

## NEAR EAST

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Arabic folk epics, (*siyar*; singular: *sīrah*, which literally means life history), developed from fragmentary narratives of raids and invasions. When and how this development occurred is a matter of speculation. They are composed in rhymed prose or verse, and circulated orally and in written form. The oral popular ones are performed until today by illiterate poets to a one-string musical instrument, and the written ones were read loudly by storytellers to an audience usually in a coffee house.

This special issue consists of the editor's preface followed by a bibliography on Arabic epics that complements the previous one published in *Oriente Moderno* (57, 1977), and nineteen papers. It is not possible in a brief review to do full justice to the scope of the authors' contributions or to argue at points where one might choose to disagree. An exposure of these contributions and some comments may suffice here. In his almost four-page preface Canova reviews research on Arabic epics in the last two decades and the various approaches it has taken, be they historical, literary, linguistic, lexical, thematic, ethno-poetic, and so on. In spite of this research, many aspects of Arabic epics remain to be studied. In this context, the issue under review is significant because it "resume[s] a general discussion about the topic, with particular emphasis on current research" (viii). But though the study of Arabic folk epics is still a virgin field, and in fact topics for future research are suggested by most of the contributors to this issue, the editor wishes to widen the scope of research by suggesting periodic meetings on the genre in co-operation with scholars interested in Turkish and Iranian epics.

The epic of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī also known as *al-Sīrah al-Hilālīyyah* is the most popular one; it is available in cassettes and was produced as a television series. It is no wonder that five of the nineteen papers focus on it. Bencheikh and Michelline give a linguistic analysis of a manuscript of this epic preserved at the Vatican Library, whereas Slymovics analyzes an Egyptian version of this epic, in which a father-daughter incest and not famine and international politics is given as a reason for the *Hilālīyyah* migrations and invasions. She discusses the meaning of this incest to a folklorist collector, the narrator, and the audience. Sowan examines the *Hilālī* poetic corpus in the published editions in six different manuscripts of the fourteenth century historian Ibn Haldūn's *Al-Muqaddimah* (The

Introduction) and its relationship with the *Hilāliyyah* epic, and being an expert on the oral poetry of Arabia, succeeds in editing the poems. Schippers gives a narrative interpretation of the motif of blackness which implies slavery in a version of the episode of Abū Zayd the black hero of this epic as a school boy, and thus adds to the other interpretations, be they psychological, Marxist or related to the identification with the hero as it is the case of the black audience in Egypt and Sudan. Incidentally, in the Sudanese versions of the *Hilāliyyah* which are very short Abū Zayd's color is *azraq* (dark blue), a color which distances him from blackness and hence slavery. Cavona's paper is indeed very informative; it tells us about the *Hilālī* tradition in Southern Arabia, about which information is rare and consequently no studies have been carried out before.

Two studies focus on *Sīrat 'Antarah*, the second most popular epic which was produced into a film. Jason discusses the oral epic of 'Antarah, the black hero and poet, by using ethnopoetic theories. For example, on the semantic level this *sīrah* belongs to the sub-genre of the historic epic whereas 'Antarah's adventures belong to the episodic epic. Cherkaori identifies the historical elements in this epic and shows how it uses them to convince the audience that it is true. Kurk and Ott deal with the epic of Zāt al-Himmah. The first continues in the line of his research on its heroines and focuses this time on the warrior heroine princess Maymūnah. The second presents the storyteller, his performance and the interaction of the "audience" who is replaced here by the readers of the manuscripts. He traces the reader's notes and remarks on the pages and interestingly finds out that their "(r)actions are quite similar to the interaction between a storyteller and his audience on real storytelling performances" (450).

Luengo applies the peace research approach to a printed and abridged version of the epic of al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars and shows how conflicts in this *sīrah*, whether real or imaginary, are satisfactorily resolved, and thus contributes to our understanding of the cultural mechanism of conflict resolution in the Arab Islamic (read: Muslim) world. Herzog chooses to draw a portrait of 'Uthmān, a hero in this epic, by concentrating on his identity, the society he comes from, and his role and aspirations. Matar's contribution focuses on the manuscript of the narratives of the epic of al-Zīr Sālim, and examines the relationship between the text, the narrator (*rāwī*), the recounter (the person who reads the epic) and the audience.

Basing his analysis on the texts of the present editions of *Sīrat 'Antarah*, *Sīrat Zāt al-Himmah*, *Sīrat al-Zīr Sālim*, and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, Madeyska identifies four kinds of delimiters, which always appear at the boundary point and link longer sections of the *sīrah*. The first are explicitly expressed by the storyteller/narrator, the second are meta-textual expressions indicative of his presence, the third are not directly related to him and the fourth are the beginnings and ends of the narrative proper. Norris' contribution gives 'Amr b. Ma'dīkarib al-Zubaydī his due. 'Amr is an early Islamic (read: Muslim) Arabian hero, whose proto-*sīrah* has been lost for unknown reasons and whose honor has been conferred upon Saif bin Zīyazan, the hero of a *sīrah* that carries Saif's name. Norris suggests that authentic folk-epical content of 'Amir's proto-epic may yet be found in the folk literature of the descendants of the tribe of Madhiḡ in the 'Asir, the Yemen, and North Africa.

Two lesser known epics, that is the epic *Firūzšāh*, whose hero is the son of the Achaemenid king Darius, and the epic of Iskander (Alexander the Great) are examined by Grant and Doufīkar-Aerts respectively. Grant compares and contrasts the Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu versions of *Sīrat Firūzšāh* and points out that the relationship among these versions needs also "to be studied within the wider context of the development of the genre" (527). Doufīkar-Aerts argues that the *Sīrat al-Iskander* which scholars do not consider as part of the Arabic *siyar* tradition is in fact a genuine part of the genre because its

narrative structure, style and linguistic features are substantially similar to other *siyar*. His comparison of this epic in relation to the Dutch summary of the Malay *Hikāyāt* (stories of) *Iskandar* in terms of contents is stimulative. The comparison would undoubtedly encourage epic scholars to collect Malay versions and undertake the worthwhile and challenging comparison of these versions in relation to the Arabic ones.

Lyon's and Ouyang's contributions are not strictly related to epic because each analyzes a story in the "middle" Arabic literature, that is, the *One Thousand and One Nights*. They are included in this special issue because "a comparison between different research methodologies would be productive" (viii). The first analyzes the story of 'Arūs al-'Arāi's in which the heroine, unlike Arab heroines, commits and causes homicides without explicit motives. Lyon rejects the interpretations that, for example she is a tragic heroine or a victim of Islamic (read: Muslim) society as well as the moral interpretation, and sees the story as a dramatic self pity. This he thinks distinguishes it from "wonder" stories and "give[s] it an importance that extends beyond its mere curiosity value" (574). Ouyang studies the story of 'Umar al-Nu'mān, which starts as a romance and ends as an epic by means of enduring love stories inserted between the two parts, analyzes these stories, and concludes that the absence of enduring love in modern Arabic novels shows that the novel is an alien genre, a conclusion that Arab novelists may not accept. Chraibi researches some elements in the epic of Al-Hansā', such as the projects considered by the characters, the means used to carry them out and overcome the immediate difficulties, the selected characters, the language—traditional, colloquial, prose, verse, and so on—and the setting of the final scene such as its time and place of action, point of view, speed and chronology.

The contributions vary in length and depth of analysis. The authors use the terms "storyteller," "narrator," and "performer" interchangeably as having the same meaning. Some of them refer to the Muslim society as Islamic society whereas the former aspires to become like the later, which is presented in the *Qur'ān*, the Holy Book of Muslims and the *Sunnah* (Prophet Muḥammad's sayings and deeds). It is also noticeable that no attempt has been made to standardize the notes and references. In spite of these minor points, the editor G. Canova is to be congratulated for this special interesting and stimulating issue, which advances our knowledge and understanding of Arabic epics. As such, it should not be missed by scholars of folklore in general and epic genre in particular. It is unfortunate that some scholars of Arabic epics had declined to contribute to the issue, not because of prior commitments but because they "have been so shocked by international events that they have not found themselves able to speak about Arabic heroism with ease—even if of bygone times" (viii)!

Ahmad A. NASR  
U. I. A., Gombak  
53100, Kuala Lumpur