic talents manifested themselves from a very early age. In Arab culture where poetry was prized more than any other art form, al-Mutanabbi was thus a precocious star. Some of his youthful compositions have been preserved, despite the purging his *diwan* (collected poetry) underwent at his own hand, though it is impossible to date them with any certainty.

When al-Mutanabbi was about ten years of age, his family left Kufa to stay for two years with the Banu Kalb tribe in the Samawah region of the Syrian desert. While the family may have been fleeing the turmoil left in the wake of the Qarmatian sacking of their native city in 924 CE, for al-Mutanabbi the two-year stay with the Bedouin constituted the important basic training sojourn that had become customary among poets of the period, who viewed the Bedouin as the preservers of the purest form of the Arabic language. On his return to Kufa, al-Mutanabbi became attached to Abu'l-Fadl, a Kufan, credited with introducing the young man to Hellenistic philosophy, perhaps specifically the Shi'ite gnostic teachings that were circulating in the area at that time. This verse from a poem in praise of this mentor, in which al-Mutanabbi likens Abu 'l-Fadl to God, is an early instance of the sacrilegious tone often found in the poet's verse.

I behold you, though I think I must be dreaming  
[But] who could dream of God, that I might be dreaming [of him] now?

(W., 2)

In early 929, at the age of fourteen, the promising young poet, perhaps accompanied by his father, set out for Baghdad and his first turn at finding fame and fortune in the 'Abbasid capital. He left behind the only mother he had ever known, his beloved grandmother, whom he was never to see again.

## AL-MUTANABBI GOES TO BAGHDAD

Baghdad, at this point in history, was a shadow of its former grand self, and the talented newcomer found little substantive support for his poetry in the political disarray of the ailing capital. The patron of one surviving ode, Muhammad ibn 'Ubayd Allah, who was an 'Alid businessman and landowner from Kufa, is representative of the type of patron al-Mutanabbi was able to acquire during this early stay in Baghdad. The forty-two-line poem, eulogizing Ibn 'Ubayd Allah, allows us to assess the state of the young poet's art. The ode seems to be standard neo-classical fare, employing all the traditional motifs of the polythematic ode, but there are some telling details forecasting trends that would dominate in al-Mutanabbi's later compositions.

Though many of al-Mutanabbi's works, even early ones, omit the traditional amatory prelude, this poem commences in traditional fashion. As Andras Hamori (1992) has pointed out, al-Mutanabbi tended to retain this amatory opening for praise poems that were not occasioned by particular large battles or other events. But here already our poet is nipping at the edges of the conventions that he would more boldly challenge later in his career. In pre-Islamic poetry, one of the conventional motifs consists of reference to two companions whom the poet-lover addresses and invites to pause with him over the remains of the lost beloved's campsite. This does not occur in every pre-Islamic poem, but where it does, it is an integral vehicle of the pathos of the amatory prelude, with the customary crying over the effaced campsite. In this ode, al-Mutanabbi invokes this convention, but with a significant little twist: instead of apostrophizing two companions who would share his grief with him and urge him to recover from it when the time was right, the poet addresses the two camel-drivers leading away the beloved, in what would otherwise be the familiar scene of departure of her tribe. He calls on them to halt the departure that is, literally, in their hands and allow him a brief glance at the woman who

will soon be gone from his life. The effect of this slight manipulation of the convention is to render the traditional scene ever so slightly more dynamic. ~~The two men being called on to halt would~~ actually have some power to re-direct the scene. Unlike the two companions of the tradition who are as powerless as the poet, the camel-drivers are able to alter events and potentially rewrite the script of this conventional scene. Al-Mutanabbi is breathing a bit of new life into the convention: for the brief moment when the camel drivers are addressed, the entire set progression of the conventional scene is called into question. The poet is simultaneously drawing the listener's attention to the rigid predictability of the conventional motif and to the potential for change suggested by his subtle manipulation of it.

A similar instance of tweaking the conventions occurs in the description of the poet's camel. In this poem, the novelty is that the mount is not a camel, but rather the poet's feet, his only means of transportation, and he likens the parts of his sandals to the various parts of the camel and its appurtenances. The flavor of this section, where the poet describes himself as running as fast as the wind, is reminiscent of the poetry of the *sa'alik* – or “outlaw” poets – who vaunted their ruggedness, speed, and ability to face the elements alone. This poem is both a thorough display of al-Mutanabbi's precocious virtuosity and his mastery of the pre-Islamic and Islamic poetic corpus and an announcement of his great potential as innovator.

Several stock features of his style are already apparent. For example, his great economy of expression and his ability to convey several key ideas in one concise formulation is apparent in line 29:

The people know with certainty that he who planted it  
through cunning, will reap its harvest in his [own] heart.

(W., 1

The poet is focusing on a mark left on his patron's face as a result of a wound suffered in battle. Al-Mutanabbi's goal is to portray this visible sign of partial defeat or weakness as a positive thing. Line 29 is the culmination of a four-line treatment of the patron's wound. In it, the poet condemns the enemy who managed to wound his patron, by declaring him a coward for having sneaked up on him instead of facing him – he planted the blow “through cunning” – while implicitly praising Muhammad ibn 'Ubayd Allah – for the enemy would not have been able to wound him except through cunning. Had he faced him bravely, the courageous patron would, of course, have won the day. The poet also asserts that Muhammad ibn 'Ubayd Allah, in true Arab warrior fashion, will avenge this perfidious assault. Al-Mutanabbi here assumes the traditional role of the Arab poet as publicist for his subject, with his description of the public reaction to his patron's wound serving the performative function of instructing the public as to what their view of his patron should be. This verse, though not terribly original, is laden with ideas stemming from the Arab tradition. In his very condensed formulation, al-Mutanabbi manages both to paint the picture of a complete Arab hero possessing all the traditionally admired traits, and to place himself within that same tradition as the monitor of and spokesperson for shared social values.

Al-Mutanabbi's favorite rhetorical figure, antithesis, is early displayed in this poem, for example, in line 34:

Fire is kindled from the places where they (the swords) strike  
While the water of their necks (i.e., the enemies' blood) extinguishes it.

(W., 1

The line, built on the opposition of the two verbs, “to kindle” and “to extinguish,” and the contrast

between the two named elements, “fire” and “water,” accomplishes several goals. The antithesis draws attention to the inherent irony in the situation – to the idea that it is in the nature of fierce battle to bring together opposites, to shock and be chaotically forceful. The use in this figure of elemental substances such as water and fire emphasizes the primal power of intense battle. Furthermore, by assigning the patron power over these opposing elements, the poet is describing him as arbiter over life and death, as if he possessed virtually cosmic power. This notion is elaborated in the next few lines of praise in the poem, as al-Mutanabbi concludes his hyperbolic praise of Muhammad ‘Ubayd Allah in a fashion that elevates his merit to a higher plane. Ibn ‘Ubayd Allah does not just possess physical might, but also spiritual authority, while his enemies are on the wrong side of the true path, and his excellence is such that all creation acknowledges it. This combining of material and spiritual authority, sanctioned by creation and the natural world, is an echo of what AbuTammam, al-Mutanabbi’s famous predecessor, did in some of his odes, in which he raised his caliph-patron to a cosmic level of authority and singularity. In the concluding verses of this ode al-Mutanabbi, already assuming the prerogative of the confident panegyrist, takes on the role of judge of what true generosity is and invokes the traditional power of the poet to make or break someone’s reputation for liberality, while also encouraging his patron to be as generous as possible in rewarding him for the poem.

## EARLY CAREER IN SYRIA

After his stay in Baghdad, al-Mutanabbi spent two years in Syria, where his experience was scarcely better than it had been in the capital. In Latakia, where he was attempting to establish a patronage relationship with the Tanukhis – an illustrious family of litterateurs, judges, secretaries, and transmitters of prophetic sayings – al-Mutanabbi composed a number of poems that convey not only his great ego, but also his profound pride in his south Arabian tribal origins. At the same time, the persistent difficulty in interpersonal relations that al-Mutanabbi would have throughout his life is clearly foreshadowed. His attempt to gain the sustained patronage of the Tanukhis failed in part because of the effort of detractors, who composed a satire of his would-be patron the governor of Latakia and ascribed it to al-Mutanabbi. Although al-Mutanabbi composed a poem in which he responded to these slanderers and disavowed their inferior poetry, the damage had been done.

The poetry of this early period is revealing in two ways: it conveys a clear picture of the immense promise of this young poet, and of his complex personality. Not only was al-Mutanabbi extremely proud and ambitious, he was also a racial elitist, disgusted to see Arabs subject to the authority of non-Arab rulers. As he declares in a panegyric to ‘Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Tanukhi:

People [are measured] by their kings  
And no Arabs whose kings are non-Arab will ever prosper.

(W., 14)

In this piece (“Oh, continuously raining [cloud] ...”), the conventional amatory prelude is replaced by the poet’s complaint about the contemporary political situation and his own personal fate, followed by his trademark boasting:

Though I blame my enviers  
still I do not deny that I am a punishment to them.

(W., 14)

This is a tack he was to develop and elaborate throughout his career, gradually replacing the communal voice of pre-Islamic poetry with a clear individual voice and personal presence, even in panegyric poetry. Even in this fairly desperate period of his professional life, al-Mutanabbi often produced panegyrics that focused as much on himself as they did on his patrons. As we will later discuss, this was a revolutionary change, which did not escape the grateful attention of generations of admirers. It is easy to imagine how difficult it must have been for such a haughty young man to wander from one potential patron to the other in the hope of finding stable patronage. Some of the satire/invective poems al-Mutanabbi produced during this period seem to owe their origin to the rough reception he received from some potential sponsors. Far from easygoing, al-Mutanabbi was often at odds with the customs of sociability, and his dislike of drinking made him the butt of jokes by potential patrons and their associates. Given his pride, it is not surprising to find al-Mutanabbi justifying his abstention from alcohol by a heroic self-portrait, as in the following epigram composed extemporaneously, to decline the invitation of a friend, Abu Dabis:

More pleasant than choice old wine  
and sweeter than handing round cups  
Is handling broad swords and tall lances  
and me thrusting an army into another army  
To die in battle is my life, for as I see it  
[attaining] the soul's need [alone] is living  
But if I could be served wine by the hands of a  
companion and be pleased, he would have to be Abu Dabis.

(W., 8)

It is clear from this that al-Mutanabbi fancied himself a warrior. Interestingly, while he does describe himself as a great poet – “the master of rhymes” – it is primarily the image of himself as a hero on the battlefield that he nurtures. The great irony is that, according to some sources, at this point in his life he was barely able to mount a horse or assemble his weaponry. It would, I believe, be wrong to read, as some scholars have, the bluster of this exaggerated self-image as a psychopathology. Throughout his life, the greater the insult he had to endure, the haughtier al-Mutanabbi became, and there is no doubt that his pride was seriously wounded by his early difficulties in finding patronage. A child prodigy, he probably expected the world to throw open its arms to him, which is hardly what happened.

The craftsmanship of much of al-Mutanabbi's early poetry is so accomplished that it is difficult to remember that he was just a teenager, though there are a few pieces that are almost refreshingly adolescent. Warned by concerned friends that he should stick to praising great men and leave off the tirades, al-Mutanabbi, like a typical rebellious teenager, responded with increasingly bold expressions of defiance:

So leave me my sword, my steed and my supple lance,  
as if we were one, to confront men [in battle] – then watch what I will do!

(W., 2)

Such talk might have seemed like little more than the bravado of a frustrated adolescent, were it not for what followed.

## **REBELLION AND ITS AFTERMATH**

Al-Mutanabbi's sobriquet, meaning “the would-be prophet” or “one who claims prophethood,”



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