

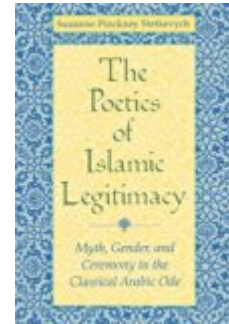
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xvi + 383 pp. \$59.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-253-34119-8; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21536-9.

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## Poetry and Political Transitions

Stetkevych's book is a collection of interconnected essays, each of which consists of a methodological discussion and a reading of one-three poems. The ode is the *qasida*, a major genre of poetry in classical Arabic culture. Stetkevych aims for an audience that includes the non-specialist as well as the specialist, and the book is one of the most accessible studies on classical Arabic poetry for the non-specialist in a Western language. The analysis is based mainly on the anthropological theories of van Gennep (*The Rites of Passage*), Gaster (*Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*), and Mauss (*The Gift*). Stetkevych also reaches beyond scholarship on classical Arabic literature to incorporate and make productive use of scholarship on classical and medieval European literature. Like almost all work on classical Arabic literature in Western languages, the use of modern Arabic scholarship is minimal. Unlike most work on classical Arabic poetry, Stetkevych integrates her analysis of poetic texts with an analytic approach to the anecdotal material that developed around the poets and their poems.

Stetkevych focuses on poems dedicated to rulers, as opposed to other members of the elite who received such poems, and her selections are particularly important poems, not typical poems about ordinary political conditions. The poems come from a range of pre-Islamic and early Islamic contexts in the Arab east, and one chapter focuses on poems from Andalusia. Each analysis revolves around a close reading but also offers more general ob-

servations. This study is not designed to provide the kind of data that would be needed to make a case for some of her general observations, such as her distinction between the bipartite and the tripartite poem for two different types of political relationships. However, her study does make a case for other general observations about the genre, such as its role in the negotiation and regulation of status within hierarchy through rituals of exchange. At times, Stetkevych uses references to specific events in the poem to interpret conventional features of the poem as also referring to these events. For example, she suggests that the conventional abandoned campsite in one text refers to a specific dispute over the failure to protect tribal clients, an approach that will persuade some readers more than others. Her occasional references to the figurative use of language in the context of ritual, such as her assertion that wine in the genre refers to blood, will also persuade some more than others.

Of the three topics in the subtitle, myth and ceremony are a central component of each chapter and gender is a central component of one chapter on pre-Islamic poetry and one chapter on early Islamic poetry. Although Stetkevych does not develop her discussion about gender in a theoretical way, these two chapters offer interesting perspectives on the relationship between gender and political ideology in these poems.

The dual audience of non-specialists and specialists creates advantages and disadvantages for each group.

The methodological introduction to each essay provides a coherent perspective on her approach and makes it possible to read each essay independently. For the non-specialist, the very readable translations of entire poems contribute to the accessible approach to the material. For the specialist and other readers of Arabic, the location of the Arabic texts in an appendix makes the book much less accessible. Most importantly for an analysis that is grounded in close readings, the absence of lines (in Arabic or in translation) on the page where they are discussed makes it difficult to follow the reading.

While Stetkevych is particularly interested in examining poems of political crisis, her argument, in conjunction with the theories that she uses, emphasizes the use of myth and ceremony to confirm and embody political legitimacy. The repetition of ritual, sacred cyclical and profane ephemeral time, the authority of patron and poet, political hierarchy and legitimacy, reciprocal obligations, and the combination of archetypal context with specific historical events all come together in a well-organized presentation. Stetkevych focuses on Islamic “manifest destiny” (p. 168), but she also observes, while discussing a political crisis, that “the *qasida* and its associated ceremonies serve not merely to affirm but also to challenge or question the legitimacy and moral authority of the ruler” (p. 120). In addition, she notes that one could fol-

low recent research in classics to suggest that the emphasis on ceremony reveals anxieties about the origins and future of a dynasty. Further support for a more complex and problematized perspective can be found in the works of van Gennepe, Gaster, and Mauss, and in the secondary material on European literature that Stetkevych uses. The argument would have been more nuanced had it built more extensively on these observations about the problematic aspects of the construction of political legitimacy.

Stetkevych’s analysis of classical Arabo-Islamic “manifest destiny” offers useful insights into role of political life in this genre. The impressive scope of her knowledge of the genre is evident; this is her third book on the *qasida*, and the most comprehensive articulation of her critical approach to it. Her theoretical framework enables her to offer a coherent perspective on the *qasida* in a wide range of early Arab and Arabo-Islamic contexts.

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