The many-layered nature of Arabic has traditionally divided its language and literature into two streams: the formal, written, literary Classical Arabic language, called *fuṣḥā,* and the many spoken regional and national dialects. These dialects can themselves be further subdivided; colloquial Egyptian Arabic, for example, encompasses Cairene Arabic, Ṣaʿīdī southern Egyptian Arabic, and so on. A longstanding bias elevates the literate, written Classical tradition, while Arabic vernaculars are frequently and mistakenly characterized as corrupt variants of Islamic high culture, language, and religion.

This complex sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world affects the transmission, reception, and editing of oral literature because this literature is most often expressed in dialect and yet written in Classical Arabic. When scholars write down oral texts in Classical Arabic, they employ a range of strategies, from approximate transcription of the dialect to partial transformation into a "corrected" literary language to direct translation into Classical (or contemporary Modern Standard) Arabic. Such folk literature texts often achieve currency thanks to the legitimizing force of written usage. In contrast, scholars who transcribe oral vernacular traditions according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) use Roman transliteration, a system not easily accessible to the Arabic-language reader.

The linguistic relationship between the formal, written language and the spoken is complex; so too are the connections between oral and written narrative. It is noteworthy that exceptions to the oral/dialect versus written/Classical Arabic abound. Orally

performed traditions such as Quranic recitations (Nelson), religious praise-songs, sermons, political speeches, and even formal, prepared poetic declaiming are pronounced in Classical Arabic. Nonetheless, Egyptian folklorist Hasan El-Shamy characterizes oral narratives as a separate cognitive system from any written ones when he discusses the production of Egyptian oral folktales (*Folktales* l-li; Slyomovics, "Death-song").

The Arabian Nights

This essay focuses on English-language research that provides both text and performance contexts from oral traditions such as *A Thousand and One Nights*, the genres of folktale and epic, and the heritage of Arab vernacular poetry. Although the interactions between the written and the oral are not our primary concern here, the history of *A Thousand and One Nights* -- since its appearance in Europe in 1704 the most well-known work of Arabic literature in the West -- reveals much about overlaps between authentic oral variants and written versions. Scholars have argued whether the written collection is made up of tales of oral provenance or, conversely, of tales never recited or performed but rather consciously molded by an editor-redactor to mimic oral storytelling style (Slyomovics, "Performing" 390-93). These issues of Arabic linguistic and literary variation and interaction affect the many available editions and influence the reader's choice of English translations. Other factors are a varied manuscript tradition, linguistic registers from Classical to dialect, and even idiosyncratic editorial emendations, the most notorious instance being Sir Richard Burton's eroticizing alterations.

Recommended texts available in paperback: 1) the two-volume translation by Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* and *The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories,* based on a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript, recounts two hundred and seventy-one nights; 2) *Thousand Nights and One Night*, the four-volume English translation of Joseph Charles Mardus' French text by Edward Powys Mathers, based on the later Egyptian Bulaq and second Calcutta editions, consists of the canonical thousand and one storytelling nights; 3) N. J. Dawood's *Aladdin and Other Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* translates selected tales; and 4) *Arabian Nights' Entertainment,* the earliest English-language translation (1706-1712), based on Antoine Galland's French text (1704) and produced by an anonymous "Grub Street" translator, enjoyed a wide readership from the early eighteenth century.

Sīra / Epic

Other tale cycles, ones that recount adventures of historical and legendary heroes and heroines, are part of the Arab *sīra* or epic tradition: *Sīrat ʿAntar ibn Shaddād* about Antara, the black warrior hero of pre-Islamic times; *Sīrat aẓ-Ẓāhir Baybars,* about the medieval Egyptian ruler, aẓ-Ẓāhir; *Sīrat Dhat al-Himma*, on the wars of the heroine queen Dhat al-Himma against the Byzantine Empire; *Sīrat al-Malik Sayf Ibn Dhi Yazan*, on the wars of a south Arabian king against the Abyssinians; *Sīrat aẓ-Ẓīr Sālim,* about the Bedouin Arab hero aẓ-Ẓir Sālim; and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the epic of the Banū Hilāl tribe.[1] These epics also exist in

[1] For historical and bibliographical materials, see appropriate entries in the *Encyclopedia of Islam.*

both oral and written forms. Numerous handwritten manuscripts are located in libraries throughout Europe and the Arab world; printed editions can still be cheaply purchased in many Arab countries. Of all the epics, it is *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* that continues to be the most widely performed by poets, storytellers, and singers from Iraq in the east to Morocco in the west, in the Arabian peninsula, and in parts of Sudan and Central Africa. Contemporary bards consider the Hilali epic the true history of the Arabs. ʿAwaḍallah, an Egyptian epic poet who sings the Hilali tales in dialect, also proclaims the uniqueness and intelligibility of epic performance in all forms of Arabic: "Blessing the Prophet is beneficial before all / my speech is earnest, my art is Arab / northwards and to the east of my words, / my art only Arabs understand" (Slyomovics, *Merchant* 112). The Hilali epic is based on historical events -- the migratory waves of Banu Hilal Bedouin leaving the famine-ridden Arabian peninsula for the verdant shores of North Africa from the eighth to the eleventh century. History and legend have become so intertwined that we know only one certain fact about the transmission of this epic: the earliest, extant oral versions were written down by the famed medieval scholar, Ibn Khaldun, who collected Hilali tales from Bedouin tribes in North Africa around the fifteenth century (Rosenthal 3:412-40).

The importance of contemporary Egyptian reciters and narrators in preserving the Hilali epic is reflected in the scholarly literature.[2] Performance texts of the oral Hilali epic tradition are in Slyomovics, *Merchant*; Reynolds, *Heroic Poets*; and Connelly. These

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[2] I confine myself to English-language scholarship; French-language studies have concentrated on the Maghribi (North African) versions.

are versified narratives by Egyptian poets sung over many nights to the accompaniment of the *rabāba* (spike-fiddle) or the *ṭār* (drum). Excerpts from the opening section of the Egyptian Hilali cycle, the birth of the hero sequence, are translated by Reynolds and Slyomovics and appear in Hale and Johnson. Versions by Patterson in Shuwa Arabic dialect of Nigeria and by Hurreiz in Sudanese Arabic demonstrate the Arab-African cross-fertilizations. For additional Arab epics in translation, Lyons has compiled brief prose versions of twelve epics and Jayyusi has translated and adapted the epic of *Sayf Ibn Dhi Yazan*.

Folktale

The longstanding idea that the literate, written culture is innately superior to the oral, often illiterate, heritage affects the collecting of folk literature. The folktale in the Arab world, like its European counterparts, has endured rewriting, simplification, and censorship as it moves from oral rendition to written text. Rarely do Arab folktales, whether they are collected in Arabic or Western languages, preserve an authentic oral form. Two exceptions are the Egyptian collection by El-Shamy (*Folktales*) and the Palestinian one by Muhawi and Kanaana.[3] Both provide biographical information on the tellers, ethnographic description of the storytelling context, and comparative annotation linking the tales to international tale-types and their Arabic variants. Finally, in an effort to organize and

[3] Tales are accurate translations from their respective dialects; Muhawi and Kanaana also transliterated one Palestinian Arabic tale in Roman transcription.

structure the huge domain of Arabic folktales, epics, and legends, El-Shamy's two-volume guide (*Folk Traditions*) classifies Arab oral literature according to the standard Stith Thompson system of motifs.

Folk Poetry and Gender

A consideration of performed folk poetry introduces yet another layer to the perceived dichotomies of written and oral, literate and illiterate, Classical and vernacular Arabic: the role of gender. Abu-Lughod's work on Bedouin women of Egypt proposes that the oral composition and recitation of love-poetry by women is a defiant move by the powerless against the powerful. These women use a poetic language to subvert social demands for modesty and denial of women's sexuality. Abu-Lughod's fieldwork demonstrates that paradoxically the poetry through which women (and another powerless group, young men) express subversive views is also highly valued by the community. Two ethnographies about male poets in the Arabian peninsula, Caton on Yemeni tribal poets and Sowayan on Saudi vernacular poetry, confirm the value and power of orally performed poetry among its practitioners and listeners.

Folk poetry is a key cultural event in Arabian society because it is an integral part of political, social and religious institutions. Poetry, and by extension folk narrative, is central because it is also a form of political rhetoric -- a means to persuade, to mediate, to praise, and sometimes to subvert. At certain times and places in the Arab world, folk narrators and singers, such as Egyptian epic poets, are an especially trained, hereditary class, valued yet apart. In

others, as among Egyptian Bedouin women or in pre-modern Arabia, dynamic tradition created a nation of folk poets. The oral literature of the Arab world is a primary literature; one cannot hope to approach the richness of Arab literature if one remains bound to the Classical tradition alone.

Pedagogical approaches

Texts from the Arabic-speaking world introduce American students to the study of a living, oral tradition of "troubadours" and performers from the Middle East and North Africa. To illustrate the qualities of oral epic poetry from a fully comparative perspective, for example, course syllabi may employ the ancient Greek epics as well as the mediaeval (written) and modern (orally performed) epics from the Arab world. Conflicts, cross-influences, and contacts between the Islamic and European epic traditions are reflected both in French and Spanish medieval epic texts and in poetry from the Arab world. A case of special interest is the Bosnian Muslim poetry composed and performed in the former Yugoslavia. This poetry has been intensively studied by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in connection with their theories of Homeric oral composition, but could also be systematically related to the Middle Eastern tradition. Epics are also versions of national myths that retain their power, and help in understanding the background to modern ideologies and fictions of national identity. By connecting Arabic material on epic, romance, folktale, and performed poetry to the mainstream traditions of Classics and other national literatures, the cross-

disciplinary approach to oral literature will remain at the heart of the comparative folk literature enterprise.

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