INTRODUCTION

POETRY DUELING IN ARABIC

It is after ten o’clock on a late June evening in Fandaqumīyah, a tiny village in the hills between Jinin and Nablus in the West Bank. I have come here to witness the poetry dueling that is an integral part of the traditional Palestinian wedding of this region. The wedding eve celebration, or sahrah (pl. saharāt), is taking place in the street in front of the groom’s family home. I and the other women who have chosen to leave the women’s indoor party are crowded on the flat rooftop of the three-story building overlooking the all-male celebration in honor of the groom and his father. For nearly two hours now, we have been standing at this roof edge, our bodies pushing against each other and against the waist-high cement wall that encircles the roof, watching the poetry duel taking place below and chatting amongst ourselves. The poetry, sung without musical accompaniment, is broadcast electronically through loudspeakers erected at either end of the performance space. The feedback and electronic hiss of the equipment render the words of the poetry barely understandable to anyone who is not already familiar with the art, but the rhythm of the performance, marked by the audience’s responses, is clear, and the excitement of barely contained celebration is palpable. Some women have been vocal participants in the celebration, their zaghrīd and ululations mingling with the poets’ electronically amplified singing and the sound of hundreds of men clapping, dancing, and chanting refrains below. The hired poets Mūsā and Jihād Ḥāfīz have been leading the host and guests through the forms and melodies that are traditional to the sahrah poetry performance: the exchange of quatrains—the somber yā ḥalāli yā māli, a livelier murabba, and the ‘atābā, another slow genre, with its complex paronomasia—and the call-and-response of the far‘awī which this group, eager to participate actively in the performance, greets with special enthusiasm. The qaṣīd, a long ode that often begins or ends a sahrah, is conspicuously absent; the

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1 Zaghrīd are one-line tunes sung at a very high pitch and characterized by yodeling. They are usually improvised by women at many types of celebrations.
men who form a moving ring surrounding the two poets as they perform are young and energetic, more interested in dancing than listening. Suddenly, a young man emerges from the audience to take Jihād’s microphone, much to the excitement of the women around me who increase their ululating and singing of *zaghārīd*. In verse, the local poet challenges Mūsā to “duel” with him in poetry. The men below are also excited and begin to clap more complex rhythms. The poets do not debate a topic; rather, the duel consists mainly of boasting by each poet and prediction of the opponent’s imminent defeat. In other words, the duel itself is a metalinguistic commentary on the performance in process, interspersed with the praise, greetings, and chivalrous themes which have dominated the evening.

The exchange between Mūsā Ḥāfīz and the local poet lasts only a few minutes, but it greatly energizes the evening’s performance. Mūsā and Jihād are brothers and poetry partners, and they almost always perform together at weddings. As regular partners, they know each other’s performance style, strengths, and weaknesses well. Like improvising musicians, they support each other through the performance of material that, though not necessarily planned or rehearsed, is intimately familiar to both of them. They are very good at what they do; indeed, Mūsā Ḥāfīz is one of the best-known oral poets in the Galilee and northern West Bank, and during the season (May through October), he is generally booked on weekends for months in advance. However, the short interjection from the local poet adds an element of excitement to the night’s entertainment that Mūsā and Jihād Ḥāfīz cannot provide alone. Of course, part of the excitement arises from the wedding participants’ pride in the poetic and performative ability of one of their own, in the fact that one from their family or village is capable of standing in the poetry arena and responding appropriately to a professional poet. But the excitement is also due at least as much to the element of challenge and difference that this poet adds to the evening. Jihād and Mūsā, as regular foils for each other’s verses, are expected to be able to put on a good show. For Mūsā to perform as well with a poet other than his brother, one trained in the same tradition, but who has not yet performed with him before, is proof that the poetic tradition is just that, a tradition fully shared by both the hired poets who have come from outside to perform and the residents of Fandaqumiyah. And, perhaps more importantly, for the young man from the village to succeed in performing with Mūsā Ḥāfīz is proof that the village of Fandaqumiyah is an active participant in