Introduction

She longed to read Ulysses, and when Virginia [Woolf] produced it for her, Katherine [Mansfield] began by ridiculing it, and then suddenly said: “But theres something in this.” This scene, Virginia thought, remembering it almost at the end of her life just after Joyce’s death, “should figure I suppose in the history of literature.”

The Life and Times of Abū Tammām (Akhbār Abī Tammām) by Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī, more than any other book, illustrates the role of poetry in premodern Islamic society. Composed over ten centuries ago, it brings together two salient personalities of cultural history from one of the most dynamic periods of Arabic poetry. This is the first English translation of the work.

Abū Tammām

Abū Tammām (d. 231/845 or 232/846) is one of the most celebrated poets in the Arabic language. He ranks alongside Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 198/813), famed wine poet and hedonist, and al-Mutanabbi (d. 354/965), self-declared prophet and supreme panegyrist. Yet Abū Tammām is virtually unknown in the West. This is largely because his poetic style is very difficult, resulting in a dearth of translations of his verse. Furthermore, Abū Tammām excelled in the composition of the panegyric, a genre that does not sit well with current sensibilities and expectations about the nature and purpose of poetry. Still, classical Arabic poetry, including the panegyric as a major genre,
was understood to be a powerful and prestigious form of communication, and a specific audience response was the declared goal of much of this poetry. The present book aims to remedy the dearth of translations and the obscurity of genre and poet by making many passages of Abū Tammām’s odes available in English and by presenting these excerpts within their performance context, showing how these poems “worked”—that is to say, why they were written, which issues they treated, and how their audience reacted to them.

At first glance Abū Tammām seems an unlikely candidate for a poetic career. Born in the Syrian countryside, and of Greek Christian background (his father owned a wine shop in Damascus), he engaged in menial occupations until he eventually took up the study of poetry. His success was slow in coming. His first patrons were local Syrian dignitaries whom he lampooned when his praise poems did not yield the desired result—payment. Panegyrics constituted the main source of income for a professional poet, though some deemed (the threat of) lampoons a more effective tool.

Abū Tammām’s next patrons were generals in the army of Caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 197–218/813–33). They became long-standing supporters and were the recipients of many of Abū Tammām’s odes throughout their lives. Abū Tammām’s career reached its peak under Caliph al-Mu’taṣim (r. 218–27/833–42). The poet celebrated al-Mu’taṣim’s reign in famous odes, such as those on the conquest of the Byzantine border fortress Amorium, on the quelling of the Bābak revolt, and on the execution of General Afšīn for high treason.

Another group of patrons comprised regional rulers, some from as far away as Khurasan (northeast Iran), where Abū Tammām traveled to present them his odes. Government scribes and high-ranking civil servants also patronized the poet. In the last year of his life, Abū Tammām was appointed head of the postal service in Mosul through the good offices of one such patron. When Abū Tammām died, his loss was mourned by this patron and by many fellow poets.

Unlike many poets of the time, Abū Tammām did not serve an apprenticeship with any other poet, but studied his predecessors’
work in book form (§65.2, §86.3). From such books he also compiled a number of anthologies, among them, *The Book on Bravery* (*Kitāb al-Ḥamāsah*). Abū Tammām is said to have put this book together in a patron’s library when he was snowed in during his travels.

Abū Tammām’s poetry captured the atmosphere of his time. In it he promoted and developed an avant-garde aesthetic that mirrored the intellectual and artistic flourishing of the day. It also reflected the greater cultural openness of the Abbasid dynasty, which programmatically imported foreign science and offered non-Arabs far greater opportunities for professional and social advancement than had previously been the case under the Umayyads (41–132/661–750). The Abbasid elite took pains to acquire and demonstrate their erudition. In Baghdad, grammarians and poets were important cultural forces. Poets no longer hailed solely from Arab tribes, nor did they need to follow the standards of linguistic purity generally held to be the preserve of the Bedouin. They now came from many backgrounds, especially Persian and Byzantine, and created new genres that reflected contemporary material and intellectual life. Baghdadi sophistication came to compete with the cultural ideal of Bedouin purity of language. Abū Tammām forcefully promoted a new avant-garde aesthetic that introduced more craftsmanship and rhetorical finesse into poetry. His verse most obviously displays the features of what came to be known as the “New Style” (*bādi’*). Even his critics recognized that he had invented an impressive array of poetic motifs.

Abū Tammām relied greatly on his own ingenuity in introducing what some thought were incongruous elements into his particular brand of the New Style. He created logical twists, paradoxes, and antitheses, and specialized in the personification of abstract concepts. But he merged these with an archaic Bedouin lexicon and older poetic motifs. As a result, his poetry sounded very different from what had come before. It echoed the tradition but gave it a new feel, so much so that it shocked. It quickly became both wildly
controversial and wildly popular. Some found it daring. Others deemed it strange. Abū Tammām was the talk of his time; whether one liked his verse or not, one had to be prepared to discuss it (§10.1). Al-Ṣūlī says as much himself, referring to Abū Tammām and other modern poets: “Their poetry is also more suited to its time and people employ it more in their gatherings, writings, pithy sayings, and petitions” (§11.2).

One social group that figures prominently in al-Ṣūlī’s book is the scribes, who are ubiquitous as financial supporters and artistic partisans of Abū Tammām. In the far-flung lands of the Abbadid caliphate, these highly educated clerks became the mainstay of government. They came from many different backgrounds, and not all of them were Muslims, but their skills, sorely needed to run the empire, outweighed factors such as religious persuasion or ethnic provenance. In fact, non-Arabs (mostly Persians and Aramaic-speakers) flourished in administrative service. They swiftly climbed the social ladder, and some established veritable dynasties. Financially secure in their government employment, and enjoying the social status that came with their wealth, they were in a stronger position than were the poets and scholars on whom rulers called at their whim. These scribes acted as sponsors of poets, as go-betweens who secured stipends and rewards for them, and as amateur critics of poetry. Their profession necessitated training in sundry subjects of elite culture beyond basic competence in the Arabic language and script; some scribes even tried their hand at poetry themselves. The difference, however, was that they were not dependent on poetry as a source of income. Thus they judged it according to their taste and were open to new fashions, a liberty that the philologists could not afford, because their authority hinged on their expertise in the ancient corpus.

The tumultuous state of Abū Tammām’s reception is conveyed in the fresh and refreshingly opinionated voice of Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Yaḥyā l-Ṣūlī (d. 335/946 or 336/947). He was writing a century after the events he records, but matters were not yet
completely settled, though the debate had shifted from the Ancients (awāʾil) versus the Moderns (muḥdathūn) to the pitting of individual modern poets against one another. In introducing and commenting on Abū Tammām’s life and poetry, al-Ṣūlī laid the groundwork for a tradition of serious poetic criticism of Abū Tammām’s work. Al-Ṣūlī’s contemporary al-Āmidī (d. 371/981–82), in his book Weighing Up the Merits of Abū Tammām and His Disciple al-Buḥṭurī (al-Muwāzanah bayn shiʿr Abī Tammām wa-l-Buḥṭurī), champions the latter. Some half a century later al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994), in his Embroidered Book (al-Muwashshah), collects Abū Tammām’s poetic shortcomings. Al-Āmidī also includes in his book the record of a long debate between supporters of the two poets. A shorter debate is cited by al-Ḥuṣrī (d. 413/1022) in his Flowering of the Literary Arts (Zahr al-ādāb).

Al-Ṣūlī

Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī was a man steeped in the culture of his time, positioned through descent and education at the very top of society, and gifted with an aesthetic perception that enabled him to compose nuanced portraits of literary life both of the earlier third/ninth century and his own day. His Turkish ancestor Ṣūl had governed the region of Jurjān southwest of the Caspian Sea and adopted Islam under the general Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab (d. 102/720). Subsequent family members were mostly officials in the chancery, with the exception of al-Ṣūlī’s uncle Ibrāhīm ibn al-ʿAbbās (d. 243/857 or later), who excelled both as a poet and a secretary.

Al-Ṣūlī studied with the leading scholars of his day, including the philologists Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, Thaʿlab, and al-Mubarrad, and he quotes many additional authorities in his works. His student al-Tanūkhī (d. 383/994) became a celebrated adab author in his own right, and eminent luminaries like al-Marzubānī and Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 356/967) quoted al-Ṣūlī extensively.

The bulk of al-Ṣūlī’s life was devoted to serving several caliphs as companion, helping them to while away their idle hours with
erudite and entertaining conversation, and as tutor of their sons. It
was his chess playing that first earned him the attention of Caliph
al-Muqtadir (r. 295–317/908–29) entrusted him the care of his two sons, one of whom,
when he became Caliph al-Rāḍī in 322/934, gave al-Ṣūlī a privileged
position at court. With al-Muttaqī (r. 329–33/940–44) al-Ṣūlī’s
fortunes waned. In search of new patrons, he made his way to the
Turkish commander and future regent Bajkam (d. 329/941) in
Mosul before retiring to Basra, where he died in 335/946–47.

The composition of The Life and Times of Abū Tammām probably dates to the last two decades of al-Ṣūlī’s life. The addressee
of its introductory epistle, Muzāḥim ibn Fātik, remains strangely
obscure. No contemporary source mentions him, but al-Ṣūlī tells
us that the composition of The Life and Times of Abū Tammām
took place during a period of disgrace (§2.4), which means that it
probably happened during al-Ṣūlī’s temporary absence from court
under al-Qāhir (r. 320–22/932–34), or after his final departure from
it under al-Muttaqī. The eulogies al-Ṣūlī appended to the names of
the two grammarians al-Mubarrad and Tha’lab (§4.1), who died in
286/899 and 291/904 respectively, provide a post quem for the epis-
tle. Muzāḥim may thus have been a military man of minor impor-
tance but with literary interests, whose favor al-Ṣūlī sought when
his star was fading. The dedicatory epistle may be a petition for
sponsorship and patronage.

Al-Ṣūlī lived at a time when literary scholarship about an ear-
erlier oral tradition had become primarily a written exercise, though
it did not sacrifice person-to-person teaching and transmission.
During the previous century, the standardization of the Arabic lan-
guage (‘arabiyyah) and the introduction of papermaking from Cen-
tral Asia had supported a flourishing book culture. Oral transmis-
sion continued to alternate with the use of written sources and is
preserved in the introductory chains of transmission (isnād). Thus
a text’s journey from memorization to oral transmission to written
transcript, sometimes over as long a period as three centuries, was
carefully documented, transmitter after transmitter. Al-Ṣūlī owned a large library, but claimed to have studied all his books with relevant authorities.

The books of this era, however, show the history of their inception in their structure—and they differ from the continuous text we expect of books today. The main ingredient of early Arabic prose was short texts, or *akhbār* (sg. *khabar*), which had been transmitted from as early as the sixth century AD. In fact, the large body of orally transmitted literature accelerated the process of book composition and was one of the conditions for the cultural revolution that led to the emergence of the Arabic book; the oral texts in circulation needed to be collected, sorted, and presented on the page. There were two main terms for the production of a book. One kind, the redacting of oral matter, was referred to as *taṣnīf*. The composing of a text from scratch was known as *ta’lif*. Compiling required its own set of skills—the sources still needed to be cited—but disciplines differed in the level of strictness in evaluating the reliability of the transmitters: those of literature and history were not given the same scrutiny as those of Hadith, which served as a basis of religious ritual and law. Authors wrote in this way because they wanted to authenticate their materials; thus, the lines of transmitters are akin to modern footnotes, except that they come at the beginning of an account in reverse chronological order, from the most recent to the earliest—“headnotes” so to speak. In the fourth/tenth century, writing from scratch would come to dominate, and chains of transmitters lost their original function, becoming instead a literary device authors played with or something they invented outright.

Compilation does not make for fluid reading—like a snapshot, each piece captures one situation from a specific angle and together with the others creates a kaleidoscope. While a compiler basically arranged preexisting texts, compiling was no less scholarly or creative than composing anew. Individual compilers differed in their degree of intervention in their material. It could be minimal, simply arranging snippets of text into thematic chapters, or it could be more
extensive, clustering variant retellings of the same event, commenting on their differences and relative authenticity, and integrating them into a new overall narrative. Al-Ṣūlī is an “interfering” compiler who leaves his readers in no doubt about his interpretation of the material he collected. And because many of his texts were contemporary with his subject, Abū Tammām, they strengthened al-Ṣūlī’s case of showing the poet’s acclaim historically.

Al-Ṣūlī’s own writings, many of which are extant, treat history and poetry. His Book of Folios (Kitāb al-Awrāq) chronicles literary aspects of the court during the reigns of caliphs he knew personally, and The Scribe’s Vademecum (Adab al-kuttāb) imparts technical advice and epistolary etiquette to secretaries. But al-Ṣūlī’s main concern was modern poetry. He collected the work of nearly every major Abbasid poet and of numerous minor ones, and his list of edited dīwāns reads like a who’s who of early Abbasid literature. But al-Ṣūlī also treated poetry in its social context, as he deemed audience appreciation important in a proper evaluation of the art of the word. To this end he collected narratives about poets’ verses recited in public, their occasions of delivery, and their critical reception. His book on Abū Tammām is a fine demonstration of this. A similar work on al-Buḥṭūrī does not survive as an independent book but has been reassembled from its quotations in the sources by the scholar Ṣāliḥ al-Ashtar.

**The Life and Times of Abū Tammām**

*The Life and Times of Abū Tammām* takes readers to the heart of classical Arabic literary and court culture. It showcases the vibrancy of the life of poetry in the third/ninth century. We meet the patrons who rewarded poetry with generous sums of money, robes of honor, and paid positions. Al-Ṣūlī includes chapters on select patrons who supported Abū Tammām as a testimony to the poet’s success. According to some contemporaries, during Abū Tammām’s lifetime no other poet “could earn a single dirham” (§58). This support of the elite was both material and verbal (§§66.1–2, §§69.1–4). Rulers,
generals, and high officials made the novel style not only acceptable but turned it into the ruling fashion for panegyrics in their honor. The patrons formed one important audience group. Al-Ṣūlī also throws light on the social classes that made it possible for the elite patrons to sponsor poets. He describes the day-to-day dealings between individual poets, and between poets and their intermediaries, who connected them to the corridors of power. He thus paints a lively picture of literary life in the capital, Baghdad, and in the palatine city of Samarra.

What is more, *The Life and Times of Abū Tammām* offers unique insight into the formative phase of Arabic poetic criticism. The book lies at the crossroads of various cultural, literary, and intellectual developments. As a compilation, it reveals two stages in the eventful process of the reception of Abū Tammām and his poetry, the first stage represented by the *akhbār*, and the second by the activity of the compiler. The first stage, the layer of the *akhbār*, charts practical criticism from the poet’s time: different groups of critics (and fans) are featured and their agendas are evident. The high Arabic language was still being codified in grammar books, and poetry was a principal source. This central role of poetry as a cultural commodity and the importance of its professional stakeholders, the philologists, worked against making Abū Tammām’s innovation uniformly welcome. What some relished and paid highly for, others found objectionable, disliked, or did not understand.

Abū Tammām’s sophisticated intellectual style was of particular appeal to the scribes, who had a professional mastery of classical Arabic. Their appreciation of his poetry was something the caliphs did not necessarily share. When he was asked, “Did al-Mu’taṣīm understand anything of your poetry?” (§167), the poet’s answer was ambiguous. What was true for caliphs also applied to philologists and transmitters, who occasionally conceded their befuddlement at Abū Tammām’s verse. In response to one scholar’s question, “Why don’t you compose poetry that can be understood?” Abū Tammām
answered impatiently, “Why can’t you understand the poetry that is composed?” (§42.1).

Abū Tammām thus heralded a crucial phase of growth in the study of Arabic as a language and of literary criticism: much of the debate surrounding the poet can be explained as a turf war between the recently established discipline of language and the competing fledgling discipline of poetics. Al-Ṣūlī, by collecting sources contemporary with Abū Tammām, shows those ideas in ferment, cast into a vivid tableau. This layer of the compilation thus presents the words of others, the contemporaries of Abū Tammām.

The second stage, the layer of the compiler’s craft, presents the arguments of the author-collector al-Ṣūlī himself, as well as his extensive commentary on several of the accounts he cites. He speaks in his own voice as an expert arbiter, and as one who defends the separation of poetics and philology. Al-Ṣūlī lived a century after his protagonist, when personal attack had matured into scholarly debate, and the contested ideas were being reformulated with greater precision. The material al-Ṣūlī provides is unusually concise, accessible, and concrete. He highlights the significance of the new type of poetic criticism, which claimed the status of scholarship, while considering features other than the purely linguistic.

Despite his clear preference for, and defense of, the contemporary poetic style, al-Ṣūlī was an even-handed arbiter between ancient and modern poets. His ire was directed at those critics of the Moderns whom he deemed incompetent and dishonest (§§9–10 and §69.6). Being a poet and an expert on poetic motifs, he well knew the indebtedness of the Moderns to their predecessors. The same is true of his subject Abū Tammām, who excerpted and reused ancient poetry, even though he boasted of his own additions: “The ancient poet has left so much for the modern!” (§109).

Thanks to the efforts of al-Ṣūlī, Abū Tammām was enshrined as one of the classics in al-Qāḍī l-Jurjānī’s (d. 392/1002) Mediation between al-Mutanabbī and His Opponents (al-Wasāṭah bayn
al-Mutanabbī wa-khuṣūmihi), composed when the next genius of Arabic poetry, al-Mutanabbī, had become the major bone of contention. The great theorist ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078 or 474/1081) defined metaphor and imagery through a heavy reliance on both Abū Tammām’s and al-Mutanabbī’s verses. The subsequent fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries saw a wealth of commentaries on both Abū Tammām’s Dīwān and his Ḥamāsah anthology.

Contents

The Life and Times of Abū Tammām opens with an introductory epistle, addressed to one Muzāḥim ibn Fātik, about whom almost nothing is known. The opening (§§2.1–4) recapitulates the conversation between al-Ṣūlī and Muzāḥim that prompted the commission to compose The Life and Times and edit the Collected Poems of Abū Tammām. Al-Ṣūlī then (in §§3–5.2) makes an unfavorable comparison between over-ambitious and pretentious contemporary literary scholarship and the integrity of the previous generation. He next explains (in §§6.1–8) how badly he has suffered at the hands of contemporary scholars. But the favor of the patron and his brothers encourages al-Ṣūlī to continue with the commission. In §§9.1–18, he describes how Abū Tammām was and continues to be faulted by one group of scholars, experts on ancient poetry, who deliberately avoided his poetry and modern poetry generally. In his rebuttal al-Ṣūlī shows how the Moderns improved upon the motifs of the Ancients. Al-Ṣūlī next identifies the second kind of critic of Abū Tammām: would-be litterateurs (§§19.1–26.3). He describes how this group criticizes Abū Tammām as a means of self-promotion. Al-Ṣūlī rebuts the criticism of one particular metaphor and lambasts the ignorance of critics in general and sets Abū Tammām’s borrowing alongside his inventiveness. The epistle ends (§§27–28) with the plan of the book, which is also intended as a corrective to the circulation of corrupt variants of verses by Abū Tammām. Al-Ṣūlī intimates that his new and superior edition will
supersede any other extant versions of Abū Tammām’s poems, in the same way as al-Ṣūlī’s edition of Abū Nuwās’s collected poems had done (§27).

The epistle is followed by a long chapter on the status of Abū Tammām as recorded in instances of practical criticism, and then by chapters that describe Abū Tammām’s dealings with illustrious patrons. A judge, two generals, two high officials, two governors, and a prince represent elite support and establish the wide acclaim the poet received. The treatise concludes with shorter chapters on negative criticism and the end of the poet’s life. The Life and Times of Abū Tammām was in fact originally intended as a preface to the edition of Abū Tammām’s Collected Poems (§28).

In the first and longest chapter, “The Superiority of Abū Tammām,” and a later shorter chapter, “Criticisms of Abū Tammām,” al-Ṣūlī assembles competing opinions about the poet. To the philologists, who claimed poetry as their scholarly province, Abū Tammām’s verse posed a particular challenge. Al-Ṣulī records testimonies by the philologists Tha’lab (§4.6, §§10.1–2) and al-Mubarrad (§4.6, §51.1–3, §91.2, §95.2) in which they either reserved judgment or begrudgingly acknowledged Abū Tammām’s merit. Other philologists remained puzzled and undecided, such as Ibn al-Aʿrābī (§123), Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (§124), and Muḥammad al-Tawwazī (§125).

Fellow poets were divided. Diʿbīl al-Khuzāʾī even denied Abū Tammām the title of poet, excluding him from his book on poets and referring to him as an orator instead (§§122.1–2). Ibn al-Muʿtazz halfheartedly defended Abū Tammām’s rhetorical figures by claiming older precedents for them, notably in the Qurʾān, admitting his innovation not in kind but in degree. Many other poets, such as ʿUmārah ibn Ṭāqī (§§50.1–3), Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥāzim al-Bāhilī (§35), the court poets of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ṭāhir (§64.3), ʿAlī ibn al-Jahm (§31, §179), Ibn al-Rūmī, and al-Buḥturī (§39), were admirers. Those most vocal in the poet’s defense were government scribes, such as al-Ḥasan ibn Wahb, who combined material support for the poet with vociferous defense of his odes.
The short texts that make up the collection depict real-life situations. They contain fascinating information about the professional life of poets, how they supported or competed with each other, and the etiquette of literary gatherings. They even include circumstantial details, such as how a poet composed (with ink on papyrus, or by heart), what sort of tools he had at his disposal, or which hurdles he had to brave to find a sponsor or get a promised reward disbursed. Most importantly, they touch on many more aspects than are reflected in the chapter headings. Notable are the recurrent topics of poetry and poetics, such as imitation and innovation, briefly characterized in what follows.

**Criticism**

In this evolving phase of poetics as a discipline, criticism often took the practical form of abridging odes to include only the best verses, as al-Ṣūlī tells us was done by the poets ʿUmārah ibn ʿAqīl (§30, §§50.1–3) and Ibn al-Muʾtazz (§§52.1–3), the secretary al-Ḥasan ibn Wahb (§§61.1–4), and a Nuʾmānī scribe (§95.2). In his commentaries, al-Ṣūlī argues against criticism of specific metaphors, such as fever for generosity (§§21.1–6) and water for blame (§§22.1–10), and against criticism of motifs, such as the figs and grapes mentioned in the Amorium ode (§§20.1–6), a sword falling from the sky on one’s head as an image of bravery (§§71.1–9), or the fallen moon as an image of the irrereplaceable loss of General Muḥammad ibn Ḥumayd al-Ṭūsī (§69.5 and §§69.10–28). This last verse, part of Abū Tammām’s lament for the general, is elsewhere condemned as a plagiarism (§§94.1–2). Thus al-Ṣūlī argues that criticism of the same verse as both a bad motif and a good theft shows that the criticism is gratuitous.

**Meaning**

The principal concepts that were to dominate the discipline of poetics were not yet defined. A good example is *maʿnā*: this term carries many meanings and nuances that are at times hard to distinguish.
In *The Life and Times of Abū Tammām, ma’nā* stands, first, for the general meaning of a passage; second, for a smaller theme within a poem, such as exile from home; and third, for the particular way in which a poet formulated this. Al-Ṣūlī notes how, for example, Abū Tammām transformed a familiar theme of exile as a painful experience into an individual’s decision to enhance his appreciation through absence (§30).

**Novelty**

The most salient features of Abū Tammām’s skill as a poet, those that were emphasized time and again, were his novelty, inventiveness, and self-reliance (§11.2, §23.2, §26.1, §52.8, §103); his development of motifs (§51.1); and his skill at improvisation (§§110.1–2).

**Imitation**

Poetic experimentation and toying with older, existing motifs led to a debate about originality versus imitation and about authorship. Different terms, to wit, “taking,” “stealing,” “reliance” (§44.1), “emulating” (§69.13), “copying, transposing,” “imitating,” and “being inspired” (§55.1, §72.1) reveal as much about attitudes to the influence of one poet on another as they do about specific opinions on individual cases of borrowing. It had already been established that it was not the act of poetic theft itself that mattered for the evaluation, since such a thing was literally unavoidable in a continuous poetic tradition, but rather the manner in which it was carried out, considered in terms of eloquence and invention. Al-Ṣūlī refers in this context to a “rule” (§26.1, §52.8) or “condition” (§81.5) posited by experts, namely precedence in the authorship of a motif in terms of chronology, and among contemporaries, precedence in terms of quality (e.g., §13.4). A poet could thus “earn” the ownership of an existing motif if he outdid its creator. In this way the poet became “more worthy of it” (§34.1, §81.5). In other words, poetic excellence creates entitlement (§26.1, §34.2).
The Presence of al-Buḥturī

A long section deals in particular with al-Buḥturī’s borrowings from Abū Tammām (§44 and §§46–48). Al-Buḥturī was a younger poet whom Abū Tammām took under his wing, but al-Buḥturī’s fame among contemporaries would soon match Abū Tammām’s. Al-Buḥturī poured the ideas that he borrowed from Abū Tammām, as al-Ṣūlī shows, into a more natural language than that of his mentor. Audiences and critics would compare the two, and each poet had his particular supporters, but al-Ṣūlī makes the point that in terms of creativity, al-Buḥturī was clearly second to Abū Tammām.

Poetic Themes

Most classical Arabic poems belong to a fixed set of larger genres, such as panegyric or lament, each of which included a catalog of common themes. Al-Ṣūlī also lists some themes that the Moderns rendered more successfully than the Ancients did (§§11.2–18). He assembles several series of motifs that show the versatility of poets when they return to the same themes over time, such as metaphors involving water (§§22.1–10), sounds that, though inarticulate, move their listeners (§§100.1–6), responsibility for endeavor but not success (§§25.1–6), and people who do not even merit a lampoon (§§24.1–30). One series lists poems describing robes (§§92.1–5).

Abridgments

Finally, the work features selections and abridgments of Abū Tammām’s most famous poems in all genres (panegyric, apology, lament, boast, satire, love lyric), placed in the context of their first recitation and subsequent discussion in literary circles. It presents a lively picture of how hotly these were debated and how highly remunerated.

Factions

Al-Ṣūlī throws light on the two factions that attacked Abū Tammām. Language-centered philologists and transmitters made
up one faction (§§9.1–2, §§69.6–9, §87.1), as confirmed by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir (§53). Self-promoting amateurs made up the other (§§19.1–4). Al-Ṣūlī dismisses their arguments as gibberish (§§70.1–3).

CONCLUSION

The Life and Times of Abū Tammām also affords a window on the academic world of Baghdad in the first half of the fourth/tenth century. In the course of his argument, al-Ṣūlī pronounces on professional ethics and his own scholarly etiquette. He lauds al-Mubarrad and Tha'lab for not overstepping the limit of their competence by remaining faithful to their discipline (§§4.1–8, esp. §4.6), and he condemns religious and other biases against, or slander of, poets (§§86.1–7). He boasts of his own scholarly propriety, making a show of not criticizing colleagues openly (he toys with not naming them), but then does so, claiming a sense of scholarly duty. For example, after declaring that God would not ask him to explain scholars’ and poets’ unwarranted criticism of Abū Tammām (§69.9), he proceeds to do so a paragraph later, with “I will mention this” (see §9.1, §23.3, §24.1, and §28).

Al-Ṣūlī demonstrates great respect for the intellectual property of others (§46.1). Inversely, he complains that scholars like Abū Mūsā l-Ḥāmiḍ did not treat him with the same respect, and used his works without giving him credit (§§6.1–2). But he misses no opportunity to promote his own expertise as a commentator of poetry (§2.4, §78.5, §101.2), mentioning the popularity of his edition of Abū Nuwās’s Collected Poems (§27) and the failure of competitors to match his collection The Life and Times of al-Farazdaq with a similar work on Jarīr (§7.3).

Impressionistic and discursive, The Life and Times of Abū Tammām inaugurates a long line of poetic treatises that react to innovations in poetry. Along with Arabic grammar, premodern Arabic poetics never lost its dynamic character—ever unfolding in the wake of the seemingly inexhaustible creativity of its poets.