

“Tonight My Gun Is Loaded”: Poetic Dueling In Arabia

Saad Abdullah Sowayan

Introduction

Although folk traditions are rapidly disappearing in Arabia as it is suddenly transformed from an illiterate society to a modern state, poetic dueling remains one of the most popular and spectacular folk performances. Oral poets are paid handsomely at weddings, festivals, and similar public occasions to entertain spectators with their verbal jousts. Encouraged by eager audiences and by an accompanying chorus that repeats their improvised verses, the competing poets can stay up singing and playing until the call to the morning prayer.

Poetic dueling is part of a larger poetic tradition locally called *Nabaṭī* (i.e. vernacular) poetry, the direct continuation and living representative of classical Arabic poetry, the poetry of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia (Sowayan 1985). It should be remembered that even though the classical poetic tradition of Arabia survives today in written form and has become the ultimate model in Arabic written literature, it was originally a popular oral tradition. In its gradual movement to become truly written literature, depending strictly on pen and paper in its composition and transmission, Arabic poetry lost its oral features. These oral features survive today in *Nabaṭī* poetry, which, linguistic differences apart, mirrors its classical predecessor in form, content, and function as well as in the process of its composition, transmission, and performance (*ibid.*). This fact offers us new possibilities for comparative research. No longer can we look at one of these poetic traditions in isolation from the other, and whatever scientific progress we make in our study of one will have direct bearing on our understanding of the other. Therefore, our study of the performative art of poetic dueling as a living tradition will not only deepen our understanding of the *Nabaṭī* poetic tradition as a whole but it will also provide us with a wider comparative scope and a deeper

conceptual framework to deal with questions relating to classical Arabic poetry in particular and oral poetry in general.



The poets seated with the audience behind

Stepping into the Field of Action

Poetic dueling is called *galṭih* (from *galaṭ* “to step forward,” “to answer the challenge”) *riddiyih/mrādd* (from *radd* “to respond,” “to answer back”), *mbāda^c* (from *bad^c* “poetic composition”), and *mḥāwiriḥ* (from *ḥiwār* “dialogue,” “discussion”); the last term is recent and it is used by educated people. The term *mbāda^c* is used mainly in Ḥijāz. The terms *galṭih* and *riddiyih/mrādd* are the most commonly used. These are general terms used in reference to poetic dueling as a performative activity. An individual match between two dueling poets is called *tārūg*, *mīhrāf*, or *gāf*. A dueling match involves two poets and consists of a few rounds of exchanges between them, each round consisting usually of two verses. The first poet steps forward and improvises two verses in which he greets the assembled audience and singing participants, and at the same time asks a challenger to step forward and face him. These opening verses are called *wisṭmih* (from *wasm* “brand,” “mark”) because they mark or establish the pattern of rhyme and meter to be followed throughout the match. The second poet steps forward, “*yagliṭ*,” returns the greetings, and answers the challenge, “*yiridd*,” with two verses of his own, strictly

following the rhyme and meter established by the first poet. The first poet in turn retorts with two more verses, the second poet answers back with two new verses, and so on until the end of the match. A *riddiyih*, thus, is actually the work of two poets, but it is one piece and all its verses have the same rhyme and meter.

The group of singers (chorus) repeat the verses of the dueling poets as they deliver them. The singers arrange themselves in two lines standing and facing each other with some space in between for the dueling poets to move in. This space is called *mēdān*, “field of action,” or *mal‘abah* (literally “playground”). Among the many terms used in reference to poetry is *li‘b*, a word also used in reference to playing, singing, dancing, and fighting on horseback. Singing is accompanied by hand-clapping only, with no drums or any other musical instruments. This makes it easy for anyone present to join in the singing.



The singers

In his opening lines the poet may call out the name of the opponent with whom he wishes to play. A champion is usually too proud to play with a poet of a lesser rank while a beginner is always anxious to play with a recognized champion in order to learn new tricks from him. Taking on an experienced poet is in itself to the credit of the lesser poet, who can later boast about the event. The reputation of a poet may reach so far and wide that other poets from distant places come and challenge him.

To be recognized as a good dueling poet, it is not enough to have a good voice and the ability to versify. One must also have a wide

knowledge, deep understanding, quick mind, sharp wits, and the ability to twist words and turn phrases, say the same thing in different ways, and express ideas in veiled metaphors and figurative language. In the final analysis, poetic dueling is a match of wits and an exhibition of knowledge. In the match, dueling poets view themselves as lawyers or litigants in a legal dispute, “*da^cwa shar^ciiyyih*,” each being the opposing party, “*kha^sm*,” of the other. Every verse from either one of them must be to the point. It must hit the mark, score. A stray verse or one that is void of significance is called a mere rhyme, “*g^aarⁱh*.” It is compared to an empty cartridge, “*i^bru^d*,” which cannot fire. A verse which is not the lid, “*g^aata*,” or rebuttal, “*khi^smah*,” of the one passed by the opponent is useless, no matter how beautiful it is. Shl^wih Ibn Shall^h al-M^teri explained it to me this way: “A poet may deliver good verses with beautiful imagery and embellished language, but all this is of no avail if his opponent cannot figure out which direction he is heading for, if he is not good at arguing and refuting [*yaftil w-yangi^z*].”

The concept of *fatl w-nag^z* is crucial in poetic dueling. The word *fatl* means to plait, to twine, and it refers to the tightly argued case advanced by one contending poet to his opponent. The opponent’s refutation or rebuttal is called *nag^z*, literally meaning to untwine, to unplait (cf. *naq^a’id jar^r wa-l-farazdaq*). In its apparent structure, a dueling match seems to be strands of argumentation and refutation plaited together and woven into an integrated whole.

A dueling match, “*riddiyyih*,” is frequently compared to a wrestling match or a football game. The contestants should pass the “poetic dialogue” between them like a ball in a football field. The opponents start by courteously greeting each other. They scrupulously observe the rules of the game, but each tries his best to score the highest points and win the match. Even if they should happen to be the best of friends, they try to create some friction in the match, build tension and warm up the *mal^cabah*, so as to have an exciting show and give the audience a good time.

To reach a high status and maintain it, the poet must start early in life and continue to practice and attend as many performances as possible. He must watch and listen carefully how good poets play their matches. In the beginning the poet may start practicing alone in private, or with another beginning poet while they are sitting around or driving, or in small friendly gatherings. Before the poet steps into the *mal^cabah* to meet a reputable poet and face a large public audience, he must be quite sure of his poetic genius so that he can avoid the ridicule and embarrassment which would be his fate should he fail the test for any reason. Poets speak of themselves metaphorically as real heroes and of poetic dueling as real dueling with sword and spear. They say that only daring poets with stout hearts can step into the *mal^cabah*, exchange verbal blows with tenacious

opponents, and deal with the unexpected in a battle witnessed by a large multitude of spectators. When the two contestants in the *mal'abah* are real antagonists who have personal differences or who belong to two unfriendly groups or different tribes, the contest between them could turn into a real battle, each trying to debilitate, “*y'ajjiz*,” the other by squeezing him into a tight corner, “*yahashruh*,” and causing him to quit the *mal'abah* and leave the whole assembly, “*ysarrth*.” People will talk for many years afterwards about how the poet so-and-so was driven out of the *mal'abah* by the poet so-and-so.

It is not possible for a poet to prepare himself for a match beforehand. This is because he does not always know which opponent will be playing against him, what rhyme and meter will be used, what subjects will be discussed in the match, which direction the match will take, or any other dueling elements that cannot be predicted and planned. Such matters can be decided only when the match is underway. The most a poet can do is to prepare the two opening lines “*al-wis'mih*,” but even these lines can be rejected if the singers do not like their melody. Also, the opponent reserves the right to reject the *wis'mih* should he suspect that it was prepared beforehand.



A poet delivers his line

The topic and general tone of the *riddiyyih* are determined by the performance context and by whether the contestants are friends or antagonists. On public occasions and in the presence of high government officials, the *riddiyyih* is likely to be restrained and decorous. On other

occasions, especially late in the evening, the performance may become riotous and vulgar. In many cases, the poets are from different tribes or different districts, or one may be from the desert and one from the settled country. In such cases, each poet becomes the champion of his group and expresses pride in belonging to it while attacking his opponent and the other group. Each poet draws on his vast repertory of historical and genealogical information in formulating his attack or defense. The contest often turns into a match of wits. If the dueling poets are friends, they exchange compliments with a touch of humor. They may try to work out a misunderstanding between them in their *riddiyyih*, or, if they have not seen each other for some time, may inquire of each other about some private affair, or one may ask the other whether a rumor that has been spread about him is true, and so on. All this, however, must be handled in a veiled and oblique way that only a discerning poet can understand. In many cases only the poets themselves know what the verses really mean; hence they say, *ma'na ash-shi'r b-baṭn ash-shā'ir*, "the meaning is in the belly of the poet." The very singers who repeat the verses of the dueling poets may not know their meaning.

The length of a dueling match varies significantly. Generally it ranges from six to ten rounds (twelve to twenty verses) of exchange divided equally between the contesting poets, the whole taking about an hour to finish. When one match is finished either the two contestants start a new one or they leave the *mal'abah* and a fresh team steps forward. It is not infrequent for a match to fizzle out as soon as it is started because the melody is too hard to sing, singers lose heart, the rhyme and meter are too difficult, or the words of one poet make the other angry and cause him to quit.

The duration and quality of a dueling match is determined by several factors: the enthusiasm of singers and audience, the mental and emotional state of the poet at the time of the match, time limitation, and the matter of whether there are other poets who wish to play. It is preferable that the two poets are comparable in skill. A master poet cannot perform well with a weak opponent. If the two poets are of the same caliber, it is possible that they could go on dueling for up to two hours in a single match. The poets themselves say it is like a conversation. Sometimes you feel like talking, sometimes you don't. Some people you feel comfortable with and can converse with for hours. With others you can hardly find a word to pass in conversation. A seasoned poet, especially when he plays with an opponent he feels comfortable with, will construct the rhyme and meter of his *wisṭmih*, "opening lines," in such a way that many words can be used for rhymes. Through this device the poet opens up many roads for his opponent, "*ysammih luh aṭ-ṭirīg*," so as to facilitate composition and enjoy a long duel.

As in regular *giṣīdih*, “lyrical ode,” the *riddiyyih* has at least two rhymes, one for the first hemistich and another for the second hemistich. The same word cannot be used more than once in a rhyming position. When the contestants play until they deplete the good rhyming words, they say “*shāb al-gāf*,” “the rhyme has become gray, old,” and they end the match. One poet told me that he cannot use a word just because it rhymes. Some rhyming words are like coffee dregs, useless. Mḥammad Ibn Twēm ath-Thbētī told me that “rhyming words are like bank notes. Some are worth a hundred, some are worth fifty, others are worth ten, five, and even one riyal [Saudi currency]. A poet should use only those of the high value.”

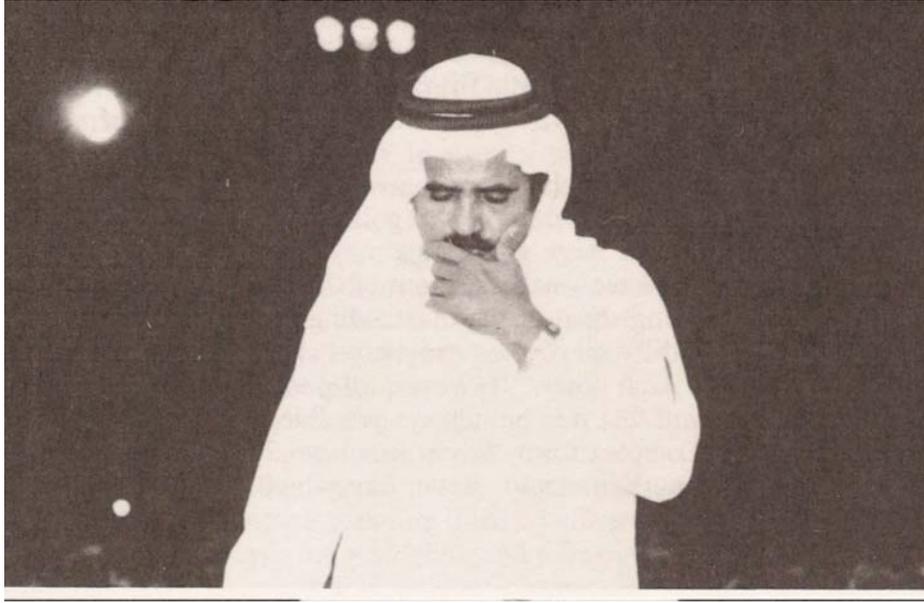
I have mentioned that the contestants would usually avoid difficult rhymes and meters in order to make the going easy for each other. But sometimes good poets in large gatherings may resort to difficult rhymes and meters in order to drive weak poets out of the *mal‘abah* and screen out beginners. Even among themselves, outstanding poets may feel the urge sometimes to try out difficult rhymes and meters when they want to exhibit their skills and defy each other. However, all poets agree that this slows down composition and that it is not always possible to have complex form and good content. Complex form, “*al-m‘ōsar*,” would force the poet to use words which fit the rhyme and meter but which may not serve the meaning.

Strategies of Composition

The pressure of performance and the constraints of rhyme and meter check the speed of composition. Dueling poets do not come up with their verses one right after the other. It takes a few minutes for a duelist to decipher the meaning of his opponent’s verses and form the proper response to them. Each verse, therefore, is repeated several times by the singers, until one of the poets comes up with the next verse. Each new verse is received enthusiastically by the singers with cheers or jeers, depending on its content.

The poet should not take too long to come up with his verses. The singers and audience might lose interest. The poet who takes too long to come up with a verse loses the match. I asked the poets what strategies they use to speed up composition. Ṣayyāf al-Ḥarbi explained it to me this way: “Each poet must deliver two lines each time it is his turn. Therefore, when it is my opponent’s turn and he delivers his first line and gets busy designing his second line, I myself start in the meantime composing a retort to his first line, the line he has already given to the singers to sing. By the time he comes up with his second line, I have already finished composing

my retort to his first line. I let the singers sing his second line a few times before I give them the line which I have already composed.” This strategy is not foolproof. The line readied by the poet could be nullified by his opponent if the opponent in his second line should happen to come upon the same rhyming word or same meaning or image.



Muṭlag ath-Thubayti pondering a line

Singing in the *riddiyyih* functions not only to fill the void while the poets think up their verses; it is also necessary for the compositional process. All poets I have talked to agree that without the singers they would not be able to compose. One poet compared dueling without singers to fighting without a weapon. Mḥammad al-Jabarti puts it this way: “Without the singers no inspiration [*ḡamīr*] comes upon me. The chorus for me is like tires for the car. To have long lines of good singers is like having full tires. No singers is like having flat tires.” Shlḡwī Ibn Shallāḡ al-Mṡēri says: “The chorus is the spirit of it all. The thoughts, feelings, and jinnis of the poet do not come to him unless he sees the singers sing and clap enthusiastically and harmoniously. The motion and zeal of the play are totally dependent on the enthusiasm and zeal of singers and audience. When the poet sees the audience talking and paying no attention to him, he loses interest [*yintizi' wāhsuh*]. When he sees them devoting their total attention to what he says, then playing becomes wonderful.”



al-Jabarty delivering his line

The question of composition, transmission, and performance leads us to the discussion of the differences between poetic dueling and other poetic forms. It has been a common practice among specialists to lump the whole vernacular poetry of Arabia together as one single undifferentiated tradition. But the native audience and the vernacular poets consider poetic dueling to be a poetic genre *sui generis*, different from other poetic genres. Each poetic genre has its own enthusiasts and a poet who excels in one genre does not necessarily excel in the other. In fact, when a dueling poet is defeated by his opponent, it is considered unfair for him to compose and use a satiric ode against the opponent. This is violating the rules of the game by mixing genres.

A close inspection of the vernacular poetic tradition of Arabia reveals that within this vast tradition there exist subgenres. There is the lyrical ode, “*giṣṭdih*,” which is usually long and which is composed to be chanted or, in most cases, recited. Then there are short ditties and poems which are composed to be sung to the accompaniment of drums or *ribābih* (a one-stringed bowed instrument) or while traveling on camel mounts. A poem sung while traveling on camel mounts is called *hġeni* (from *hġin*, “mounted camels”), and it deals usually with description of camel mounts, desert travel, or separation from the beloved. Short love poems sung at night to the accompaniment of drums are called *sāmri* (from *samar* “to stay

up at night”). Rousing poetry sung to the accompaniment of drums on the occasion of war is called *‘arḏih* (from *‘araz* “to exhibit strength”). Short poems or parts of long poems can be sung in different melodies with the accompaniment of *ribābih*. In Ḥijāz, there is a special genre called *Kasrah* (pl. *Kasrāt*) which is very similar to the Somali *balwo* (“calamity”; cf. Andrzejewski 1967, Johnson 1972). A *kasrah* consists of two or three lines to be sung, usually to the accompaniment of *samsimiyyih*.

We see, then, that the *giṣṭdih* is composed mainly to be recited while the other sub-categories are composed to be sung. The *riddiyyih* resembles these sub-categories in that it is composed to be sung, but it is different from them and from the *giṣṭdih* in that it is always composed in performance and never before. On rare occasions, composition in performance could happen in *sāmri*, *‘arḏih*, *hḡeni*, and on the *ribābih*. This means that when singing is the primary purpose of composition, composition may take place during performance.

In the *giṣṭdih* and the other sub-categories of sung poems, the patterns of rhyme and meter are limited. Invention of new patterns, though not ruled out, is rare. But in the *riddiyyih* the form can be quite complex and invention of new patterns of rhyme and meter is not infrequent. The meter, as is well known, is determined by the number of long and short syllables to each hemistich and the manner of their combination (Sowayan 1985:148-63). The meter, in turn, determines the melody (or vice versa). The connection between singing and meter makes sung poetry generally more diversified in metrical structure. This is more so when performance involves exhibition of skill in a face-to-face challenge, as in poetic competition. In dueling poetry, poets with musical ears and good singing voices are the most creative in inventing new meters and also in finding new melodies for old meters.

Rhyming words are called *ḡawāri‘* and the rhyme is called *ḡār‘ah*, “rhyme,” or *māḡaf*, “stop.” A formally complex verse in dueling poetry may have up to five, six, seven, or even eight stops, in which case it would be called *mkhōmas*, *msōdas*, *msōba‘*, or *mthōman*, accordingly. It is perhaps inaccurate to call such a long unit a verse, so we will call it a stanza for lack of a better term. Each of such super-verses will have several sub-segments, each with its own rhyme and meter. The rhyme and meter of every sub-segment will be the same as that of the corresponding sub-segment in the other stanza of the poem. Here is an example:

1.
 - a. khiṭṭārīna l-lēlih mn arba‘ garāya
 - b. ya-zēfīna lli ḡiṣarna fi wajūbak
 - c. yāsāki minna l-‘idhir ma hi bekhālih
 - d. lākinn ‘ayya z-zimān ysā‘id an-nās
 - e. ḡatta nidhabbiḡ kibūsh mgarḡanāti.
2.
 - a. lina allah akram risamt arba‘ garāya

- b. dugg az-ziyārāt w-izhamni w-ajūbak
- c. ‘azīz abu zēd yit‘azwa be-khālih
- d. w-an-nāfir mn al-jarād yrā‘i an-nās
- e. ya-shāribin min ‘idūd mgarḥanāti.
- 3. a. yah la lah lah la lah lah yah la lah lah lah
- b. ‘ind zahrāni zil‘ ismih garāgurra.
- 4. a. yah la lah lah la lah lah yah la lah lah lah
- b. lin tidagthart ya-l-ma fi garāgurra

The length and complex melodies of super-verses like the above example make it hard for the singers to remember the words and melodies. Therefore, the poet sings the entire super-verse but the singers pick up only the last sub-segment (3ab and 4ab in the above example). This last sub-segment repeated by the singers is called *tahntshah*. Among the formal constraints which the poets resort to, sometimes in order to make composition more difficult, is *shagir* (literally “to split”), which is the same as *jinās* in literary Arabic. If we take a second look at the above example we will notice that the rhyming final word in 1a is the same as the rhyming final word in 2a. The two words are the same in form and sound but different in meaning. The same thing applies to the other sub-segments in our example. Also, as a formal constraint, the poet may choose to close the verse with the same word used in the opening of the verse. This is called *mardūd*. Although we are talking here of an oral tradition, these formal constraints and complexities we are discussing remind us of *zajal*, *muwashshah*, and other post-classical literary forms in Arabic poetry.

It should be pointed out that spontaneous improvisation is an infrequent feature of *Nabaṭī* poetic tradition. In poetic dueling, composition in performance is a totally different procedure from that in epic poetry. The epic is an exceedingly long poem composed quickly at the rate of “from ten to twenty ten-syllable lines a minute” (Lord 1960:17). In poetic dueling, the purpose of the performance along with the rigid constraints of rhyme and meter make composition in performance a slow process; it takes a few minutes to compose each verse. Moreover, these constraints make it impossible for a dueling poet to compose more than a few verses in a performance.

In the fifth chapter of my book *Nabaṭī Poetry* I have dealt with the question of composition in *Nabaṭī* lyrical poetry from the poets’ viewpoint. I have analyzed the poets’ views and conceptions concerning composition as expressed in their poems. By watching dueling poets in performance, it has become clear to me that what the poets say in the introductions of their poems about the pains and labor of composition is what actually happens. We can learn a great deal about composition in lyrical poetry by watching dueling poets in action. The composer in poetic dueling appears indifferent to his surroundings and totally engrossed in the labor of composition. He

paces around twisting his rattan cane or worry beads, pulls on his mustache or beard, murmurs to himself, moves his lips constantly, and makes all kinds of gestures and movements that indicate the difficulty of his task, not to mention the incredible amounts of tea and cigarettes he consumes. Mḥammad al-Jabarti describes composition as follows: “When you see the poet absorbed in composition he is like one building a house. He is constructing and demolishing [his verses] and the audience does not know this. That brick [i.e. “word, expression”] is too small, the other too large, this one fits perfectly.”

The differences in composition between *riddiyyih* and *giṣṭdih* lead to differences in transmission. In the *giṣṭdih* composition is a slow, difficult process which precedes performance or delivery (Sowayan 1985:91-100). The following observation by Alois Musil vividly illustrates how a poet goes about composing his *giṣṭdih* (1927:236-37):

Our omnivorous poet Miz^{el} aḥu Za^{el}la was composing a poem in my honor. Since a roving versifier must earn his living by his art, he apparently thought I would pay him well for a poem I liked. It was interesting to watch his procedure. He would ponder for several minutes and then recite two verses twenty or thirty times, substituting for some of the expressions new and better ones—*azjan*, as he called them: Then he would bid Ṭāreš· pay attention and remember these verses. After Ṭāreš had learned them, Miz^{el} would be absorbed and silent again, and after a while would sing the first two verses and add the third to them. Having sung them to Ṭāreš innumerable times in his shrill voice, he would ask me to write them down while he composed the rest.

It is not difficult to see from the above observation that what is taking place is not merely composition but memorization as well. One may even draw the general conclusion that in an oral poetic tradition whenever composition comes before performance, memory plays an important role in transmission. In Arabic poetry, whether classical or vernacular, once the composition of an excellent lyrical ode is finished, it is preserved in the poet’s mind, then in public memory, and it may survive in a relatively fixed form for many generations to come.

In a *riddiyyih*, the minute a verse takes shape on the lips of the poet, he throws it at the singers and gets busy composing the other verse. The pressure of performance does not allow for memorization. Composition takes up the poet’s entire concentration, and he cannot spend any effort to memorize what he is composing. After the *riddiyyih*, poets can rarely remember the verses they just finished exchanging. Perhaps there will be among the audience or singers someone with a good memory who might remember some of the savory and provocative verses, but not all of them. Only with the introduction of tape recorders has it become possible to memorize an entire *riddiyyih* by taping it and repeating it until it becomes

fixed in memory.

Another reason why a *riddiyyih* does not survive in memory (without special aids such as tape recorders or writing) is that it is composed to be performed and enjoyed on the spot. Its primary function is entertainment. The *giṣṭdih* on the other hand is a much more serious affair. It contains maxims, “*amthāl*,” which are the guiding principles for individual action and social conduct. Its primary function is edification and elevation of mind and spirit. It is an expression of a world view and vision of life. Tribal histories and genealogies, as well as all significant social and political events, are recorded in the *giṣṭdih*. The *giṣṭdih* is a tradition associated with a vested public interest of the same type that Jan Vansina describes as having control over its recital and a guarantee against distortion through failure of memory (1961:42).

Poetic Dueling Through Time

The fact that the survival of *riddiyyih* poetry is not guaranteed through preservation in public memory makes it impossible to determine the early beginnings of this performative art, impossible to trace its development through history. The task is made yet more difficult by the absence of written records. We have to base our assumptions concerning the history of poetic dueling on mutilated and scanty samples that do not date back very far historically.

When did poetic dueling start? I posed this question to all the poets I interviewed and the answer was always the same: *gidīm*, “it is ancient.” When I asked them to name the most famous of the ancient poets, they named someone who is still living or someone who died only twenty or, at the most, thirty years ago.

The only reference to this poetic genre we find in ancient sources dealing with classical Arabic poetry is a text of a duel between ‘Ubeid Ibn al-Abras and Imru’u l-Qays in the latter’s *Dīwān* (1969:461-62). There is a likelihood that the text is forged. Nevertheless, it at least indicates that at the time of its possible forgery, poetic dueling was known, for it must have been forged after an existing model, or at least a concept. Unfortunately, the sources that recorded this early sample give the text but not the performance context. We find no mention, for example, of singers or audience. From the way the text is presented it seems that the two poets simply met and decided to compete with each other. In fact, this does happen occasionally in the vernacular tradition. What is worth noting in this classical sample is that it bears some resemblance to more primitive vernacular samples surviving from earlier times. First, each poet in the classical example delivers one line at a time, instead of two. Second, the

whole duel consists of riddles and their solutions; °Ubeid Ibn al-Abras poses the riddles and Imru'u l-Qays gives the answers to them. Riddling was once fashionable in the dueling of vernacular poets, but at that time the whole attitude towards poetic dueling was different from what it is today. It was an attitude of overt expressions of antagonism, aggression, and verbal insult, and insistence on knowing who wins and who loses. This is the reason that °Abdullāh al-°Utaybī calls poetic dueling *fannu l-mufākharah adh-dhātiyyah*, “the art of individual boasting” (1984). Today, poets say verbal abuse disrupts performance and riddling slows down composition. Before I say more on this point I shall first turn to the discussion of performance context and occasions for poetic dueling in the past.

The lack of sources makes it difficult to know how widespread poetic dueling is outside peninsular Arabia. But what I have heard of the Lebanese *Zajal* sounds close to poetic dueling. Poetic dueling is also found in Palestine (Sirhān 1979:97-113, 281-83.) In the Arabian Peninsula, poetic dueling seems to have originated in Ḥijāz and the Ḥijāzi nomads are still the most famous in this art which of late has become so widespread in the Peninsula that it has reached the Gulf states. Some of the most outstanding dueling poets come from the Western tribe of Sulaym, Hudhayl, Banū Mālik, Bal-Ḥārith, Ḥarb, and °Utaybah. This is not to say that poetic dueling has not been known in Najd for a long time. Yet, it is worth noting that the most famous dueling poets in Najd, e.g. Lwēhān, Slēmān Ibn Shrēm, °Ali Abu Mājid, and Aḥmad an-Nāṣir ash-Shāyi°, spent a good part of their lives in Ḥijāz.

When we compare poetic dueling past and present we notice that tremendous changes have taken place not only in the attitudes toward poetic dueling, as mentioned above, but also in the mode and context of performance as well as in the thematic content and contest strategy. In the old days, before the introduction of modern means of entertainment such as radio and television, people also loved to have a good time, and they of course used to find any excuse to get together and sing, especially on summer nights when the moon was full. Men would stay up all night singing and playing. Only at the break of dawn would they disperse and go directly to their fields to work. This, according to my informants, proves how rugged and enduring people used to be. As of late, the most preferable time for such gatherings is Wednesday night and Thursday night because people do not have to go to work the next morning. (Thursday and Friday are sabbath days in the Muslim calendar.)

Some informants told me the following. In the past when someone was bitten by a snake he would not go to sleep before the snake that bit him went to sleep, that is, when the morning star appeared, lest the poison should flow into his blood. In order to prevent him from going to sleep,

men of the village, or tribe, would gather together at his bedside dueling and singing all night long. If the bitten man was not cured the next day, they would say the snake turned over on its back. In such a critical case, they needed to stay up and sing every night for seven days. Later on, when the Wahhabi movement gained strength in Arabia, religious authorities prevented people from singing. When the poets could no longer contain their urge and yearned to play, they would pretend that one of their people was bitten by a snake. Through this ruse, religious authorities could not prevent them from performing.

In wintertime, social activities are curbed because the nomads split up and disperse in the desert while the farmers are busy plowing their fields, not to mention the influence of the extremely cold weather at night. But in the summertime, the season of grain and date harvests, it is time for reunions and get-togethers. Tribal lineages converge at their tribal wells near the settled country. Nomads and villagers come together to renew their economic relationships and resume their social activities. Communication between these two groups becomes very intense and visitation very frequent. Poets from both sides arrange to meet almost nightly to exchange news and newly-composed poems, and to engage in poetic dueling.

It is during the summertime, when people come together, that marriages, circumcisions, and similar activities which call for public celebrations are performed. Such festive occasions are called “*mzayyan*,” “*mşanna*.” Starting early in the morning, the host of the night’s *mzayyan* would hoist a banner, “*yighizz ar-rāyih*,” as declaration to everyone that they are all welcome to his place at sunset. Before sunset, the women gather a high heap of wood and a large bonfire is lighted which can be seen from a great distance. Dueling may start in the late afternoon, before sunset; this is called *ar-rāyih*.

In the early days the rules of poetic dueling were not as formalized as they are today. For example, there was no clear beginning and end for each match, “*mihraf*,” and the match was not so much between two poets as between two opposing groups. Anyone who had a fitting line ready might step forward into the playground and sing it out. Contributions of this sort might range from one single line to ten lines in an interrupted sequence, not only two lines at a time as is the case today.

During the past times of political anarchy in Arabia, when poets were the voice of their people, dueling poets were in most cases real antagonists, each representing his own tribe or district. In this case, the two groups of singers were usually divided between the two poets, each one having his own group of singers and supporters. Yet, according to the rules of the game, each group of singers was obliged to sing the lines of the two poets with equal enthusiasm. For example, if one poet belonged to the

tribe of Slēm and his opponent to the tribe of Ḥarb, one line of singers would be from Slēm and the other line would be from Ḥarb. But the singers from Ḥarb would sing the lines of the poet from Slēm just as they would sing the lines of the poet from Ḥarb, and vice versa.

During these days, when the poet stepped into the *mal'abah* he was putting his life on the line, figuratively speaking, and he was betting on his resourcefulness and ability to return fire, no matter what verbal guns his opponent could muster. The tone of poetic dueling was overtly aggressive. Every poet would try to be “on top” by praising his own people and boasting of his poetic genius while at the same time mocking his opponent and taunting his opponent’s group (al-ʿUtaybī 1984). The poetic argument might have gone something like this:

- A. We are the fire that will burn you up.
- B. We are the torrent that will wipe you out.
- A. We are the mountain that cannot be moved.
- B. We are the thunderbolt that will split you in two.

To prevent any fight that might result from such sharp exchanges of words, a distinguished man of prestige and honor was chosen from every group to guarantee that no harm would be inflicted by any member of his group upon the opposing poet, and he would give his headdress as a token of countenance, “*wajh*,” and sincerity. Yet squabbles, even serious fights, could not be avoided on some occasions. A duel might unearth an old feud, or remind someone of a forgotten revenge to be taken upon one of the people present, or one of the poets and his group might not be able to swallow all the insults heaped upon them by the other poet.

Some of the poets I interviewed said they remembered in their young days when men and women used to sing and play together in poetic dueling. This is called *al-khlēṭi*, “mixed play.” When the dueling gets going, “*ila ʿamar al-liʿb*,” a beautiful lass steps into the playground and starts dancing, her hair unplaited and holding a rattan cane. After she gets tired another one steps in, and so on. Dancing girls are referred to as *sammānāt/as-samin*. In some regions the dancing girl is called *al-ḥāshi* (literally “young camel”) or *al-jilūbah* (literally “a camel driven to the market for sale,” perhaps because she is of a marriageable age. Actually, before she steps into the *mal'abah* a fictitious price is paid to her father or brother to let her dance). A poet of reputation could refuse to step into the *mal'abah* before a *ḥāshi* is brought in. The *ḥāshi* herself may become the topic of poetic exchange (cf. Sirḥān 1979:227, and al-ʿUzayzī 1981:248-49).

Among the Northern tribes poetic dueling is not known, and the *ḥāshi* dances in the *dahḥih*, a collective performance resembling the *Ṣahjih* in Palestine. The *dahḥih* resembles the *riddiyih* in that men of the tribe

get together to sing and dance with a poet improvising lines for them to sing in their midst. But it is different in that there is no competition involved.

It is worth noting that *riddiyih* and *dahhah* are not the only ritualized occasions where women were allowed to unveil and dance in public. In major tribal battles maidens used to loosen their tresses and bare their breasts and yell shouts of encouragement to the fighting men of their tribe with the daughter of their chief ahead of them riding her camel (Sowayan 1985:36-37). Such a ritualized behavior deserves further investigation, but for our purpose here it is sufficient to note that it occurred only in combat, actual or verbal.

Verbal obscenities are another institutionalized license indulged in under the context of *riddiyih* performance but not allowed under normal conditions. In their attacks and counter-attacks, the poets may resort to verbal obscenities, a strategy much favored by the audience because it is entertaining and it can turn the performance into a hilarious show. In content, this practice reminds us somewhat of "playing the dozens," a verbal dueling game played by American Blacks (Abrahams 1962). The purpose of this strategy is to ridicule and disparage the poet's opponent and smear his honor. This is somewhat similar to the strategy followed by Turkish boys in their verbal duels (Dundes et al. 1978:73):

One of the most important goals is to force one's opponent into a female, passive role. This may be done by defining the opponent or his mother or sister as a wanton sexual receptacle. If the male opponent is thus defined, it is usually by means of casting him as a submissive anus, an anus which must accept the brunt of the verbal duelist's attacking phallus. A more indirect technique is to disparage or threaten the opponent's mother or sister, which is a serious attack upon his male honor. Thus the victim either has to submit to phallic aggression himself or else watch helplessly as phallic aggression is carried out upon his female extensions, his mother or sister. Of course, the victim normally does not simply remain passive. Rather he tries in turn to place his attacker in a passive, female role. Much of the skill in the dueling process consists of parrying phallic thrusts such that the would-be attacking penis is frustrated and the would-be attacker is accused of receiving a penis instead.

One cannot but wonder how the Arabians, especially the nomads, who are so courteous and decorous in their conversation and interpersonal relations and who guard their honor jealously, could allow such obscenities. Of course, we cannot understand such forms of behavior by merely looking at their surface manifestations. We must have recourse to the subconscious and attempt deep structure analysis. The psychological interpretation offered by Dundes et al. for the Turkish boys' verbal dueling, though it may not be quite valid in its finer details, offers good directions for dealing with this issue.

After the unification of Saudi Arabia under the late King ʿAbdulazīz Ibn Saʿūd and the discovery of oil later on, tremendous and rapid political, economic, social, and cultural changes have been taking place. Consequently, gradual changes are taking place with regard to the form, content, and context of poetic dueling. More and more, it is becoming, as mentioned above, strictly a form of entertainment. Dueling poets are shifting their roles from spokesmen of their tribes or districts to a “semi-professional” class who are paid highly for their services and who vie with each other for wages and economic gains. Even the audience no longer chooses its favorite poets according to tribal or regional affiliation, but rather according to “professional” criteria. I am speaking here only of trends, and the old values and themes have not died out, surviving in atrophied forms.

Nowadays, poetic dueling has become strictly a form of entertainment and poets are highly paid for their performances. This is considered shameful by the old-timers. They have told me that such a practice is suitable only for night-club dancers and singers. In the old days poets were prouder and more dignified; they say, if dueling were to be performed at weddings or circumcisions, some poets would make it a point to come late after supper so as not to partake of the public feast and thus expose themselves to the accusation that they had come to fill their bellies.

It has always been the case that dueling poetry is more symbolic and figurative than lyrical poetry, but lately it is becoming more so. Concealing poetic meaning is called *ghishsh*, *ghaṭuw*, *dafin*, i.e. “diluting, covering, burying (the meaning).” A verse with a hidden meaning is called *mlaghgham*, *mrahham*, i.e. “mined, loaded (with meaning).” This mechanism resembles hidden messages and veiled speech practiced by Somali poets (Andrzejewski and Galaal 1966, Andrzejewski 1967, Johnson 1972). Concealing the meaning is considered very clever and highly desirable because it challenges the intellect of the opponent and the audience. Through this means, the dueling poets can pass verbal messages back and forth between them with an intended hidden meaning which is understood only by them and perhaps by a few of the people present. The rest of the audience is distracted by the apparent signification, which is not the real meaning. It is verses of this sort that usually survive. They become delightful topics of conversation and people repeat them frequently in an attempt to figure out their meanings. Everyone argues that his interpretation is the correct one. A verse that can be interpreted in so many ways is called *wisīc*, “vast, extended” and *malyān*, “full.” The more one attends performances of poetic dueling and associates with dueling poets, the more one is able to understand and enjoy their verses.

In order to understand a poetic duel fully it is not enough to decode its figurative language and symbolic allusions. It is also necessary to know

the background events which are dealt with in the duel. In the past those events were mostly personal or tribal. For example, the two poets might work out a misunderstanding between them, or discuss a rumor that has been spread about one of them, or any similar topic. But nowadays the emphasis has shifted to social and political issues. Poets are beginning to draw their themes from world events and television shows. This is due to the rise of the level of awareness among the poets, thanks to literacy and modern means of communications. One of the most famous dueling poets of this age is a young man by the name of Muṭṭlaq ibn Ḥamīd ath-Thubayti. He has a master's degree in literature from the University of Manchester. Most dueling poets agree that Muṭṭlaq is playing a very influential and leading role in transforming poetic dueling from petty tribal and personal squabbles to the treatment of modern issues and current events. Muṭṭlaq told me that the theme of a duel should be relevant to the modern age and the verses should be constructed in such a vague and ambiguous way that their aesthetic value lies in that everyone can impose on them his own interpretation and find in them some sort of relief and fulfillment. In this way, the verses of a duel can serve as a projection device through which we can gauge individual as well as national anxieties and concerns.

There are other university graduates besides Muṭṭlaq ath-Thubayti who have gained popularity and established names for themselves as excellent performers in poetic dueling. In addition to these highly educated people, there are very prominent social figures and notables who engage in poetic dueling, not the least of whom was the late King Faiṣal Ibn Sa'ūd. I mention this not merely to prove how popular poetic dueling is, but also to show that in the Middle East (and perhaps in all cultures with ancient histories) it is very difficult to separate the literate from the oral, the folk from the non-folk, the popular from the elite. All these sociocultural aspects interact and blend together in terms of form, content, context, performers, and manners of performance.

Cultural and Literary Context of Poetic Dueling

In his book *The Presence of the Word* (1967:192-222), Walter Ong argues that poetic rivalry is a manifestation of the polemic world view. Because of the prevalence of personal tensions, fliting—the concerted exchange of personal abuse combined with boast and challenge—is a staple of oral performance and forms a characteristic verbal institution in pre-literate societies (197):

The reasons for the overt hostilities of early man's life world were of course complex. One evident reason was the lack of mastery over environment. An economy of scarcity prevailed everywhere, as it still prevails over much

of our globe. With a limited supply even of necessities, abundance for one automatically spelled scarcity for others or—what came to the same thing— was thought to do so.

How does this statement apply to poetic dueling in Arabia?

One of the most characteristic features of traditional Arabic poetry, whether classical or vernacular, is that it is an engaging poetry. A poet composes to stir audible and perceptible reaction not only from his public audience but, more importantly, from other poets. Many poets address their verses as a direct appeal or threat or challenge to another poet. Following the same strict rules of rhyme and meter employed by the first poet, the respondent answers his challenger, either emulating him or returning his friendly words or refuting his claims and accusations. The Arabic language abounds with technical terms describing this literary state of affairs; e.g. *naqā'id*, *mu'aradāt*, *musājalāt*, etc. Another aspect of this engaging characteristic of Arabic traditional poetry is that the poet under certain circumstances may hide his intentions and veil the meaning of his verses, thus challenging the intelligence of the audience and the respondent. Again, the Arabic language abounds with technical terms referring to this practice; e.g. *lahn*, *ta'rīd*, etc. These facts about Arabic poetry are common knowledge and I need not dwell on them here. My purpose is only to indicate that poetic dueling is in a sense the encapsulation in a highly condensed and highly charged public performance of literary phenomena which are widespread and have a long history in Arab culture.

Poetic dueling is also the manifestation of well entrenched cultural values and social norms which, in one way or another, are echoed in the metaphoric language of dueling poets and which influence the context and mechanism of their performance. From ancient times until a few decades ago, the arms of the Bedouins—such as the lance, the saber, and the coat of mail, along with the horse—allowed full scope for the display of bravery with little loss of life. The Bedouins were fond of single combat because it was spectacular and gave the individual warrior an opportunity to distinguish himself. When two knights met in a duel on the battlefield, it was part of the ritual for one of them to gallop his horse around brandishing his arms and shouting vociferously his war cry and two or three verses which he composed on the spot and in which he praised himself and mocked his adversary. The adversary answered likewise. The verbal combat accentuated and highlighted the actual combat. The two parties of the dueling knights formed two halting lines opposite each other and watched the fight.

Because of the constant struggle against nature and against other men, desert life puts a premium on manly courage and the combative traits of character. The nomads live in perpetual conflict with each other, not only armed conflict but more commonly legal conflict. The *lex non scripta*

of the desert is very complex. To cope with the volatile and potentially explosive politics of the desert in the absence of central authority, the nomads devised complex codes and lengthy procedures of litigation which served to minimize danger and mitigate the shedding of blood. To win these legal proceedings, one must be alert, shrewd, astute, perceptive, quick-witted, and endowed with verbal skills. These legal procedures sharpen the wit and the tongue. Articulate orators and eloquent poets are masters in presenting their cases. They try to silence their adversaries with cogent arguments and irrefutable testimonies employing formulaic verse and rhymed prose. Should legal channels fail to establish peace and armed conflict become inevitable, poets of feuding tribes unleash their tongues at each other, each boasting of himself and his tribe while mocking the enemy tribe and its poets.

Furthermore, when one group wishes to sue for peace, ask for assistance, or propose an alliance with another group, it sends a delegation to that group for that purpose. On the way, a poet from the delegation composes a ditty, “*ḥdāt*,” pointing out the purpose of the mission. Members of the delegation sing the ditty as they drive their camel mounts. When they reach the vicinity of the host group and their singing becomes audible, the latter sends the children of the camp to go pick up the ditty and bring it back so that the host poets can compose a suitable answer. When the delegation reaches the camp, its members remain seated on their mounts singing their ditty and they do not dismount before they hear the answer of the hosts.

We see then that the engaging character of the Arabian poetry is an echo of the engaging nature of the structure of a feuding tribal society which is organized around the well-known system of fission and fusion. In this system, particularly since it is characterized by constant feuding, neutrality is hard to maintain. Every individual is either with or against, an ally or a rival, close or distant. From the sociological point of view, poetry serves to reinforce and elucidate the social structure; and from the psychological point of view, it shows how social realities color the individual’s worldview, attitude towards others, and perception of himself. This is nowhere more evident than in dueling poetry.

King Saud University, Riyadh

[Field research for this paper has been partly financed by the Research Center of the College of Arts of King Saud University. The paper is based on extended interviews with the following poets: Jārallāh aṣ-Ṣwāṭ, Reshīd az-Zlāmi, S‘ūd as-Se‘īdi, Shlēwīh ibn Shallāh, Ṣayyāf al-Ḥarbi, Ṭalag al-Hudhayli, ‘Abdal‘azīz al-Miḡhim (Suhayl), ‘Ali al-Gari, ‘Uzallāh as-Slemi, Mḡammad ibn Twēm, Mḡammad al-Jabarti, Mḡammad Se‘īd adh-Dhwēbi, Mḡammad al-Miḡsin (ad-Dirm), Mḡammad ibn Shallāh, Mastūr al-‘Ṣēmi, and Miṭlag ath-Thbēti. To every one of these poets I owe a debt of gratitude. During the process of writing this paper I had many fruitful discussions with Dr. Marzūg ibn Tunbāk

and Dr. °Abdullah al-Mi°tāni. The first draft was read and commented upon by Dr. °Izzat Khattāb, Dr. °Ali Jād, Dr. °Abdulwahhāb al-Masīri, Dr. Nazeer al-°Azmah, and Paul Majkut. I am grateful to all of them for their suggestions, and I may yet regret having not always followed their advice.]

References

- Abrahams 1962 Roger D. Abrahams. "Playing the Dozens." *Journal of American Folklore*, 75:209-20.
- Andrzejewski 1967 B. W. Andrzejewski. "The Art of the Miniature in Somali Poetry." *African Language Review*, 6:5-16.
- Andrzejewski and Galaal 1966 _____ and Musa H. I. Galaal. "The Art of the Verbal Message in Somali Poetry." *Hamburger Beiträge zur Afrika-Kunde*, 5:29-39.
- Dundes et al. 1978 Alan Dundes, Jerry W. Leach, and Bora Özkök. "The Strategy of Turkish Boys' Verbal Dueling." In *Essays in Folkloristics*. Ed. by Alan Dundes. Folklore Institute, 34/1, Kailash Puri, Meerut, India (First published in *Journal of American Folklore* 83[1970]: 325-49).
- Imru' al-Qays 1969 *Dīwān Imru' al-Qays*. Ed. by Muḥammad abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm. 3rd edition. Dār al-Ma°ārif bi-Miṣr.
- Johnson 1972 John William Johnson. *Heelloy Heellelloy: The Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry*. Bloomington: The Research Center for the Language Sciences.
- Lord 1960 Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968 et seq.
- Musil 1927 Alois Musil. *Arabia Deserta*. New York: C.R. Crane.
- Ong 1967 Walter J. Ong. *The Presence of the Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sirḥān 1979 Nimr Sirḥān. *aghāntna ash-sha°biyyah fi d-ḍiffah al-gharbiyyah*. 2nd edition. Kuwait: Kazmah.
- Sowayan 1985 Saad °Abdullah Sowayan. *Nabaṭi Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- al-°Utaybī 1984 °Abdullāh al-°Utaybī. "al-galtih: fann al-mufākharah adh-dhātiyyah." In *dirāsāt fī ash-shi°r ash-sha°bī al-Kuwaytī*. Kuwait: Mu°assasat al-Khalīj li-ṭ-ṭibā°ah wa-n-nashr. (First published in *al-Bayān*, no. 183, June 1981.)

- al-°Uzayzī 1981 Rōkos Ibn Zā'id al-°Uzayzī. *gāmūs al-°ādāt wa-l-lahajāt wa-l-'a wābid al'urduniyyah*. vol. 2. 2nd ed. Jordan: Mudīriyyat al-Maṭābī° al-°Askariyyah.
- Vansina 1961 Jan Vansina. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Trans. by H. M. Wright. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.