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## The Arab Epic Poet as Outcast, Trickster, and Con Man

Across the folklore of virtually all cultures, the figure of the trickster stands out as a convergence of deception, disguise, and verbal ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> The trickster acts and speaks in a paradoxical fashion, one that Roger Abrahams characterizes as "combin[ing] the attributes of many other types that we tend to distinguish clearly. At various times, he is clown, fool, jokester, initiate, culture hero, even ogre."<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss has described the trickster as the expression of both sides of any binary opposition -- life against death, chaos versus order, the sacred and the profane.<sup>3</sup> Such clown-like personalities are often culturally sanctioned characters allowed, either in narrative or in performance, to reverse the rules of both language and society.

This essay explores several levels of the use of the trickster figure in the Arab epic *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, a cycle of heroic tales recited throughout the Arabic-speaking world in the specific version collected by myself in Upper Egypt in 1983. What are the interconnections between the role of the Upper Egyptian outcast poet in his society and the Arab trickster-epic hero in the epic narrative, and how do these connections mediate the relationship between the storyteller and his story in an enacted performance? I claim that at the heart of this configuration is an outcast poet on the one hand, a trickster culture-hero on the other, with a third

equally ambiguous and polyvalent feature of Upper Egyptian performance, namely, the proliferation of puns embedded and improvised in live performance. I begin with a brief description of the life of a contemporary performer and reciter, the Upper Egyptian epic poet ʿAwaḍallah ʿAbd al-Jaʿlil ʿAli, in order to relate the ambiguous, outcast position of this epic poet to the rich, multivocal role of the trickster-epic hero, Abū Zayd the Hilali.

### 1. The Epic Poet, ʿAwaḍallah ʿAbd al-Jaʿlil ʿAli

ʿAwaḍallah ʿAbd al-Jaʿlil ʿAli is an epic poet from the province of Aswan in Upper Egypt. He sings in the surrounding southern Egyptian marketplaces, in cafes, during public ceremonies, and at people's homes to celebrate births, weddings, circumcisions, a return from the hajj to Mecca, and Ramadan break fasts. I have described elsewhere the complex status of the epic poet in southern Egypt -- his role as an outcast yet at the same time the artistic bearer of his group's cultural history. In Upper Egypt, epic poets own no land, are ethnically designated as gypsies (everywhere an outcast group), and do not possess *ʿaṣīl*, the Upper Egyptian term for honorable character aligned with good, "clean" lineage. All these characteristics disqualify them from respectable social standing. But both audiences and poet see the poet at the moment of performance as the bearer of tradition and not as an individual, let alone an individual creative artist.<sup>4</sup> In performance, ʿAwaḍallah's epic story is respected though ʿAwaḍallah the epic poet is not.

## 2. The Epic Hero: Abū Zayd, Outcast, Trickster, and Epic Poet

Abū Zayd the Hilali is the hero of the Arab folk epic *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the epic sung by ‘Awaḍallah and the many poets of Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world. The epic hero, Abū Zayd, is in part a trickster figure, a characteristic that is closely linked to the black-skin he owes to a single word that almost accidentally governed his origin. In "the birth of the hero" sequence that is the first part of the traditional tripartite division of the epic, the hero's mother, Khaḍra Sharīfa, has been barren for eleven years.<sup>5</sup> In hopes of conceiving a son, she goes down to a magic spring in the Arabian peninsula. There she wishes upon a black bird, fierce and combative. She says:

"Give me a boy like this bird

black like this bird

I swear to make him possess Tunis and Wadi Hama!

I swear to make him possess Tunis by the blade of the sword!"<sup>6</sup>

Her wish is granted, but divine interpretation of it is absolutely literal: her son is born with a black skin. When the Hilali Bedouin Arabs discover her son's skin color, mother and son are banished to the desert. Abū Zayd is therefore of noble birth, but also black-skinned, in Arab epic a sure sign of servile status; he is a warrior by definition, but also by definition an outsider or outcast. The childhood and youth of this exiled hero are marked by the most approved occurrences and exploits.<sup>7</sup> He combats authority figures: he begins by killing his Koranic teacher, then he annihilates the Arabs responsible for humiliating his mother, and almost slays his own father. Eventually he manages to win reinstatement

with the tribe, marry, father children, and acquire a great reputation as a warrior. It is Abū Zayd's destiny to unite the warring Bedouin tribes for the battle for Tunis and the conquest of the Maghrib, the centerpiece of the epic narrative.<sup>8</sup> However, before embarking on the grand westward migration, as if to rehearse for the exploits ahead, the hero Abū Zayd must defend his tribe and his religion in the Arabian peninsula against two local enemies: first, a Jewish leader named Khaṭfa, and second, the evil Arab and Muslim king Ḥanḍal, who has raided the holy city of Mecca, captured the Hilali women, and wounded the hero's father. It is the latter tale that will be examined more closely in this essay.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Pun as Outcast, the Outcast as Pun

According to Jonathan Culler, who called his introductory essay on puns "The Call of the Phoneme," puns are a reality of the language "where boundaries -- between sounds, between sound and letter, between meanings -- count for less than one might imagine and where supposedly discrete meanings threaten to sink into fluid subterranean signifieds too undefinable to call concepts."<sup>10</sup> Puns show how language, literature, and even social relations work by forging unexpected connections. Beyond serving as obvious linguistic wordplay and artistic ornamentation, the pun can expand into the narrative to generate plot, episodes and even protagonists. Because of the ready availability of homophones in Arabic in particular and the ambiguous nature of language in general, frequent punning is a hallmark of much Upper Egyptian performance of epic poetry,<sup>11</sup> and the tale of king Ḥanḍal versus the Hilali Bedouins, as it is told before Egyptian audiences, is a narrative in which deceit, trickery, and

disguise propel the plot, and puns seem not only to govern the way it is articulated by the poet but also to generate the events and the substance of the plot itself.

We begin with the fact of a black hero whose black skin causes him to float between acceptability and rejection much like the pun. He is accused of bastard origins, but so are puns. As will be seen, the black hero plays with identity the way puns play with language. This essay describes what unites (1) the black epic hero, (2) the outcast Upper Egyptian epic poet who sings about the outcast black epic hero, and (3) the language of the Arab epic song. I claim that because the black outcast epic hero disguises himself in the narrative as an epic poet which in Egyptian society is coded as a social outcast, he therefore uses the language of the outcast, the double-talk and double-meaning of puns, all of which points to the potential deceptiveness of language itself.

#### 4. The Two-faced Hero, the Double-Tongued Poet

The Arab epic hero Abū Zayd is two-faced, the Egyptian epic poet ʿAwaḍallah is double-tongued. This points to a counter-tradition, an anti-rhetoric in the literary history of rhetoric. Indeed Barthes speaks of deliberate transgression, calling the use of puns "'a black rhetoric,' (*une rhétorique noire*) of games, parodies, erotic or obscene allusions ..., where two taboos are circumvented, language and sex."<sup>12</sup> In other words, wordplay suits texts and characters that are not straightforward. Certainly, the Arab epic *Ṣīrat Banī Hilāl* frequently pronounces, in oral formulaic fashion, lines that speak to the hero's triumphs over the word. Some examples to describe the hero and his actions are taken from texts

cited below: "Abū Zayd worked his trickery / he mixed lies, he brought falsity"; or frequent epithets for the hero scattered throughout the epic: "The hero Abū Zayd, who but him deceives the defenseless?" (*ilbaṭal abū zēd mīn gīru yikīd ilʿuzāl*) and "I know him, Abū Zayd, the man of lies" (*btāʿ ilahyāl*).

In the episode of the evil Arab king Ḥaṇḍal against the Hilali Bedouin, the range of punning and deceit has much to say about the role of epic poets in society and epic heroes in narrative. One device within the tale, for example, not only comments on the social status of the epic poet at the king's court but also exemplifies multiply embedded frameworks of disguise. The Ḥaṇḍal tale turns on the witty syncopation of the hero Abū Zayd's disguising himself first as an epic poet and then as an old man who is also black. He assumes the poet's disguise in order to wander freely in the enemy court to entertain, to seek information, and to free his kidnapped womenfolk by slaying the enemy ruler Ḥaṇḍāl. (An important advantage of this disguise is that epic poets in Upper Egypt are permitted to associate freely with women strangers, another instance of the characteristics of the trickster converging to invert and subvert social beliefs.)<sup>13</sup> Thus, ʿAwaḍallah, the Upper Egyptian epic poet sings about a hero disguising himself as an epic poet (who presumably sings about an epic poet who sings about an epic poet and so on). The second disguise is that of a black slave who is the jailer of the black epic poet.

It is also noteworthy that the Ḥaṇḍal story itself is introduced by an episode in which a mother and son meet in disguise and attempt to deceive each other. The hero Abū Zayd, while traveling through mountain and desert disguised as an epic poet with his musical instrument, the *rabāba*, slung over his shoulder, encounters his mother Khaḍra Sharīfa. As

if to prove that ambiguity and disguise is hereditarily acquired through the maternal line, Abū Zayd's mother has also put on a disguise; she too is dressed in the clothes of a despised black slave, the easier to flee Mecca with her wounded husband, the hero's father. Mother and son greet each other disguised as blacks and as slaves, assuming the precise transgressive characteristics that caused their original traumatic expulsion from the Bedouin Arab confederation. Abū Zayd, who is truly black-skinned, is able to pierce his mother's fake blackface, whereas the mother cannot recognize her own son disguised as an epic poet even though one of son's many formulaic descriptions declares that the hero is yoked, paratactically and genetically, both to his trickster status and to his mother: "(Abū Zayd), son of Sharifa, the trickster" (*ibn iṣarīfa btā' ilaḥyāl*). where the description "trickster" can apply, by zeugma, to either or both of them. The mother has merely changed superficial attire, the first and basic level of disguise and trickery; but the son can both alter and divine appearances. He is even trickier than the mother: he deceives her for no apparent reason by announcing his own death to her in language full of ambiguities, as though to underline that the pun is the realm of the oblique, the sly, and the teasing. Then he laughs as she weeps and laments:

(lines 56-65):

56: min ahd abu zēd mitwaffa

57: tammit-lu sab'a -tṭiyām

58: šūfi -ddunya -lkaddāba

59: la dāmit li-bāša wala sulṭān

60: bakit xaḍra bi madma' il'en

61: ana fann il‘arāyib ḤOZIN(A)

62: bakit xaḍra bi madma‘ il‘ēn

63: ya ma fann il‘arāyib ḤOZI ‘ANA

64: ow‘āni -zzamān w -ilbēn

65: ‘ala kabdi ‘annawaḥ ḤAZINA<sup>14</sup>

56: "From the day Abū Zayd died,

57: seven days have passed,

58: see the world of deceit

59: it does not last for a pasha or sultan."

60: Khadra cried tears from her eyes.

61: I, the art of Arabs, MY POSSESSION /SORROWFULLY

62: Khadra cried tears from her eyes

63: O, how the art of Arabs is MY POSSESSION / SORROWFULLY

64: fate and separation torment me

65: over my beloved (literally "my liver") I mourn SORROWFULLY / MY POSSESSION

The words for SORROWFULLY (*hazana*) can split into two words, *hozi ana*: MY POSSESSION (*hozana*) that are puns, cross-coupling the notion of art as full of sorrow even as the mother's beloved son is her possession and his death to be mourned in sadness. The multiple puns in this line also render the speaker indeterminate allowing for ambiguity in line 61 about the art of the Arabs: do these sentiments belong to the epic poet ‘Awaḍallah, or to the epic hero Abū Zayd disguised as an epic poet, or are they the words of the mother? This pun recognizes that any of the three may be the speaker, thereby illustrating the instability not only of sounds



to which different meanings can be assigned but also of meanings to which different nuances can attach in the mouths of different speakers.

Puns are about the deliberate cultivation of overlap, mess, and struggle; they emerge from language like the hero's laughter in response to his mother's laments. Laughter, a nonverbal physical reaction to one's own or another's puns and disguises, causes Abū Zayd to bare his front teeth to reveal his one unconcealable descriptor, the famous gap-teeth that forever mark the identity of the hero Abū Zayd in folk memory. His true identity is thereby revealed to his mother. While a dominant motif of this black Arab hero-trickster is his superiority of verbal wit and intellectual cunning, it is also the case that laughter, like disguise, resides in the body in an ephemeral way. Laughter acoustically emerges from between the gap-toothed grin. Abū Zayd responds to his mother's laments at his supposed demise not with duplicitous punning words that exit from the hero (perhaps the poet's mouth); instead there is laughter, a nonverbal physical reaction to puns and disguises. Laughter resolves its owner's identity. Indeed in this epic all products of the mouth are viable: the hero's laughter is revelatory and happily reunites the family. The hero's spittle, the magical liquid of his mouth cures his father's wound. Finally, the hero's words, a vow to his father to return after twenty nights with the ninety captured Hilali maidens, set the action of the tale in motion.

## 5. The Plot of King Ḥanḍal

The tale of Abū Zayd against the Arab king Ḥanḍal properly begins when Abū Zayd arrives in Ḥanḍal's orchards. There, he finds the Hilali

maidens dressed in sackcloth and bearing the heavy waterskins (*girba*) usually carried by men. The Hilali maidens are forced to attend the *diwans*, the public assemblies or gatherings of Arab men where females on public display are fair game for insults by passing Arabs. Abū Zayd, in his disguise as an epic poet, addresses in turn each of his beautiful maidens. In this way we, the audience, are introduced to the famous heroines of the epic, Jaz the woman warrior and herself a trickster; Rayya, Abū Zayd's daughter; Diyya, his niece; Na'ṣa, his wife and so on. To each he insultingly addresses the epithet *Jammasiyya*. The Jammasa are an outcast tribe of Upper Egypt; to be associated with them is an insult. Yet they are in fact the modern lineal descendants of the same Bani Hilal who are the heroes of the Arab epic. In the rest of the Arabic-speaking world, descent from the Hilali tribes is a marker of noble Arabian Bedouin heritage,<sup>15</sup> but in Upper Egyptian society, these subjects of heroic song are as ostracized and outcast as the poets who sing about them. In southern Egypt not just epic poets and epic heroes, but even membership in the Hilali tribe, there known as the outcast Jammasiyya tribe, reinforces the conflation and attribution of outcast status to tale, teller, and even topic.

Rayya, Abū Zayd's daughter, objects strongly to this abusive language by her father though, in fact, he has named her what she is, a Hilali, but he has used Upper Egyptian pejorative terms. Rayya's reply yokes the identity of poet and warrior, a link altogether absent in Upper Egyptian ascriptions of social status to their epic poets. Rayya says to the epic poet who, unknown to her, is her father, the hero Abū Zayd: (lines 240-243)

My father is a poet like you --

he conceals himself, he pretends he's an artist,  
 he comes concealed, he pretends he's a poet,  
 -- a bold valiant man, a horseman.

She urges Abū Zayd in his role as epic poet to make poems and give news about their predicament wherever he travels. Rayya's views of her father Abū Zayd resembles a dual-purpose metaphor of mobility: he is both epic poet and its social opposite, a horseman and a warrior whose contrasting epithets provide simultaneous, though competing references in the same unit.

Abū Zayd then presents himself at Ḥaṇḍal's court where he is rudely ignored. Ḥaṇḍal, who has heard of Abū Zayd, his black skin and his penchant for disguises becomes the recipient or audience to Abū Zayd's multi-layered characterizations. Ḥaṇḍal instinctively recognizes the association of black outcast equals epic poet equals brazen liar as in (lines 269-274):

He [Ḥaṇḍal] feared he was the hero Abū Zayd,  
 lest he pretend to be an artist  
 lest he with his *rabāba*  
 open the doors of destruction  
 and take the Zoghba daughters:  
 "I know him, the man of lies (*btā' baḥtān*). "

Abū Zayd begins by rebuking Ḥaṇḍal for his ignoble treatment of visiting epic poets and Ḥaṇḍal apologizes. He asks Abū Zayd to play music while the Hilali maidens dance for his men. Abū Zayd fears such public

display would insult his women. To delay, he insists that Ḥaṇḍal arrange for the women to be bathed, perfumed and beautifully attired before being presented to the Arab men. The Egyptian epic poet ‘Awaḍallah describes in detail their enticing dress which renders men delirious. Rayya, the hero's daughter, leads the other women. She describes their predicament in a pun: it is "bitter," the extended meaning of *ḥaṇḍal* (derived from its literal meaning, "bitter colocynth") and bitter due to a human cause, a king called Ḥaṇḍal. This appears to be the simplest way to pun: an identity of sound that proposes complementary denotations according to a bifurcated but related context of a name and its meaning. Ḥaṇḍal means "bitter" and the tyrant who bears this name exemplifies bitterness thanks to a justifiable etymological basis. The relationship of a person to his proper name is taken up in order to draw out the important pun on the meaning or import of a personal name that also specifies the content, as in the following sequence where the words in parentheses propose the secondary meaning(11:12-22):<sup>16</sup>

The young maidens, the daughters of Hilal,  
 women of kohl-darkened eyes,  
 they went out of the baths,  
 they have roses on their cheeks, glowing.  
 Rayya says, "O Women,  
 my heart from sorrow is BITTER (ḤANDAL)  
 when he comes he brings hypocrisy,  
 he says to the maidens, that ḤANDAL (BITTER)  
 he says, 'Dance, O maidens.'  
 Beware of agreeing to any word:

the sword before the dance."

xaragu -ṣṣabāya banāt hilāl

ʿummāt alʿuyūn ilkaḥāyil

xaraju min ilḥammām

lihum ward ʿalxadd I sāl

rayya -tgūl ya niswān

galbi min ilhamm ḤANDĀL

lamma yāji yijīb dihān

yigūl -ṣṣibāya da ḤANDĀL

yigūl argiṣu ya ṣabāya

iʿwa -tmašū-lu kilma

issēf awla min irraḡaṣān

Rayya tells Ḥandāl his very name will forever stand not only for "bitterness" but also as the linguistic sign for ignominy among the Arabs when word circulates via the epic poet that Ḥandāl dishonors Arab women by forcing them to dance and display themselves publicly. Ḥandāl strikes Rayya, she falls to the ground. Her father, Abū Zayd, still disguised as the epic poet, is forced to witness violence against his beloved daughter; only then does he reveal himself to her in the secret language, the Najdi Arabic dialect they share. Until now, the Arab maidens' refusal to expose themselves and their bodies to strange men has been matched by Abū Zayd's insistence on concealment even from his closest family members. Only when the inviolate female seclusion is threatened by dishonoring public display does Abū Zayd seek refuge in the play of secret language where he can safely reveal himself. The suggestion is of secret subculture, set apart linguistically, perhaps on a higher level, and based on those few

initiates who decode meanings. The trickster not only shifts among various human identities but he is also the master of linguistic register: (11:84-95)

Abū Zayd the bold one saw her  
 And his sound reason was lost.  
 Abū Zayd said: "This is folly.  
 I put difficulties behind and I find them ahead."  
 His reason says unsheathe your sword  
 His reason says patience is the model.  
 He spoke gibberish to the Hilali women  
 in the Najdi tongue, a foreign tongue,  
 he said: "Dance, O Rayya  
 You whose lot is darkness  
 Come, dance a little  
 I am myself the Hilali, your father."  
 He said, "Dance, O Rayya,  
 Woman of earrings and coquettish,  
 I am myself the chief of war,  
 My father Rizg, my grandfather Nāyil."  
 He said, "Dance, O Rayya,  
 I am myself your father, Salama."

wi'i -lha -lmigdim abu zēd  
 aglu -ssalīm indār  
 abu zēd gāl di balāwi  
 afūtha warā w-algāha giddām

aglu yigūl aṣḥab sēfak  
 aglu yigūl iṣṣabr istimtāl  
 raṭan banāt ilhilāliyya  
 bi -lsān najd ġarīb ya lisān  
 yigūl arguṣi ya rayya  
 ya -lli layāli nabūki  
 ta‘āla ‘arguṣi šwayye  
 bi zāt ilhilāli abūki  
 gāl liha arguṣi ya rayya  
 ya -mm ilḥalag wa -ddalāyil  
 biḏāti rayīs ilgomāya  
 abūya rizg wi jadd I nāyil

In the end, Abū Zayd is unmasked by Ḥaṇḍal's daughter, ‘Ajāja, who is a sand-diviner. She is able to penetrate his disguise as an epic poet and singer because her power resides not in the identity transformations of a trrickster but in her ability to read the truth about the present and the future in the sands. Abū Zayd tries to forestall ‘Ajāja's exposure of his identity by claiming that according to Arab custom women have no right to be present let alone speak in Arab male assemblies; to deflect attention from her accurate reading of his form, he reproaches her with unveiling her own. This leads the evil king Ḥaṇḍal, ‘Ajāja's father, to accuse his own daughter of loving the epic poet, a dishonorable passion that leads to her dishonorable presence among men. Nonetheless, she speaks, connecting all Abū Zayd's disparate disguises and social meanings. Her words send him to prison.

In prison, Abū Zayd continues to proclaim he is merely an innocent

wandering epic singer. Ḥaṇḍal proposes to Johar, his black jailer, that he, Johar travel to the Hilali homeland in Najd to verify whether the real Abū Zayd is there: a man, unlike a pun, cannot be present in two places, distant Arabia and Ḥaṇḍal's jail, at one time. Johar's reward is to be Jāz, one of the Hilali heroines. Marriage to her would ennoble a black slave's children; Johar enunciates a rule of class and color: (13:248, *‘abīd ma ‘awwiz ‘abīd*), "a slave does not want a slave." After a journey of seven nights, Johar arrives in the Hilali territory, enters their diwan, and pretends to be the sultan of Sudan. Jews have attacked his city, he relates, and he seeks help from the hero Abū Zayd to defend his people.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the black slave pretends to be a prince in order to investigate the identity of the black prince in his custody, who is pretending to be an epic poet and will soon -- as will be seen shortly -- pretend to be a slave. The two are even described in identical oral formulas, for example (line13:268): *xalaṭ izzūr wi jāb ilbuḥṭān*," Jōhār mingled lies and brought untruths/slander."

The Hilalis truthfully inform him that Abū Zayd is at Ḥaṇḍal's court on another mission, namely to rescue the Hilali maidens. Johar returns successfully from his mission to inform Ḥaṇḍal that the black epic singer locked in his prison is in truth the hero Abū Zayd. Ḥaṇḍal resolves to kill Abū Zayd and again promises his slave Johar marriage to a Hilali maiden of his choice once Abū Zayd is dead.

At this point in the complicated crossing of class and color, cross-dressing, duplicity, and false identities, there is one character in the tale who voices a critique of puns, obliqueness, and false presentation. The imprisoned Abū Zayd had called for help from al-Khiḍr, his magic protector since he was born.<sup>18</sup> A figure with magical powers, al-Khiḍr



insists Abū Zayd renounce disguise, in other words put an end to puns, ontological confusions, and attendant catastrophes. It is as if he insists: let there be uncomplicated likenesses, everyone be who they are, names fit their owners, and human behavior based on action not wordplay. He delivers his plea clearly, repetitively, and without any punning. Moreover, he insists, Abū Zayd must replace himself in prison with the character in the narrative (the black slave Johar) whose disguise Abū Zayd has donned so that all actors are in their appropriate place for the ensuing events (lines 11:332-341):

al-Khiḍr said to him: "I bid you, O Prince Abū Zayd,  
 Come reveal yourself to people,  
 O Abū Zayd, come to me, revealed  
 And I will make you victorious in every place."  
 He said to him: "The slave who brings you a tray,  
 shackle him in chains.  
 If you shackle him in your place,  
 your life continues til now.  
 If you don't shackle him in your place  
 go dwell in a grave of sands."

Nonetheless, al-Khiḍr performs his magic on Ḥaṇḍal's daughter, ʿAjāja: she becomes inexplicably stricken with concern for Abū Zayd's welfare. She orders the same black slave, Johar, to bring Abū Zayd a tray of food. Johar demands nights of passion in her bed as his price and she agrees. Then Johar delivers food to the imprisoned Abū Zayd. By playing upon a shared black identity, Abū Zayd asks Johar to release one hand so

he can eat from the tray. With only a single arm, Abū Zayd pounds Johar to the ground, shackles him and escapes.

As this point in the performance, the Upper Egyptian epic poet ʿAwadallah comments in an understated aside that again Abū Zayd "begins his tricks anew" (*jaddad ahyāl* 12:8), "mixing lies with untruths." Abū Zayd now disguises himself as Johar, Ḥaṇḍal's black slave, and returns with the tray of food to Ḥaṇḍal. Ḥaṇḍal asks "Johar" (remember this is Abū Zayd in disguise) to bring Abū Zayd before him. In a rhetorical mode, it could be said that Abū Zayd is faced with the crisis of the pun forced to be put into explicit words, to disambiguate the uncontrollable in language.

Abū Zayd, alias Johar, calls for king Ḥaṇḍal's ninety horseman to enter the prison. Then, Abū Zayd, still as Johar, stations himself outside the prison entrance, sending the ninety horsemen into the dungeon in search of himself. When they emerge again, they encounter not Abū Zayd disguised as Johar but Abū Zayd the Hilali warrior, who proceeds to slaughter all ninety of them. Abū Zayd then returns to Ḥaṇḍal, reverting to his disguise as Johar, to announce that Abū Zayd has escaped from prison. Ḥaṇḍal goes to the prison and finds the real Johar, but at this point he no longer knows if the black man before him is Johar or Abū Zayd disguised as Johar. In the manner of tyrants, Ḥaṇḍal kills the black man who is really Johar reasoning thus: if the black man in his presence is indeed his slave Johar, then he Johar failed in his mission and deserves to die, and if it is Abū Zayd the enemy, he must be killed instantly.

There is a dead black body. The ninety fair Hilali maidens approach it, they see no identifying gap-tooth, and they rejoice in the knowledge that Abū Zayd still lives. In the meantime, Abū Zayd grabs a horse and takes refuge in Ḥaṇḍal's garden where the Hilali maidens find him. Despite

their urgings to escape, Abū Zayd stays to fight Ḥanḍal. Abū Zayd sends two letters: one to Ḥanḍal announcing Abū Zayd's imminent arrival and a second to the Hilali tribe encampment in Arabia. In his second letter to his Hilali kinsmen, Abū Zayd signs his missive with yet another identity, that of his enemy Ḥanḍal. Again he repeats an earlier trick from other episodes in the epic: he writes to his fellow tribesman in Ḥanḍal's name that Abū Zayd has died and they now owe tribute and wealth. His point is twofold: to test again his worth among his tribesmen and to ensure their presence in the final battle. Though his tribesmen weep and lament at Abū Zayd's death, the Hilali warriors quarrel over the need to rescue the maidens still imprisoned at Ḥanḍal's court. They finally arrive thirty days later, engage the real Ḥanḍal in battle, and are defeated. Only when the hero's own mother, Khaḍra Sharīfa, prepares to join battle because she believes yet again that her son is dead, does Abū Zayd come forward to stop her.

Finally, only in the last section of the Ḥanḍal tale, do Abū Zayd and Ḥanḍal, hero and villain, engage in the bloody, descriptively-detailed, set battle piece on horseback so beloved of the epic genre. Ḥanḍal is killed and the tale concludes with 'Ajāja, Ḥanḍal's daughter, a sand-diviner who saw through Abū Zayd's disguise, is, at her own request, brought under Hilali authority and protection.

## 6. Conclusion

Disguise, metamorphosis, multiple meanings, and the variety of effects procured by the use of linguistic puns serve, I claim, to reestablish a serious hierarchy. Abū Zayd can play with becoming a black slave but

the corresponding reversal cannot be so readily effected; Johar, the genuine black slave can never become a hero. So too, puns have limits: they can uncover truths and they can serve as cover-ups but you cannot invent puns that are not already potential in the language. For this reason, Abū Zayd can disguise himself as an epic poet. He can add meaning, gain identities (even with a temporary loss of status in the narrative), and he can celebrate ambiguities. He can trick or mix with evil, yet lose no honor. Punning can extend to a whole narrative and even misread an entire situation. Epic poets, whether they are Abū Zayd in the epic narrative or ‘Awaḍallah in his southern Egyptian milieu, possess a high conception of poetic vocation. Though epic poets prefer multiple visions and meanings in the universe, nonetheless the everyday circumstances of social life in Upper Egypt ensure that, like Johar the black slave and unlike the black hero Abū Zayd, the epic poet ‘Awaḍallah ‘Abd aj-Jalīl ‘Alī of Upper Egypt can never be seen as an epic hero -- certainly never in his own society but then, not even in performance.

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<sup>1</sup> For an historical and bibliographical overview of the trickster figure, see William G. Doty and William J. Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Roger Abrahams, "Trickster, the Outrageous Hero," *Our Living Tradition: An Introduction to American Folklore*, ed. Tristram P. Coffin (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 170-178.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 224-226.

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<sup>4</sup> For additional material on Upper Egyptian epic singers, see my *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); "Methodes de transcription et traduction d'une performance de geste orale arabe," in *Le Conte*, ed. Pierre Lyon and Paul Perron (Montreal: Didier, 1987):127-139; "The Death-song of Amir Khafaji: Puns in an Oral and Printed Episode of Sirat Bani Hilal," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 18 (1987):62-78; "Arabic Folk Literature and Political Expression," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 8:2 (Spring 1986):178-185 and "Praise of God, Praise of Self, Praise of the Islamic People: Arab Epic Narrative in Performance," *Classical and Popular Medieval Arabic Literature: A Marriage of Convenience? Festschrift in Honour of H. T. Norris*," ed. Farida Abu-Haidar and Jareer Abu Haidar (London: Curzon Press, in press).

<sup>5</sup> 'Awaḍallah divided the epic into three parts: (1) "the Birth of Abū Zayd" (*mīlād abū zēd*); (2) "the Reconnaissance" (*al-riyāda*); and (3) the "Journey Westward" (*taḡrība*). For a discussion of the epic's divisions according to oral Egyptian poets, see Dwight Fletcher Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 16, n. 30.

<sup>6</sup> For a translation of the birth sequence according to 'Awaḍallah, see my "'The Birth of Abu Zayd': The Epic of the Hilali Tribe in Upper Egypt," in *An Anthology of African Oral Epics*, ed. Thomas A. Hale and John William Johnson (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, in press). The text of 'Awaḍallah's Ḥanḍal story is based on my unpublished fieldwork tapes recorded in 1983 in Upper Egypt. A complete set of 'Awaḍallah's version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is available in the Folk Arts Center, Tawfiqiyya, Cairo,

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Egypt. For text and analysis of a Ḥanḍal tale collected in a northern Egyptian Nile Delta village by Dwight Reynolds, see his *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*, op. cit., pp. 79-87 and pp. 214-215,

<sup>7</sup> Abū Zayd performs many exploits following the hero patterns described by Lord Raglan, Otto Rank, and Alan Dundes: Lord Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folklore*, 45 (1934):212-231 and *The Hero: A Study In Tradition, Myth and Drama* (New York: Vintage, 1956); Alan Dundes, "The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus," *Interpreting Folklore* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 223-262, and Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (New York: Vintage, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> Some historians interpret the epic as a literary analogue to the religious and political Islamicization of North Africa, e.g., Michael Brett, "Ibn Khaldoun and the Invasion of Ifriqiya By the Banu Hilal, 5th Century AH / 11th Century AD," in *Actes du Colloque International sur Ibn Khaldoun, Alger, 21-26 juin, 1978* (Algiers: Société Nationale d'Édition et Diffusion, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Awaḍallah places Ḥanḍal's tale in part one, the birth of the hero. This tale appears in printed versions: the 1948 Cairo "yellow book" edition, *Qiṣṣat al-Haydabi wa-al ‘Uqayli Hanḍal*, pp. 181-198.

<sup>9</sup> See Culler, *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (London: Blackwell, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Parenthetically, concerning the history of pun-making in Egyptian folklore, so prevalent was the practice of Egyptian punning, that a ninth century Arab rhetorician, al-Ṣafadi remarked on this propensity: "The poets of Egypt, he writes, excelled in the use of this difficult figure," (the pun, which he called *tawriya*). The reason for this, according to al-Ṣafadi,

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"is that the water of the Nile in Egypt is of an excellent quality so that poets living in these regions are endowed with both delicacy and intellect," cited in S. Bonebakker, *Some Early Definitions of the Tawriya* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1966), p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, "L'ancienne rhétorique," *Communications* 16 (1970): 174.

<sup>13</sup> On the ambiguous sexuality of the Upper Egyptian poet, see my *The Merchant of Art*, chapters 1 and 2. See also Reynolds, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Transliteration protocols for Ṣaʿīdī (or Upper Egyptian) Arabic follow "Appendix A: Notes on Translation and Transliteration," *The Merchant of Art*, pp.269-273.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Anita Baker discusses Tunisian pride in Hilali descent: "The Hilali Saga in the Tunisian South," Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1978. For a survey of Arab countries where Hilali genealogy is proudly claimed, see Faiq Amin Mukhlis, "Studies and Comparison of the Cycles of the Banu Hilal Romance," Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1964, pp. 80-98.

<sup>16</sup> For descriptions of punning possibilities, see Walter Redfern, *Puns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) and J. Brown, "Eight Types of Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956).

<sup>17</sup> For the structural role that Jews and blacks play in ʿAwaḍallah's narrative of the Hilali cycle, see my *The Merchant of Art*, pp. 60-64.

<sup>18</sup> al-Khiḍr frequently functions as a fairy godmother-like figure, e.g., see my *The Merchant of Art*, p. 12.