Malcolm C. Lyons,
The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature. A Study of Medieval Arab Hero.

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012,
x + 254 p.
ISBN: 978-0748645022

The monograph here reviewed, *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature. A Study of Medieval Arab Hero*, deals with one of the main figures of the popular Arabic literature, the Man of Wiles, i.e. the Master Thief, the Fool, the Trickster (Ar.: *'ayyār*), a sort of "Odysseus whose role include those of champion, wanderer and favourite of the goddess Athene, who helped him change his shape" (p. ix). According to Malcolm C. Lyons, the purpose of his research has been "to investigate Arabic avatars of this character and what relationship, if any, they have not only to each other but to their possible relatives in other literatures" (p. ix). Through the examination of a number of common and shared characteristics, Lyons follows a technique inaugurated by Dumézil in his *Loki* (Paris 1986), applying and adapting it to the most important Arabic epic cycles (*sīra*, pl. *siyar*).

In each section of the five chaptersmaking up *The Man of Wiles*, Lyons focuses on a different 'man of wiles'. In particular, the characters he identifies are : 'Alī al-Zaybaq, protagonist of the homonymous cycle (chapter 1.1.), Shaybub, a main character of the *Sīrat 'Antar* (1.2), Kulayb, brother of the Muhalhil al-Zīr, the principal hero of the *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim* (2.1.), Abū Zayd the major hero of the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (2.2.), 'Umar, the son of an unnamed slave in the *Qiṣṣat Ḥamzat al-Pahlawān* (3.1.), Bihrūz, son of the *ġūl* and brave young *'ayyār* in the *Qiṣṣat Fīrūz Šāh* (3.2.), Musaqib of the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Ḏī Yazan* (3.3.), al-Baṭṭāl one of the main characters in the *Sīrat Ḏāt al-Himma* (4), 'Uṯmān (5.1.) and Šiha (5.2.), two important characters of the *Sīrat Baybars*.

The amount of data and information given in these five chapters is unparalleled and can be enough to make the work by Lyons a landmark study on the subject. The methodology and accuracy in Lyons' analysis are indeed well known from his previous works. In the single chapters, he outlines the main features of each character by presenting a detailed summary of all the events and episodes in which he is involved as man of wiles.

The summaries of the sequences of various cycles analyzed in *The Man of Wiles* are corresponding to those of *The Arabian epic* (Cambridge 1995, 3 vols), the *magnum opus* on Arabic epics written by Lyons. This element also gives to *The Man of Wiles*a sense of consistency with the (massive) effort of collection and presentation of data previously undertaken. A serie of extra cross-references, in brackets, stand for themes and motifs extensively studied by Lyons and other scholars in the comparative framework of the world literatures.

The final chapter on the "Analysis and Conclusion" (6.1.) is extremely important since it discusses the Man of Wiles in the context of the Arabic literature and epics in particular. Lyons defines there in the various typologies and main features of this narrative figure.

Firstly, he focuses on the characterization of 'Man of Wiles' by pointing out that from the texts cannot a single definition be inferred. The term Man of wiles was indeed applied to characters with different features: "Shaybub, who was also 'the man who stirs up trouble', and Abū Zayd, 'the wily deceiver', and 'the master of schemes and of wiles'. Musabiq was a cunning thief, while 'Uthman 'used his wiles to cheat people'. Shihawas described as 'the king of thieves', and 'Abd al-Wahhab was astonished by the subtlety of the wiles of al-Battal. Elsewhere, Hamza was 'one of the leading *'ayyārs*' and Bihruz was 'the prince of the *'ayyār*s of his age'" (p. 215).The figures of 'Alī al-Zaybaq, the protagonist of the homonymous story, and 'Abd al-Wahhāb in the *Sīrat Ḏāt al-Himma* are "two characters boundaries" (p. 216). The first "was marked out at birth as a hero being 'as big as a one-year-old-child'". Similarly to 'Antar and 'Abd al-Wahhab he was also black. By contrast, Shiha was a little man and al-Baṭṭāl "started life as a coward, alarmed by a mouse's squeak" (p. 216).

Beyond the physical strength, Lyons emphasizes that "all the Men of Wiles are creatures of conflict", who generally "use their skills, if not in accordance with conventional morality, at least in the broader cause of righteousness" (p. 216). Usually, the open conflict or the warfare lead them to use their skills by means of intermediaries like horses and weapons.

The thousand and varied skills that the Arabic Man of Wiles possesses are deployed in the various episodes in which the characters mentioned above are protagonists: "Experience, and to a lesser extent learning, have a bearing on another branch of the expertise of the Man of Wiles, the art of disguise" (p. 219).

In the last part of the chapter (6.2), Lyons outlines series of comparisons between the various characters of the Arabic epics and corresponding characters (avatars) in the most important works of literature. The very last part is devoted to a more general definition of the Man of Wiles in relation to the Trickster, the Fool and the Master Thief as literary types. This part is particularly important since it actually lacks a whole study of this figure in the context

BCAI 30 (2016) Malcolm C. Lyons: The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature. A Study of Medieval Arab Hero., recensé par Francesca Bellino
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

of Arabic literature with a more general framing in the history of literatures.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Lyons makes a careful use of the notes and even, as paradoxical as it may seem, of the comparisons. The strength of this study has such deep roots that it does not need such formal and fashionable supports.

Francesca Bellino
University of Turin

BCAI 30 (2016) Malcolm C. Lyons: The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature. A Study of Medieval Arab Hero., recensé par Francesca Bellino
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net