THE DEATH-SONG OF ʿÂMIR KHAFĀJĪ: PUNS IN AN ORAL AND PRINTED EPISODE OF SĪRAT BANI HILĀL

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Bani Hilāl tribe migrated from Arabia through the Levant, Egypt, and across North Africa to Tunis. This migration, and the wars accompanying it, form the historical backdrop to the folk epic, Sīrat Bani Hilāl, known throughout the Arabic-speaking world. The Hilālī epic, whose oral provenance is now considered established, encompasses numerous oral and written variants in the various Arab countries. Despite the fact that there is a manifest diversity of style, of dialects, and also of contents, in these many versions, both the broad outline of events related, and their cast of characters, remain fairly constant. To some extent, this consistency reflects the semi-historical origins of the legend; however, the structural organization of the story and of its episodes also contributes to its general narrative stability.

The third section of Sīrat Bani Hilāl, entitled al-Taghrība ("the move to the west"), provides an example of such structural organization: the section first introduces the heroes, Abu Zayd the Hilālī, Diyāb, and the Bani Hilāl tribe, then describes their departure from the Najd, and finally narrates the death of the enemy Khalīfa Zanāṭī, ruler of Tunis. Between these two events, the migration of the Bani Hilāl tribe from the Arabian peninsula and their eventual conquest of Tunis, the text presents a series of battles, love stories, and episodes of shifting alliances.

This paper concerns only one small sequence from al-Taghrība, the death-song of ʿĀmir Khafājī. We will first analyze an oral, Egyptian version of this episode and then compare it to a parallel printed version that exists in a cheap popular edition (al-qasas al-shacbī) currently circulating in Cairo. In comparing these two texts, one oral and one printed, we will attempt to explain a noticeable and puzzling discrepancy between

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them: the printed text contains few, if any puns, yet in the oral version, paronomasia (jinās) is a characteristic, stressed trope.

Near the outset of the long migration westward, the Banī Hilāl encounter Āmir Khafājī: our episode is organized around this character. In the oral text under consideration (which was composed and sung by an illiterate poet and reciter Sa'd al-Shā'īr of Manṣūra Governorate, Egypt), Āmir Khafājī is the rebellious son of Durghām, king of Iraq, and abandons family and homeland to join the Hilālī migration. He dies a particularly inglorious death in Tunis, when he accepts the hospitality of Khalīfā Zanātī, who is commander of the armies of Tunis. There Āmir Khafājī is stabbed in the back by Muṭāwa, a soldier of Khalīfā Zanātī.

Āmir Khafājī’s life and death bracket the beginning and the end of the westward march. Likewise, Āmir Khafājī’s beginning and end are organized by a straightforward opposition, since his story begins with un- filial desertion in the east and ends in an inglorious death in the west. This opposition is emphasized by the nature of his death, a death in which a soldier dies nowhere near the battlefield. Āmir Khafājī’s role in the narrative is unique, not only in the context of the Hilālī epic itself, but also in comparison to other epic heroes.

Like other epic heroes, such as Roland, Rustam, and Siegfried, Āmir Khafājī meets his death through the murderous act of a villain. In addition, like other epic heroes, his death is introduced by a death-song, which both summarizes the essential characteristics of, and is itself an action belonging to, the hero’s life. As Olrik’s folk narrative laws remind us, “each attribute of a person must be expressed in actions—otherwise it is nothing.” In obedience to this law Āmir Khafājī’s death-song is a gesture: it not only reports the life and character of Āmir Khafājī in the Hilālī cycle, it embodies in its expression the essential nature of that life and character.

The death-song is a common element of folk epic. In a society founded on chivalric and military ideals, the knight’s life may be filled with extraordinary exploits, but death comes to him nonetheless. The death-song as a celebration gives the hero’s death its special ceremonial qual-