

## ARAB WORLD

HEATH, PETER. *The Thirsty Sword: Sirat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996. xx + 324 pages. Frontispiece, appendices, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$50.00; ISBN 0-87480-515-5.

Epic scholars whose appetite has been whet by "parts of this volume [which] have appeared in earlier form" (xii) can now enjoy reading the whole volume. Also they will have for the first time a summary of this lengthy epic (appendix 1, 168–231). Although the summary does not include the poetry of the epic and most of its stylistic and rhetorical devices, it is nevertheless complete and organized. It would be useful to read this summary before the analysis.

The study is based on a text of approximately six thousand pages of the *sīra* (epic; literally, life history) of 'Antarah ibn Shaddād Al 'Absī, a pre-Islamic black slave, poet, warrior, and lover who gains his freedom through his courage and skill in battles. The epic is in rhymed prose (*saj'*) dispersed with short anonymous poems. Depending on the text, the narrator recites the prose and chants the poetry, mostly without musical accompaniment.

Heath critically surveys the outdated nineteenth-century European scholarship of this *sīra* to show how the philological and historical approaches of that scholarship cast their shadow on most of the modern orientalist's studies. It is worth mentioning that some Arab writers, though not influenced by the old approach, still emphasize the importance of some literary folk genre such as Naba'i poetry (the oral poetry of Arabia) not as literature but as a historical and philological source (NASR 1996, 20). Heath's work is in the vein of the last two decades of literary studies of the Arabic *sīra* carried out by folklorists and ethnomusicologists, who focused on the most popular epic of *Banī Hilāl* which is performed orally to the accompaniment of a one-string musical instrument (*rabābah*). Analyzing a written text, Heath does not face the dilemma of integrating the oral text and music.

Coming from the literary field, Heath is not satisfied with the dichotomy between the concepts of elite and folk. He adds a third concept—popular—and distinguishes among the three concepts on the basis of producers, venues, texts, audiences, aesthetic goals, and social/geographical contexts. "(T)he texts move from folk to popular status through a process of being stripped of dialectical and other locally specific features that hamper their general comprehensibility" (49). According to him, the epic falls within the popular tradition. But to folklorists both the epic of *'Antar*, which is "stripped of dialectical and other locally specific features," and, for example, the epic of *Banī Hilāl*, which is performed orally in different Arabic dialects, are folk epics. Both are, to use Heath's words, "the product of a centuries-old [anonymous] tradition of public narration" (42).

In terms of analysis Heath has much to offer. He reduces the multiplicity of the *sīra* episodes and events to four patterns which provide the general storytelling structure. These patterns, which he terms the "heroic cycle," are the rise of the hero (birth, childhood, attributes of adulthood), the love story, heroic services (the deeds of the hero's maturity) and the death of the hero (death scene, burial, mourning, and revenge). Each of these patterns stands as an independent narrative unit and serves at the same time as part of the heroic cycle of the *sīra* as a whole. The *sīra* uses these patterns technically by applying five compositional principles: selection, repetition, and variation of emphasis which are basic to all fiction, and, what Heath calls, "displacement" and "superimposition" which are particular to the *sīra*. These principles intertwine the individual narrative strands into a unified narrative cord.

In discussing the compositional models, Heath examines in details the lion fight scene

and compares it with five battle scenes to show how the *sīra* uses these scenes to generate the narrative events through repetition. Though each scene consists of four units (attackers' appearance, opponents' response, occurrence of fighting, and the resolution of the fight by one side fleeing) the *sīra* avoids monotony by structuring the scenes hierarchically in terms of size of armies in battle, power, and high rank of opponents and allies.

The *sīra* claims that it has been authored by eminent scholars and that all its events are historically true. But a close look will show that this is not the case. 'Antar's battles, for example, take place in Rome, Spain, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Yemen, and India. The *sīra*'s history is a pseudo-history of an individual, a history which "stirs the expectations and imaginations of the audience about possibilities for action in the present and future" (164).

Limitations of space do not permit Heath, who started his study of *sīrat Antar*, Arabic, and Islamic popular literature two decades ago, to say more about the topics he dealt with (see 135 and 283, n. 16) and of course the topics he would have liked to treat (see 165). For this reason he devotes the final chapter of his book to some brief suggestions for possible directions for future research of this *sīra*, such as the detailed study of its manuscripts and textual tradition, its ten-thousand-line poetry, aesthetics, characters and characterization, and historical sources. He also suggests comparing this epic with other Arabic and Islamic epics. About the study of Arabic epics Heath writes that "the field is as wide open as it is exciting and rewarding. The length of Arabic popular [read "folk"] epic makes this task daunting. Nevertheless the subject is fascinating, edifying, and fun" (167).

*The Thirsty Sword* is a scholarly and welcome contribution to the literary study of the Arabic *sīra* in general and *sīrat Antar* in particular. I highly recommend it for epic scholars and historians interested in social and cultural history.

#### REFERENCE CITED

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