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Book Review

Stetkevych, S. P. (2010). *The mantle odes: Arabic praise poems to the Prophet Muhammad*. Indiana University Press

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In *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad*, Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych delivers a masterful scholarly investigation into three seminal Arabic panegyrics to the Prophet Muhammad: the odes of Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, al-Būṣīrī, and Aḥmad Shawqī. By placing these poems within their historical, cultural, and ritual frameworks, Stetkevych not only recovers the aesthetic and devotional gravity of these texts but also redefines the contours of Arabic literary criticism through a ritual-literary methodology.

Spanning Islamic history from the 7th to the early 20th century, the three “Mantle Odes”—all of which revolve around the symbolic motif of the Prophet’s cloak (burdah)—provide a diachronic lens through which readers can appreciate the evolving role of praise poetry (madīḥ nabawī) in Islamic spiritual and political life. The author does not limit herself to textual analysis alone; she situates each ode in its socio-political context, drawing on theories of performance, speech act, gift exchange (Mauss), and rite of passage (van Gennep, Turner) to elucidate the poetic structures and their function as vehicles of both personal supplication and communal legitimation.

Chapter One explores Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr’s *Bānat Su‘ād*, a poem recited before the Prophet Muhammad following Ka‘b’s conversion. Stetkevych brilliantly recasts the ode as a “Supplicatory Ode” structured by a tripartite pattern (nasīb, raḥīl, madīḥ) and interwoven with rites of passage. Ka‘b’s recitation and the Prophet’s gifting of his cloak, she argues, are to be read not merely as hagiographic anecdotes, but as ritual acts that transform the poet’s religious and social identity.

Chapter Two turns to the most celebrated devotional poem in Islamic literature: al-Būṣīrī’s *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah*. The author unpacks the poem’s complex internal structure, its layering of sīrah narrative, and its talismanic power in Islamic imagination. Particularly compelling is her discussion of the poem as a performative act of supplication for both worldly healing and eschatological intercession. Stetkevych’s readings here are fortified by her expertise in pre-modern Arabic poetics, while her insights into post-classical aesthetics (badī‘) expand the literary discourse beyond Western paradigms.

In Chapter Three, Stetkevych examines Aḥmad Shawqī’s *Nahj al-Burdah*, written in 1910 in colonial Egypt. Here, the analysis takes a modern turn, as she investigates Shawqī’s ode within the ideological currents of the Nahḍah (Arab Awakening) and the fraught space between Ottoman imperial nostalgia and anti-colonial nationalism. The chapter is noteworthy for its integration of political history with poetic form, culminating in a nuanced portrayal of Shawqī’s “reweaving” of the mantle as an act of cultural resistance and reformist revival.

What distinguishes *The Mantle Odes* is its methodologically eclectic and theoretically robust approach. Stetkevych’s synthesis of literary theory, ritual anthropology, and Islamic intellectual history sets a new

standard for the study of Arabic literature. Her writing is lucid, her translations elegant, and her arguments thoroughly substantiated. The book is especially commendable for highlighting the continuity and adaptability of the panegyric tradition across vastly different historical moments, from the early Islamic polity to Mamluk religiosity and colonial contestation.

This volume is a tour de force in Arabic literary studies. It not only recovers the literary artistry of the Mantle Odes but also demonstrates their enduring religious and sociopolitical relevance. Scholars of Arabic literature, Islamic studies, comparative poetics, and religious ritual will find *The Mantle Odes* both illuminating and indispensable.

Recommended citation:

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