

Cambridge University Press

0521017386 - The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling, Volume 1 - Introduction

M. C. Lyons

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The hero cycles of Arabic belong to the literary tradition of *The Arabian Nights* and can be seen as the popular epics of their civilisation. *The Arabian epic* covers ten of the main representatives of this genre. Each of these has been developed through the processes of accretive oral story-telling through an accumulation of narrative and folklore motifs, many of which belong to what can be seen as a universal tradition. The work is published in three volumes. The first volume introduces the background and the dimensions in which the cycles are set, while the second volume analyses their contents and the literary formulae used in their construction, as well as listing analogues found in other literatures. The epitomes surveyed in the final volume provide non-Arabists with a more immediate insight into contents of the cycles, drawing attention to their narrative colouring and texture.

Cambridge University Press

0521017386 - The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling, Volume 1 - Introduction

M. C. Lyons

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE ORIENTAL PUBLICATIONS 49

THE ARABIAN EPIC

Cambridge University Press

0521017386 - The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling, Volume 1 - Introduction

M. C. Lyons

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Arabian epic
Heroic and oral story-telling
Volume 1: Introduction

M. C. LYONS

University of Cambridge



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
0521017386 - The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling, Volume 1 - Introduction
M. C. Lyons
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521474283

© Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge, 1995

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1995
Reprinted 1997
This digitally printed first paperback version 2005

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Lyons, M. C. (Malcolm Cameron)
The Arabian epic : heroic and oral storytelling / M. C. Lyons.
p. cm. – (University of Cambridge oriental publications :
no. 49)

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 47428 0 (v. 1). – ISBN 0 521 47449 3 (v. 2). – ISBN
0 521 47450 7 (v. 3)

1. Folk literature, Arabic – History and criticism. 2. Literature
and folklore – Arab countries. 3. Storytelling – Arab countries.
4. Heroes in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PJ7580 .L86 1995
398.2'0953–dc20 94-25091 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-47428-3 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-47428-0 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-01738-1 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-01738-6 paperback

Cambridge University Press

0521017386 - The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling, Volume 1 - Introduction

M. C. Lyons

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

IN MEMORIAM G. M. HINDS

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
Introduction to volume one	1
1 Dimensions	8
Time and space	8
Racial groups	21
Social organisation, authority and the individual	29
Women, love and marriage	35
Background of beliefs	42
2 Narrative settings	54
War	54
The sea	60
Common: uncommon	64
3 Structure	73
4 Narrative agents	77
Minor characters	77
Princes	88
Heroes	94
The monstrous regiment	109
The Man of Wiles	118
Villains	127
Conclusion	133
<i>Select bibliography</i>	141
<i>Abbreviations used in indices</i>	145
<i>Index of names</i>	146
<i>Index of places</i>	178

PREFACE

Heroes serve both as milestones and as way-marks for their societies. They can chart ambitions, trace emotions, indicate stages of progress, and embody or identify beliefs and attitudes. Further, as the functions of heroism are not confined to a single social grouping, heroes can indicate points of contact that, in turn, relate to the universalities of human life. As a contribution to the study of this field the present work offers not only to Arabists, but to all who are interested in the heroic field, or in oral literature in general, an investigation of the main hero cycles of Arabic literature.

The parameters of the study must first be made clear. Textual scholars and those who work on the transmission of literary motifs, as well as social historians, will realise the nature of the problems involved. A text cannot properly be established before every version of it that exists has been investigated. Before a literary parallel can be confirmed as a source, a borrowing, or a coincidence, an exhaustive search is needed of all contexts in which it is found. Similarly, the history of the social background of literary phenomena can only be accepted in a framework that supplies time, place, and corroborative evidence. It is to be hoped that such studies may enhance the academic value of the Arabic cycles, but they lie far beyond the scope of the present work.

Here the investigation is based on, and, except in the second section, does not go beyond a series of printed texts whose imperfections are clear but to which improvements, at the moment, must fall short of the ideal. At least in all the texts as they stand the coefficient of academic loss is approximately the same.

The first part of the study deals with the internal background of the narrative and with the patterns that it shows. To this it adds no information that is not provided in the texts themselves, and the relevance of what is found to different Islamic countries at different periods of their development must be studied elsewhere.

The main concern of the second part is the investigation of external literary connotations. To prepare the way for this, the narrative ingredients of the cycles are listed in a Narrative Index, constructed with the help of brief epitomes of the cycles themselves. Parallels found in a sample of works taken from a range of other literatures have then been collected in a Comparative Index. Here, too, the object has been to provide a background for further studies rather than to advance theories that would require the support of detailed investigation.

For readers who are unacquainted with the Arabic originals no form of analysis can supply an impression of their texture or colour. Much must obviously be lost in translation, let alone in a précis, but, in spite of the duplication involved, a third section

xii Preface

is added in which the epitomes are expanded in an attempt to give a more immediate insight into a narrative form that has lacked the European popularity of the Arabian Nights but which, within its own context, can arguably shed more light on the civilisation that produced it.

During the years that have been taken up in the preparation of this work I have incurred innumerable debts of gratitude. The first of these is to the Publications Committee of the Oriental Faculty of Cambridge, under the Chairmanship of Dr Gordon Johnson, for their acceptance of a work whose length clearly violates the principles of modern publishing. My friends and colleagues both in the Oriental Faculty and in Pembroke College have been endlessly generous with their erudition. In particular I would like to thank Dr L. P. Johnson of Pembroke, Mr John Smith of the Oriental Faculty, and my colleague Dr Charles Melville. My sister, Miss M. E. Lyons, helped with the laborious task of indexing, and throughout the preparation of the work the contribution made by my wife, both in the field of Arabic and of European languages, has been invaluable. Finally, I acknowledge a special debt to Dr Simon Maddrell, F.R.S., Fellow of Caius College – *unus qui nobis computando restituit rem* – whose expertise and enthusiasm rescued these pages from the computer disks in which they appeared likely to remain entombed. When the weariness of the flesh, noted by the author of *Ecclesiastes*, is forgotten, it is the tradition of academic friendliness that remains in the mind.