Preface

The pre-Islamic ode (*qaṣīdah*) has traditionally been regarded as one of the twin foundations of Arab-Islamic literary culture, the other being the Qurʾān. And just as the Qurʾānic text, as the word of God, was held to be inimitable, so too the poetry of the pagan pre-Islamic era (the Jāhiliyyah or “Age of Ignorance”) was considered to be of a quality unattainable by the poets of the Islamic period. The rich history of classical Arabic literature stretches from the deepest recesses of the Jāhiliyyah (roughly the late fifth century A.D.) into the first half of the twentieth century. From the advent of Islam, traditionally dated from the Hijrah (when Muḥammad and a small group of Muslims migrated from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622 = 1 H.), the *qaṣīdah* played profane antitext to the Qurʾānic sacred text. This dynamic tension formed the generative core of a vast body of literature, sacred and secular, poetry and prose. Not only are the literary texts themselves informed by this dialectic, but it is everywhere present in the vast exegetical and hermeneutical production of the scholiasts, so that pre-Islamic poetry and the extensive body of lore that accompanies it constantly appear in Qurʾānic commentary, and vice versa.

Despite the general recognition of the esteem in which Arabs have traditionally held the poetry of their pagan past, modern critics from both East and West have yet to formulate a poetics through which to analyze and evaluate this body of verse. Orientalist studies, whether well or ill disposed toward pre-Islamic poetry, have tended to read the recurrent themes of this originally oral tradition as purely descriptive

of bedouin life and to attribute the paratactic juxtaposition of themes within the qaṣīdah to the illogic or prelogic of the bedouin.

In the present book I undertake to bring together findings in the fields of literary criticism, anthropology, and history of religions to create a poetics suitable to a body of bedouin tribal poetry that was oral in composition and, until its collection and compilation some time in the second or third Islamic century, in preservation. I propose, first, that this poetry is ritual in both form and function and offer the patterns of rites of passage and of sacrifice as a basis for interpretation. Second, I propose to employ the extensive body of lore, legend, and myth which accompanies pre-Islamic poetry in the classical commentaries and literary compendia of the Islamic period as an exegetical tool for reading the qaṣīdah. Finally, I suggest a distinct inter- and intratextual aesthetics for originally oral poetry which is intimately derived from the exigencies of oral composition and preservation and of ritual obligation and function. At the same time, however, I attempt to address the paradoxical identity of the pre-Islamic qaṣīdah, which, although oral and pagan in origin, was codified and institutionalized as one of the twin foundations of a preeminently literary Arab-Islamic culture. In no way do I intend to suggest that the ritual paradigmatic approach to pre-Islamic poetry is exclusive or exhaustive; rather, I want to explore a hitherto neglected aspect of the complex and multifaceted poeticity of the Arabic qaṣīdah.

In Part I, "Presenting the Ritual Paradigm," I argue that the tripartite classical Arabic ode (qaṣīdah), consisting of the *nasīb* (description of the ruined abode and lost mistress), *raḥīl* (desert journey and camel description), and *fakhr* (praise for self and tribe), is not a series of arbitrary and unrelated descriptive passages, as has been asserted by both Arab and Orientalist critics, but rather reflects a ritual pattern. Taking as its model Arnold van Gennep's formulation of the rite of passage/initiation, Chapter 1 is an analysis of *The Mu'allaqah of Labīd* in light of archetypal, structuralist, and poststructuralist literary theory. Further, I show that the *akhbār* (biographical anecdotes) concerning Labīd in the classical Arab-Islamic sources form a literary construct or persona that in archetypal terms parallels the structure of the qaṣīdah. Chapter 2 adds to the theoretical framework of Chapter 1 the theories of sacrifice propounded by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Edmund Leach, and René Girard and the work on blood vengeance among the Arabs by Henri Lammens and Joseph Chelhod to establish that the pre-Islamic poem of blood vengeance likewise reflects a ritual pattern. It

establishes that the taking of blood vengeance as depicted in the akhbār, as well as the poetry, constituted a blood sacrifice that marked the passage from childhood to adulthood, and that the institution of blood vengeance served, along the lines of Mauss's theories of the gift, as a ritual exchange of sacrificial victims.

The purpose of Part II, "The Paradigm of Passage Manqué," is to demonstrate that the poetry of the *ṣaʿālīk* (brigands), although it does not exhibit the tripartite structure of the classical *qaṣīdah*, can nevertheless be interpreted in light of the same ritual paradigm as the full form, as a *rite de passage manqué*, that is, a failed or aborted rite of passage, in which the passenger/poet remains perpetually in the "liminal" antisocial phase that corresponds to the *raḥīl* section of the *qaṣīdah*. Drawing on the work of the Classical (Greek) scholars Marie Delcourt, Paul Diel, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Jean-Pierre Vernant, the studies of Taʿabbāṭa Sharran and al-Shanfarā in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate that these two *ṣaʿālīk* exhibit in both their akhbār and their poetry the characteristics of the passenger *manqué*: the irregular gait, the deviation from or perversion of social norms, the use of ruse and trickery, and the like, and that the *ṣuʿlūk* poem, lacking the section of aggregation or praise of the tribe, can, in effect, be termed a *qaṣīdah manqué*.

Taking as its working proposition the ritual nature of pre-Islamic poetry as demonstrated in the preceding chapters and its oral-formulaic character as established in the studies of James Monroe and Michael Zwettler, Part III, "Orality and Gender in the Elegy," defines an aesthetics appropriate to this sort of verse. Referring to the studies of orality and literacy by Eric Havelock and Walter Ong, I focus on the mnemonic imperative of oral poetry—that is, whatever is not remembered/memorized is lost. Chapter 5 investigates the production and perpetuation of meaning in the closed oral-formulaic system of pre-Islamic women's elegiac verse. It deals in particular with the concepts of polysemy and intertextuality in the repetition of formulaic phrases. Chapter 6 concludes from its analysis of five poems of blood vengeance by Muḥallil ibn Rabīʿah that, in the absence of reliable prose akhbār and commentaries, the body of oral-formulaic and ritual verse serves an intertextual exegetical function through which variations on a particular motif from poem to poem serve to explicate one another. Within the poem a similar intratextual exegesis operates, whereby, through the repetition of the same message by means of a variety of metaphors and images, the preservation of meaning is guaranteed. In the course of the analysis of the poems in these two chapters, it becomes increasingly clear that a

gender differentiation is operative in the ritual obligations of men and women to fallen kinsmen and in the formal and thematic requirements of its ritual poetic expression. Finally, these two chapters demonstrate that the composition of both men's and women's elegies was perceived as an act of sacrifice and redemption.

In Part IV, "The Master Poem," the concluding chapter, "Regicide and Retribution," takes as its subject what has traditionally been regarded as the best achieved *qaṣīdah* in the Arabic language, *The Mu'allāqah of Imru' al-Qays*. This chapter begins with an analysis of the *akhbār* of Imru' al-Qays, which reveals two fundamental components: first, the prodigality or "arrested development" of the poet's youth, and second, the domination in the later parts of the theme of exaggerated blood vengeance for the poet's slain royal father. I then proceed on the principle of the exegetical value of the *akhbār* to argue that Imru' al-Qays's masterpiece can be read as a "sublimated" poem of blood vengeance, that is, one in which the metaphorical expression has so displaced the literal that it is no longer even stated. In this interpretation of the master poem of the Arabic *qaṣīdah* tradition, I add a final ritual paradigm to the rite of passage and rite of sacrifice: Theodor Gaster's "seasonal pattern" of rite and myth. The effect of what I have termed the "sublimation of imagery" is to raise Imru' al-Qays's *Mu'allāqah* above the level of the individual poem of blood vengeance, such as those of Muḥallil in Chapter 6, to a more mythic expression of pollution and purification and of the hero's accession to power, one that shares the same form-determining structure as ancient Near Eastern ritual, myth, and drama.

Far from being a purely theoretical work, *The Mute Immortals Speak* presents close readings of a selected body of poems and the lore that surrounds them. These are presented in original translations in such a way as to form a subcorpus from which the reader of English can get a sense of the dense intertextuality, the thematic canon, and even the distinct poetic lexicon of the pre-Islamic Arabic *qaṣīdah*. Above all, the contemporary English idiom of the poetry translations is meant to convey with directness and immediacy the power and beauty of the originals. In attempting to accomplish this goal, however, the translations are often at a considerable remove from the "literal." So, for the reader of Arabic, the original poetic texts have been provided in an appendix keyed by bracketed numbers to the English text.

In the transliteration of Arabic proper names, terms, and phrases I have used the Library of Congress system with some modifications

for long vowels and with the addition of case endings for phrases of poetry.

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Poem: A Paradigm of Passage Manqué,” which appeared in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 4 (1984): 661–78, appears in revised form as Chapter 3. Finally, some brief passages from my book *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the ‘Abbāsīd Age*, published by E. J. Brill, Leiden, in 1991, appear with some revision in Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

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