

**The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender,  
and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode**

*Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych*

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In *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych effectively debunks the myth that the classical Arabic panegyric ode

(*qasidat al-madh*) is merely a descriptive, prescriptive, or sycophantic poetic genre by demonstrating its dynamic engagements with what she terms “Arabo-Islamic court life.” The book builds on her previous work (e.g., *The Mute Immortals Speak* [Cornell University Press: 1993]), using an approach that blends an understanding of myth, rite, and archetype in the classical Arabic *qasidah* with historically grounded, contextualized interpretations of these poems. Her insightful, close readings of individual poems are coupled with a detailed exploration of the classical Arabic *qasidah*’s social and ritual functions – from the pre-Islamic period, through its early days, and continuing through the Umayyad and `Abbasid periods.

This book’s specific argument is that the panegyric ode “created, encoded, and promulgated a myth and ideology of legitimate Arabo-Islamic rule” (p. ix). She uses a range of contemporary sources, including anecdotal material about poetry and poets, in her interpretations. This grounds her detailed and specific literary analyses in a broader socio-political, historical, and cultural setting and invigorates her arguments about poetry’s role in relation to power and leadership.

Each chapter treats one aspect of this overall argument and progresses chronologically, beginning with pre-Islamic Arabia and ending with Andalusia. Each chapter is highly structured and begins by setting a context. Stetkevych then explicates the paradigms and theories employed (e.g., Van Gennep’s rite of passage and Mauss’ formulation of ritual exchange), before providing a translation of the poem(s) to be analyzed. Finally, she analyzes one or more poems, reading each section meticulously in relation to the previously outlined contexts, paradigms, and theories, as well as the Arabic literary tradition. She also notes grammatical and linguistic points and the sociopolitical, historical and/or cultural elements affecting its composition. She concludes by linking each chapter to the larger idea that binds the book together – how the poems shore up or undermine the legitimacy of Arabo-Islamic leaders.

This is an effective structure for a book so densely packed with information. Stetkevych reiterates parts of her argument which help to tie the chapters (all of which but one were previously published as individual articles) together. Chapter 1, “Transgression and Redemption: Cuckolding the King, Al-Nabighah al-Dhubyani and the Pre-Islamic Royal Ode,” sets the stage for the chapters to come by showing how a pre-Islamic *qasidah* allows a poet to redeem himself for offenses against the court and, at the same time, legitimate that ruler through its very composition. The second

chapter, “Transmission and Submission: Praising the Prophet, Ka`b ibn Zuhayr and the Islamic Ode,” builds upon this. In it, Stetkevych argues that this poem is a complementary way to encode a positive message about the changes involved in converting to Islam.

In “Celebration and Restoration: Praising the Caliph, Al-Akhtal and the Umayyad Victory Ode,” Stetkevych shows how al-Akhtal uses his *qasidah* to praise and build up the caliphate’s power. The fourth chapter, entitled “Supplication and Negotiation: The Client Outraged, Al-Akhtal and the Supplicatory Ode” and serving as a companion to the third, shows how al-Akhtal reverses his stance when wronged and actually inverts ritual roles in another *qasidah*, demanding that the caliph give his tribe its due. The fifth and sixth chapters, “Political Dominion as Sexual Domination, Abu al-`Atahiyah, Abu Tammam, and the Poetics of Power” and “The Poetics of Political Allegiance, Praise and Blame in Three Odes by al-Mutanabbi,” both treat courts and locations within the `Abbasid caliphate’s reign.

Though the word *gender* appears in the book’s title, it is only in chapter 5, where it is used as an important category of analysis, that male and female roles and the imagery connected to them are investigated in detail. Chapter 6 is devoted to three different poems by al-Mutanabbi, explaining how and why he praises and blames his different patrons. The final chapter, “The Poetics of Ceremony and the Competition for Legitimacy, Al-Muhammad al-Baghdadi, Muhammad ibn Shukhays, Ibn Darraj al-Qastalli, and the Andalusian Ode,” takes us to Cordoba. It shows how several poems written in celebration of the `Id were used ceremonially in the Andalusian courts to strengthen the legitimacy of Islamic rule there.

Stetkevych provides sound, readable translations of the poems analyzed and a 42-page “Appendix of Arabic Texts,” which contains all of the poetry cited in the book. The poems are reproduced in a clear and legible Arabic font, allowing the reader who knows Arabic to consult them easily. Including the Arabic original in this way is a practical as well as useful solution to the problem of discussing translated literature.

This book reads some of the most famous poetry of the classical Arabic tradition in new ways – no longer can the classical ode be understood as merely decorative. Stetkevych’s approach stimulates the reader by connecting this poetry to its sociopolitical functions, especially to how the caliphs and their courts authenticated their power. One might take issue with specific interpretations of certain lines of poetry, but this book is extremely valuable and thought-provoking in how it challenges the reader to incorporate poetry into the study of society and history.

Complementing Stetkevych's other work, this book falls squarely within the field of Arabic literature, particularly the study of classical Arabic poetry. In its consciously historicist approach, however, it is also interdisciplinary. Its focus on the legitimacy of the caliphs, other leaders, and court life also makes it especially relevant to scholars studying these periods and societies in any field. Its rigorous approach to reading poetry and specific interest in the ways in which Arabo-Islamic authority was created and maintained means that it will be of interest to scholars in an array of disciplines in Islamic studies, especially historians. Therefore, it could be used in teaching graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in a range of subjects within Islamic studies, and also specifically Arabic literature, comparative literature, and/or early Islamic history. This book demonstrates why studying the *qasidah*, and Arabic poetry more generally, should not be limited to a small group of literary scholars. Such study enriches our larger understanding of culture, society, history, and politics.

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