The Mu’allaqa of Imru’ al-Qays: A Reading Guide

“It is no exaggeration to say that [Imru al-Qays’] Mu’allaqa is at once the most famous, the most admired and the most influential poem in the whole of Arabic literature.”

- A.J. Arberry, The Seven Odes, p. 41

Please consider the following questions as you read Imru’ al-Qays’ mu’allaqa:

1) Why do you think that Imru’ al-Qays’ mu’allaqa is almost universally regarded by Arabic literary historians and connoisseurs of Arabic poetry as “the most famous, the most admired and the most influential poem in the whole of Arabic literature”? What elements from the mu’allaqa in particular elicit your admiration?

2) How does the mu’allaqa of Imru’ al-Qays challenge the structural and thematic conventions of pre-Islamic poetry?

3) Does the mu’allaqa of Imru’ al-Qays demonstrate the “rite-of-passage” archetypal narrative? If so, how? Note: If we haven’t had time to speak about the “rite-of-passage” archetypal narrative in class, you may find a summation of it at the end of the power point presentation uploaded to the course website for today’s class (2/25).

4) Literary historians have noted that the quasi-mythological tales surrounding the life and death of various pre-Islamic poets are frequently extrapolated from the poems that they have left behind. For this reason, narrative accounts of the undocumented lives of pre-Islamic poets and the poems themselves often overlap thematically and structurally. Based on Arberry’s introduction to Imru’ al-Qays’ mu’allaqa, how are the themes and elements of his semi-mythical life and death echoed in his mu’allaqa?