Foreword

by Gregory Nagy

Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition, by Dwight Fletcher Reynolds, introduces an important new perspective into the Myth and Poetics series. An intensive study of heroic poetry (the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* epic) in al-Bakātūsh, the Nile Delta “village of the poets,” this book concretely illustrates the centrality of performance in the very process of composition or recomposition in oral traditions. Or, to put it in Saussure’s terms, we see how the element of *parole* is key to understanding the *langue* of the poetic process. Reynolds’s emphasis on the performative dimension of oral poetics gives the reader a chance to observe how an oral tradition works in its own social framework. The author explains the tradition itself, not just a given text sample of the tradition.

Another highlight of the book is its emphasis on a poetic mentality that assumes a dialogue linking poet and audience with the characters in the story being told. Such a mentality has been investigated in the case of Homeric poetry by classicists such as Joseph Russo and Bennett Simon, but here we see, for the very first time, a detailed demonstration on the basis of a living tradition, and the result is a quantum leap in our understanding of oral epic. Reynolds isolates those tenuous moments of performance when poets and audience members alike expect to find reflections, or interactions, between their reality and the reality of the epic heroes. The poetic tradition of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* struggles to reconcile and even unite the worlds of poets and heroes, men of words and men of deeds. The heroes may be long dead, but they become ever-present each time the epic performance gets under way.

This book brings another new perspective to the Myth and Poetics

series. Unlike most ethnographers of today, Reynolds has taken with him into his fieldwork the questions classicists and other literary critics ask about the very nature of epic as genre. His research in a living oral epic tradition corroborates, and has in fact been strongly influenced by, Richard Martin's work on speech acts in Homer, *The Language of Heroes* (1989), the very first book in this series.

Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes addresses the performative realities of a living epic tradition. It accounts for the economic forces that shape the dynamics of performance, the individual poet's personal ambition to be popular, and the artistic choices necessitated by the immediacy of interaction with the audience. It demonstrates that epic can represent very different things to audiences of different social and educational backgrounds. Refuting the stereotypical image of a static "folk" poem, supposedly immutable from time immemorial, Reynolds's book reveals an epic tradition open to constant reshaping and reinterpretation, even within its conservative rural setting. In its performative context, epic is revealed as an ongoing interaction of poet, audience, and the heroes that it glorifies.