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Folktale Types of the Arab World

EL-SHAMY, HASAN, M. *Types of the Folktale in the Arab World. A Demographically Oriented Tale-Type Index*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, xxviii + 1255 pages. Bibliography and sources, registers of tale-types, motifs, and countries, subject index. Hardcover US\$75.00; ISBN 0-253-34447-6.

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PROFESSOR EL-SHAMY presented the discipline with the long awaited folk-tale catalogue for the Arab world (dubbed “DOTTI-A” by its author; see JASON 1966b). While everybody read the Arabian Nights collection, the Arab speaking world remains very much a “white spot” on the map of folktale research.

The work under review consists of an introduction, a list of tale-types based on AATH (1961, 1–977), a bibliography and list of manuscript sources (979–94), a register of all types (995–1034), and motifs listed in the body of the book with page numbers wherever the types and motifs are mentioned as main or secondary entry (1037–1202; this last item is very hard to find because of the exceedingly small print). It also has an index of authors and sources (1203–1214) and an index to countries with reference to pages (1215–1218), in addition to a type subject index referring to types (1219–1253).

The author adds a subtitle to his work: “A demographically oriented tale-type index.” The demographic aspect consists of listing for each version (where available) data about the following:

- 1) the performer;
- 2) occasionally the recorder, including their country, with some details as to province (sometimes town and ethnic group, if not Arabic), sex, age, education, profession, and marital status;
- (3) some basic text critique, especially remarks about rewritings (see JASON 2000, chapters 7.2, 7.2.1).

Especially important and a very welcome innovation is the marking of tale-types that are included in very popular collections and schoolbooks that are in the hands of every primary school pupil. All these data within the corpus, such as the quantity and percentage of various sorts of texts, including oral and written, as specified by narrators’ sex, education, and so on, could be used for statistical analyses. This reviewer would like to correlate these data with similar information about literary features of the materials, such as which genres are popular with whom? Or, what relationships are there between a narrator’s fea-

tures and the features of a text? Without such information no comparative analyses of corpora and repertoires can be carried out. The author himself does not supply relevant statistical information; the quantities are very hard to compute as every text is quoted each time a given type appears. For the purpose of such analyses, the author's computer file should really be accessible. Nevertheless, the author does not mention this possibility in the Preface and Introduction. Thus, the discipline can hardly profit from the impressively large amount of data that is presented in this manner yet inaccessible for analysis.

Although the use of both the sign “\$” after a new type number and the sign “}” for the Semitic consonant *ain* is unusual and is not used in the discipline, EL-SHAMY employs them because of technical issues involving computers. Thus computer requirements overshadow scholarly consensus (this is somewhat curious: surely the sign for *ain*, namely an apostrophe, is available on every keyboard). Furthermore, does the author's computer require that the “\$” sign be placed after the type number, and thus making new numbers not recognizable at a glance? And does the computer reject indentations in the layout and thus make the different parts of a type entry hard to keep apart?

This phenomenon is very worrying—the Golem is rising against its creator: The computer is not here to serve research; research has to adapt itself to the computer (see EL-SHAMY 1998, 351–352, where he clearly subordinates habitual scholarly technical conventions to computer requirements, which change very rapidly!)

The main problem of the book is its complete lack of type descriptions. If AATH type descriptions are left out, everybody can in principle look them up. Yet, in order to reconstruct the versions of the type, they have to be presented to the reader analyzed into episodes and smaller coded elements. Experience shows that new elements have to be added often, with special codes (see, for example, THOMPSON and ROBERTS 1960, type AATH 563: incidents to (f) and (g) for Indian materials are added to episode I; JASON 1965, type AATH 506: incident (c) for Jewish texts from Tunis, Iraq and Arabic texts from Palestine is added to episode I). In DOTTI-A the texts are not analyzed into incidents, only those types whose traces can be found in the texts are indicated. Thus no reconstruction of the content is possible. The situation is even worse for the 261 new types introduced by DOTTI-A: their content is not given at all, just a title. In each type the “motif-spectrum” lists Thompson's motifs, as emended by EL-SHAMY (1995). Are the listed motifs to be found in the type description (which is missing) or in the texts listed for each type? To make things worse, the motifs are not listed in the order of the plot. Again, the Golem is rising against its creator (see also EL-SHAMY 1998). The motifs appear in alphabetical and numerical order as they are listed in THOMPSON'S (1955–1958) Index. Thus, DOTTI-A does not give information about the content of the texts listed, and we remain ignorant

of the Arabic folktale. We are still reduced to using the catalogs of CHAUVIN (1892–1922), BASSET (1924–1926), NOWAK (1969), FADEL (1979), JASON (1965, 1975, 1988), and NOY and SCHNITZLER (1967–1979), which are wholly or partly devoted to the cataloging of oral and written folktales of the Arabic World (see JASON 1996a). All of them give descriptions of their types' contents.

In sum, the reviewer poses the question as to what use can be made of the work, to which the author has devoted so much precious time and scholarly effort. If the author and publisher supply computer files, some sociological investigation could be done. As, however, the texts are not analyzed in enough detail, the data about the performer and about the text cannot be correlated, so that an analysis of that kind is quite impossible (for a work that offers this sort of analysis, see HOLBEK 1987). As no minimal statistics are given, not even the size of the examined corpus, relations of genres to each other, and comparisons to other cultures can be done. The lack of type descriptions prevents the use of DOTTI-A to enrich comparative investigations, both semiotic and historic. The long lists of versions (many of which are, regrettably, in private archives, that is, not publicly accessible), for which the author is to praise, will serve well a future cataloger to prepare type descriptions of folktales of the Arab world.

And, last but not least, a technical remark. The exceedingly small font used and the layout which lacks indentations make the text unclear and indistinct, and thus very hard to use. For these problems the publisher is to blame.

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