

*The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance*, Susan E. Slyomovics. University of California Publications in Modern Philology, 120. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. pp. ix + 298.

Dwight F. Reynolds  
Harvard School of Fellows

At the very heart of *The Merchant of Art* lies an evening's performance of Southern Egyptian oral epic singing, recorded, transcribed, and painstakingly redacted and explicated by Susan Slyomovics. She strives for a "co-authored" text (24), that is, one where the input of poet, audience members, and even variant texts coexist in a multi-vocal reading of the central text. To achieve this, she rapidly builds, in four brief chapters, a context for the text we are to examine in detail.

In the first chapter the poet as outcast is examined: his biography, his family's tradition of epic singing, and the sensitive issue of "gypsy" origins are treated. In chapter two the relationship between the informant and the female ethnographer comes into focus. Slyomovics sees her anomalous presence as Westerner, and as female, researching an Egyptian, male tradition, as part of a structure which informs the encounter of Western female and Arab male in modern Arabic literature. However, she suggests that her relationship to the epic poet, °Awadallah, was significantly structured by "quite a different set of literary protocols" which may best be understood ". . . in terms of the literary and linguistic tension that obtains between literary or classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) on the one hand, and colloquial Egyptian Arabic (*°ammiyya*) on the other" (22). As part of this analysis she contrasts the Arabic written literary motif of the death of the Western female following the encounter of East and West, with the oral epic theme of the foreign female who becomes Arab following the defeat of her menfolk. The encounter of ethnographer and poet is thus set in frames of orality and literacy, sexuality, and the discourse of western Orientalism.

Chapter three, "The History of the Arabs," consists almost entirely of genealogies of the epic heroes as presented by the Poet °Awadallah, and a summary of the plot of the epic up to the point of the performance in question. The fourth chapter gives summaries of variant texts from a number of different sources. Some of these texts are explicitly of the tale we are about to read in full, others share only a few key motifs; the variant texts represent both written and oral sources, as well as a broad geographical spread.

The key to Slyomovics' analysis of the central text, "The Story of °Amir Khafājī," and indeed the entire middle third of the overall epic, lies in her postulation of father-daughter incest as the keystone to the tale. In it, the hero Abū Zeyd the Hilālī rescues the daughter of the King of Iraq, °Amir Khafājī. Instead of the typical folktale conclusion, where the hero then marries the daughter, the King proceeds to fall in love with one of the Hilālī women and abandons family and kingdom to ride forth with the Hilālī tribe. In Slyomovics' words (56),

The hero thereby "marries," so to speak, the father by assigning him tribal affiliation through a promised marriage into the hero's own family. It is in this context, I argue, that the father-daughter incest explicitly framing the middle section of the epic acquires its psychological significance. My claim is that the tale is designed to resolve problematic tensions relating to a strong, but unspoken, taboo on father-daughter incest.

This is a highly unusual but fascinating reading of the epic. Unfortunately, this motif of the King "giving himself in marriage" does not occur in the text which forms the body of this study, but rather is only part of the well-known background understood by the audience members but not realized in this performance. This particular text ends with the successful rescue of the daughter.

The main text is presented with ample cultural notes and an intervening narrative describing peripheral events. The text itself is closely translated with interlineal transcription. Since puns form an essential part of this poet's concept of the epic and the

art of epic singing, puns are distinguished by capitalization in both English and Arabic texts. The detailed account of the performance is quite intimate, extending even to the moment of consternation which results when the “honorary male” researcher has to go to the bathroom —thus reminding everyone, forcibly, of her femaleness (239).

The most extraordinary aspect of the performance is that the tale, analyzed by Slyomovics as motivated by father-daughter incest taboo, is reversed in performance, and becomes one of mother-son sexuality. In a complex interpolation, the poet inserts the recent death of the village blacksmith into the tale with the line, “. . . and Zakiyya weeps the day long” (110-11 and 138). Zakiyya is, however, the name not only of the blacksmith’s widow, but also one audience member’s mother. The audience member’s angry reaction is read by Slyomovics as motivated by mother-son incest taboo (264):

What initially appears to be a tale of father-daughter incest in the narrative of the tale, is recast during ‘Awadallah’s performance of the tale to his male Egyptian audience, in terms of a mother-son constellation. In the context of the performance, in the relationship of the poet performing the oral recitation of a (father-daughter incest) text, ‘Awadallah rebukes a member of the audience by a scandalous allusion embedded in the epic narrative, one which brings up the possibility of the mother’s eroticism.

For Slyomovics, this male narrative art form is one where “...both audience and poet parade linguistic ingenuity to cover a dark secret, namely female and maternal eroticism” (265).

Without discounting this reading, it must be allowed that it is only somewhat weakly supported by the evidence Slyomovics produces to prove her case. In her summary of the epic, she finds it virtually self-evident that the middle portion of the epic is inspired by father-daughter incest taboo, based on the existence of the “giving oneself in marriage” motif described above. Some readers will probably not find this so. Several of the variant texts summarized scarcely mention this motif, and the main text itself is quiet on this account. As for the brief exchange between poet and audience member which forms the centerpiece of her performance analysis, it seems possible to imagine a much less sexually charged sub-text. More significantly, we are never presented with the poet’s motivation for deliberately antagonizing an audience member in such a savage manner, nor do we learn if indeed he intended to do so. Since the very participants themselves are socially bound to deny the sexual analysis, the issue must rest in the realm of the possible.

However debatable her interpretations, Slyomovics has provided us with the best example yet of Egyptian epic singing in English translation, and has offered a rich and multi-vocal performance text which, it is to be hoped, will provide the stimulus for the use of similar research methods and similar meticulous and innovative analysis.