Premodern Arabic literature has left a substantial legacy of popular narrative. One category of this literary tradition is a genre of narratives that has become termed *al-sīra al-shaʿbiyya*, or popular epic. Reports about this genre first appear in the 6th/12th century. Its members constitute a very large corpus of public popular storytelling texts, the most famous example of which is *Alf layla wa-layla*, known in western literature as *The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*. In addition to the stories of love and magic that predominate in the *Nights* and the popular epics discussed here, which focus on conflict and adventure, this vibrant Arabic tradition of storytelling encompasses pseudo-historical accounts of popular history, humorous tales, fables, and religious stories of prophets and saints.¹

Studying these Arabic popular epics presents challenges. The details of how this thriving tradition of popular storytelling developed over time can only be delineated generally since secondary references to it are scarce. Elite literary scholars in the premodern era held these narratives in disdain and therefore commented on them rarely. They tended to mention these narratives only to condemn them as puerile specimens of literature with little aesthetic merit or as distortions of elite traditions of history and religion that dangerously misled the ignorant masses.²

Another challenge to understanding the tradition involves modalities of transmission. Most of these stories moved fluidly over the centuries between oral and written narration. A significant number of manuscripts or print examples of the written tradition exist, yet their specific relationship to the oral tradition remains largely unstudied. In the few cases where Arabic oral traditions of narration still exist, such as with *Sīrat Bani Hilāl*, disciplinary demarcations have limited comparative study. Folklorists


and ethnomusicologists tend to focus on oral versions, literary scholars on written ones. Although an increasing body of sophisticated research has grown in both disciplines, little opportunity for cross-comparison has occurred. Indeed, few individuals study either form of transmission.³

A third obstacle stems from the lack of availability of many of these epics. Although numerous copies of manuscripts of a single narrative often exist, they are scattered in libraries throughout the world. Printed versions appear in cheap editions published in various Arab countries, but as is the case with much of Arabic literature, once these printed runs sell out, copies become difficult to obtain. Given their popular nature and chapbook quality, many university libraries neglect even to buy copies of these works. Hence, although there is a significant corpus of material available in different places and written at various points in time, studying it remains difficult and time-consuming.

Moreover, the very size of this corpus, many of whose texts extend over thousands of pages, has hindered its analysis. When confronted with a narrative that continues for thousands of pages, it is sufficiently laborious to analyze one version without facing the challenge of examining multiple examples of either the same work or undertaking to compare them with other members of the genre. Few scholars have had the time or the energy to engage in extensive surveys of this literature. Researchers have at most attempted comparisons of a few versions of a single epic; hardly any have embarked on intensive comparative analysis.⁴

Other difficulties face students of this narrative tradition. One of these is the linguistic diglossia that characterizes Arabic. Written and spoken forms of the language have diverged over the centuries; beyond this, the spoken language has splintered into many dialects. The corpus of popular literature reflects this linguistic diversity. Styles in it display both the centrifugal pull of standard written Arabic and the centripetal push of the dialects. Such linguistic diversity presents a challenge to scholars accustomed to holding separate written and spoken registers of Arabic. They need to accept that either linguistic register, or more likely some mixture of the two, a form usually termed Middle Arabic, is normal for this literature. Although the linguistic evidence that these narratives contain


⁴ Among those who develop a comparative framework are Lyons (1996: vol. 1) and from the methodological vantage point of folklore, El-Shamy (1995, 2004, 2006).