Honors LA 10

November 13th, 2013

Bedouin Authors and the Oral Tradition

**Directions**: Read the below questions to know what you’ll be answering after the reading. Then, read the following information thoroughly. When you are finished, respond to the questions in your journal.

\*\*\*Due Thursday, November 14th at the beginning of class\*\*\*

**1**. In your own words, explain the purpose of “humanistic texts.” What other texts like this do you know of?

**2**. Read “The Raging War.” Summarize the author’s message in your own words. What is your reaction to this poem? What do you think the purpose of this poem is? What events could have originally inspired this poem (think about how messages can change, be exaggerated, or become more elaborate, over time)? Cite specific lines from this poem to support your assertions.

**3**. Read “Enjoyment of Life” and follow the directions above for question 2.

**4**. Are these poems still relevant? Explain your feelings.



**Introduction**

Humanistic texts show how people around the world gradually develop an understanding of what it is to be human. Multicultural extracts portray the wit, wisdom, and poetry of individuals as they reflect on ethics, philosophy, knowledge, and human relationships.

Through these excerpts we have the pleasure of encountering active, probing minds. We can read of humanistic ideas as they break through into history for the first time. Often, even the oldest ideas remain fresh and new. The excerpts aim to be of sufficient length to convey an author's way of thinking.

**History**

In the Arabian Peninsula in the Sixth Century CE, the emergence of poetry in a tribe was considered an important event. Amid a rich tradition of oral poetry, it meant that the history of the tribe would become preserved in memorable verse and that the tribe would be entertained by accounts of the adventures and thoughts of its prominent individuals. In the Eighth Century, much of this oral poetry of earlier times was collected by one of the great humanists of Islam, Hammad ‘The Transmitter’, a man of prodigious memory. This he used to good effect in memorizing the poetry he encountered in his travels among the Bedouins. From his memorized collection, seven qasida (odes) by individual authors came to be written down in an anthology. The name of this work, The Mu’allaqat, has been translated as Suspended Odes, or Golden Odes, or Collected Odes.

Each poet would decide on a meter of his own choosing, but he was constrained to use a single rhyme at the ends of lines. The poem would typically deal with subjects in the following sequence: deserted dwelling places, talks with desert people, amorous encounters, journeying on a horse or camel, and a panegyric to a host. In the course of the poem there would be various digressions into the subjects such as storms, wine, wisdom, battles, youth, and age.

The Mu’allaqat poets were famous throughout the Arab world, with their poems being frequently memorized and quoted. Their fame brought with it exaggerated legends about their lives, so that it is difficult to know the true facts concerning these remarkable individuals. The fame of Imr Al-Qais, ‘The Wandering King’, was said to have caused him to be summoned to the court of the Emperor Justinian at Byzantium in 530. Tarafa, ‘The Murdered Boy’, is said to have started to write poetry at the age of seven and to have been treacherously put to death in his early twenties (perhaps in 564) for writing satires on tribal leaders. Zuhair, ‘A Slave to Poetry’, belonged to a family of poets and was said to be sufficiently affluent to have time to polish his verses to perfection. Labid, ‘The Man with the Crooked Staff’, was said to have lived 150 years; he expressed a certain weariness of life in a poem written on his 120th birthday.

Antara, ‘The Black Knight’, was the son of a tribal leader and an Abyssinian slave girl. He became renowned for his poetry and for his skill in warfare; ultimately he became the hero of an extensive legend, the Romance of Antar. Amr became a chieftain of his tribe at the age of fifteen and is also said to have lived 150 years. One account has him giving lucid advice to his sons on his deathbed; another says that he drank himself to death with wine.

The following short extracts from these odes, deal with familiar concerns of human life.

**Raging War**

And war is not but what you have learnt it to be, and

what you have experienced, and what is said concerning it,

is not a story based on suppositions.

When you stir it up, you will stir it up as an accursed

thing, and it will become greedy when you excite its greed

and it will rage fiercely.

Then it will grind you as the grinding of the upper millstone

against the lower, and it will conceive immediately after

one birth and it will produce twins.

* Zuhair

**Enjoyment of Life**

Did Nawár not know then, and was she not aware that I

am skilled to knot the bonds of friendship, and break them too?

I am quick to be gone from places when they're unpleasing to me

except, as happens, its destiny fetters my spirit there.

Ha, but you have no idea, my dear, how many nights

of agreeable warmth, delicious in sport and companionship,

I have passed chatting, how many a taverner's hoisted flag

I have visited, when the wine it proclaimed was precious dear,

and I've forked out a pretty penny for an old, brown wineskin

or a pitch-smeared jar, newly decanted and seal broken,

for the pleasure of a song on a wet morning, and a charming girl plucking

with nimble fingers the strings of her melodious lute;

yes, I've raced the cock bright and early, to get me my spirit's need

and to have my second wetting by the time the sleepers stirred.

And many's the morning of wind and cold I've kept at bay

when its reins lay in the fingers of the bitter north

and defended the knights, my bristling panoply burdening

a swift-stepper, its bridle at dawn flung about my shoulders.

I have climbed to a look-out post on the brow of a fearful ridge

the dust of whose summits hung closely about their standards

till, when the sun flung its hand into dusk's coverlet

and darkness shrouded the perilous marches of the frontiers,

I came down to the plain; my horse stood firm as the trunk

of a tall, stripped palm tree the gatherers shrink to ascend.

Then I pricked her on, to run like an ostrich and fleeter still

until, when she was warm and her bones were light and pliant,

her saddle slipped about, and her neck streamed with sweat

and the foam of her perspiration drenched her leather girth;

she tosses her head, and strains at the rein, and rushes on

as a desert dove flutters with the flight swiftly to water.

* Labid