

THE MAQAMAT AS A LITERARY GENRE

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Hariri, whose full name was Abu Muhammad al-Qasim ibn 'Ali al-Hariri al-Basri al-Harami (466/1054 — 516/1122)¹ completed the *Maqamat* in the year 504/1111. This date for the completion of the work is given by Yaqut, who also mentions the date when Hariri began the work as the year 495. According to Professor MacKay, discussing the colophon and primary certificate of transmission of the earliest manuscript of the *Maqamat*², the latest possible date for the completion of the work is Sha'ban,³ which confirms the date given by Yaqut. The work then received immediate acceptance when Hariri brought it up from Basra to Baghdad in the very year of its completion.⁴ But Hariri, being a modest writer, did not claim himself as the originator of the *Maqamat*, for in his preface to his *Maqamat* he wrote that Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani⁵ was the first to write this kind of work; al-Hamadhani, therefore, should be preferred to himself, being the earlier author.⁶

Ibn Khallikan for his part frankly says⁷ that "The hafiz Abu al-Fadl Ahmad bin Husayn bin Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Hamadhani is the author of some beautiful examples of excellent *Maqamat*, which al-Hariri took as a model for his, fashioning them on the same plan, and imitating the manner of their author in whose footsteps he walked." The general assumption of educated Arabs is that al-Hamadhani was the true originator of the *Maqamat* genre. As al-Qalqashandi states⁸, "Al-Hamadhani was the originator of the *Maqamat* genre, and was then followed by Hariri." Al-Qalqashandi,

1 For his biography and works see for instance Yaqut, v.6, pp. 167-184, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya*, v.4, pp. 295-298 and Hajji Khalfah, v.6, pp. 57-59.

2 Prof. MacKay, University of Washington, mentions that MS. *Adab* 105 in the National Library of Egypt is the earliest MS of the *Maqamat* and was copied in the same year that Hariri completed his work. MacKay, p.6.

3 Ibid, p.8.

4 So Yaqut's report, loc. cit.

5 358/968 — 398/1008. For biographical details see for instance Yaqut, v.I, pp. 94-118.

6 See the preface of Hariri to the *Maqamat*. For English translation see for example Chenery, p. 105.

7 Ibn Khallikan, v.I, p.215.

8 *Subh al-A'sha* (14 vols.) Cairo, 1963, v.14, p.110.

however, insists on the superiority of Hariri's work which he says, surpassed al-Hamadhani's, and its elegance and refinement outshone al-Hamadhani's work and contributed to its neglect⁹. Hariri in his preface speaks about al-Hamadhani's superiority with a respect approaching veneration, while implying indirectly that he believes himself to have surpassed his model, as we can see in *maqama* forty-seven where Abu Zayd, Hariri's hero, is made to say "If al-Iskandari¹⁰ has been before me, the dew precedes the shower, but the shower excels the dew in fructifying bounty¹¹." Indeed, the praises which Hariri received were enough to exalt him in his own esteem.

But this opinion was challenged in the year 1930 by Zaki Mubarak when he concludes¹² that ".....the commonly held opinion for centuries that Badi' al-Zaman al Hamadhani is the true originator of the *Maqamat* genre is erroneous." Mubarak indeed said that the perpetrator of the "error" was Hariri himself whose acknowledgement in his preface states that al-Hamadhani "invented the *Maqamat*." According to Mubarak the originator of the *Maqamat* genre was Ibn Durayd¹³ who composed forty stories of his own invention, using the style of the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period, full of rare and forceful phrases. In order to rival Ibn Durayd, al-Hamadhani composed his *Maqamat*. But Ibn Durayd has called his composition *Ahadith*¹⁴. In fact, Mubarak's opinion was based on that of al-Husri in his *Zahr al-Adab* where he mentions¹⁵ that "having seen Ibn Durayd's forty stories, al-Hamadhani followed him with his *Maqamat*."

This criticism was replied to at once by Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi'i in the same periodical¹⁶ with arguments to prove the weakness of Mubarak's opinion, and to show how al-Husri, the root of the conflict, was alone among critics in his point of view on this matter. Al-Rafi'i stressed that a great critic such as al-Tha'alibi, who was al-Hamadhani's contemporary, had never expressed this opinion. Al-Husri, who was from Qairawan, had never travelled to Irak in order to seek the opportunity to study the works of al-Hamadhani and Ibn Durayd.

This controversy, however, does not make any alteration to the general opinion that al-Hamadhani was the "father of the *Maqamat*

⁹ loc. cit.

¹⁰ Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari, al-Hamadhani's hero in his *Maqamat*.

¹¹ See Steingass for English translation, p.162.

¹² *Al-Muqtataf*, v.76 (1930) pp.418-420.

¹³ Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Durayd (d. 321/933). See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden/London, 1954, v.3, p.757.

¹⁴ Zaki Mubarak, *al-Nathr al-Fanni fi al-Qarn al-Rabi*, Cairo, 1934, v.1, pp. 198-200.

¹⁵ *Zahr al-Adab*, v. 1, p. 307.

¹⁶ *Al-Muqtataf*, v.77, pp. 588-590.

genre''. Though we can see the influence of Ibn Durayd's stories on the *Maqamat*, such as in the style of composition which relies on narration, rhythmic prose, telling and rare phrases, there are, nevertheless, differences between the two works¹⁷. The *Maqamat* have only one hero and one narrator, (*rawi*,) who are set in an elegant realistic background which makes the work the most comprehensive of its kind. It was meant for the wise and eloquent, not for common people, since the author composed it in a literary style with rare words and phrases, remarkable idioms, proverbs and poetry. Mubarak himself agreed with this point, admitting that, although Ibn Durayd was the originator of the *Maqamat* genre, al-Hamadhani's work is the more artistic and comprehensive, and that the writers who wrote after al-Hamadhani followed his style, and called their works *maqamat* instead of *ahadith*.¹⁸ Professor Beeston, in his article *The Genesis of the Maqamat Genre*,¹⁹ writes that al-Hamadhani's originality lies in two things; firstly, the adoption of *saj'* as a vehicle for the entire composition, narrative parts included; (this is something that had not been attempted before.) The second point is the frank admission that his stories are fictional. It is typical of anecdote in all ages and places that, however manifestly fictional the narratives may be, they should be given a spurious air of truth by being woven round the names of historical personages.²⁰

Since the pre-Islamic period, the Arabs have appreciated true poetry. Some of them could repeat hundreds of *qasidas* and poems, while others could quote verses descriptive of every part of the camel or horse, or in praise or defamation of the multitudinous tribes. Others professed to explain the origin of innumerable proverbs and sayings.²¹ In the early period of Islam this tradition remained, and men's memories were exercised on a poetic production which, though individually short, formed as a whole a mass of literature of vast magnitude.²² The *rawi* (reciter), therefore, was in high favour as the repository of communications expressing vividly the spirit both of his

17 See Victor al-Kuk, *Badi'at al-Zaman*, Beirut, 1961, pp. 54-55 for further discussion of the differences between these two works.

18 Zaki Mubarak, *al-Nathr al-Fanni fi al-Qarn al-Rabi'*, v.1, p. 201.

19 *Journal of Arabic Literature*, v. 2, Leiden (1971) pp. 1-12.

20 Prof. Beeston gives as an example of this characteristic "Have you heard what Mr. Wilson said to his wife as they were leaving No. 10 Downing Street"? op. cit. p.9.

21 See Chenery, pp. 16-17 where he also claims that writing was almost unknown among the pre-Islamic Arabs at the time when their poetical vigour was at its height.

22 See R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 131-132 for the tradition of the old poetry and the great importance of oral transmission. See also MacKay, pp. 5-6.

own time and of the past. He spent his time learning poetry by heart and studying the lives of the poets and the incidents to which their compositions referred.²³ Al-Hamadhani was a member of this school. Biographers²⁴ of al-Hamadhani always describe him as a person who had a wonderful memory owing to which he could repeat a lengthy work he had heard only once, turning prose into verse, or verse into prose with equal facility. He then became celebrated for his new form of composition which was eminently fitted to display the powers that he possessed. He imagined an improviser who was given to wandering from place to place, and a reciter who should continually meet him and relate his adventures repeating his excellent composition. To this work he gave the name *Maqamat*. His narrator is called 'Isa ibn Hisham, and the improviser is Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari. Through them, al-Hamadhani has succeeded in maintaining a certain unity in his work, avoiding abrupt transitions, while he introduces and illustrates all the different ideas of his composition. Learned people admired al-Hamadhani's composition and loved to listen to the rhythmic cadences of the prose and verse as they were chanted by the reciter, through whom the author displays his eloquence, poetical power and learning.²⁵ The author was therefore honoured with the title of *Badi' al-Zaman* "The Wonder of the Age".²⁶

There were many writers after al-Hamadhani who composed *maqamat* in his style, such as Abu al-Asba' 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Tamam al-'Iraqi²⁷ who composed *maqamat* about *ba'th* (the resurrection); Abu al-Qasim 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn al-Husayn,²⁸ Abu al-Hasan al-Mukhtar ibn al-Hasan ibn 'Abdun ibn Butlan²⁹ and Abu Humayd Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazzali,³⁰ but none, except Hariri, ever succeeded in achieving what al-Hamadhani had exhibited in his work with his combination of language and style, rich store of metaphors, ancient proverbs and riddles. Hariri produced fifty *Maqamat* as models of accuracy in a series of rhythmical and metrical anecdotes to embody all the refinements of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and tradition that the author's extensive learning could supply. The celebrity of the work, therefore, is mainly

²³R.A. Nicholson, op. cit. p. 132.

²⁴See for instance Yaqut, v.1, pp. 95-96 and al-Tha'alibi, *Yatimat al-Dahr*, v.4, p. 240 for his literary talent and his powerful memory.

²⁵For details of the treatment see Victor al-Kuk, *Badi'at al-Zaman*, pp.66-82.

²⁶It seems that al-Tha'alibi was the first who gave him this title. See *Yatimat al-Dahr*, v 4, p. 240.

²⁷10th century A.D. *GAL*, 1, p. 524.

²⁸He was born in Baghdad in 410/1020 and died in 485/1092. *GAL*, Suppl. 1, p. 486.

²⁹*GAL*, Suppl. 1, p. 885.

³⁰(450/1058 — 505/1111) *GAL*, 1, p. 423.

due to its consummate literary form, a point on which the Arabs have always bestowed singular attention, and the *Maqamat* of Hariri are prized as a unique monument of their language, antiquities and culture.³¹

Besides the literary motifs and the influence of al-Hamadhani, the historical origin of Hariri's *Maqamat* is, according to general tradition, factual. When the armies of the crusaders had forced their way into Syria and carried on sporadic warfare against the local Muslims, the war made many people homeless and drove them forth to exile and poverty.³² One of them, a stranger from Saruj,³³ one day entered the mosque of Banu Haram in Basra where Hariri was sitting in company.³⁴ The stranger was an old man with old garments and all the marks of poverty, but he excited the curiosity of Hariri and his friends with the fluency and eloquence of his address, in which he related the destruction of his city, the loss of his daughter, and his own exile and beggary. Hariri, being excited by the tale told by the old man, whose *kunya* was Abu Zayd, went home and wrote the *maqama* of *al-Haramiyya*.³⁵ This story about the original Abu Zayd, Hariri's hero in the *Maqamat*, is related by most of Hariri's biographers, including Yaqut³⁶ who heard it from al-Fanjadihi, one of the authors of a commentary on the *Maqamat*, who in his turn heard it from Ibn Naqur who heard it from Hariri himself. Al-Razi,³⁷ in his commentary on the *Maqamat*, quoted Hariri as describing Abu Zayd as "a fluent old man, full of eloquence and cleverness, who visited us in the mosque of Banu Haram, conversed with the people and asked alms of them. I was filled with wonder and began that same night the composition of the *maqama* of *al-Haramiyya*, imitating his style."³⁸ On the other hand, in the same biography of Hariri, Yaqut offered another model for Abu Zayd in the person of Abu Zayd ibn Salam³⁹ al-Basri, a grammarian of uncertain moral character. This story is related by Yaqut as a direct report from Abu Abd Allah Muhammad

³¹See this point in R.A. Nicholson, op. cit. p. 336.

³²*Al-Kamil*, v.10, p. 113, also Steven Runciman, *A History of Crusades*, (3 vols.) Cambridge, 1954-5, v.1, pp. 209-210.

³³A town not far from Edessa. It was taken by the crusaders in 494/1101. See *al-Kamil*, v. 10, p. 113.

³⁴This meeting took place in the year 495/1102, a year after the occupation of Saruj by Baldwin of Edessa. Ibid, sama paga.

³⁵This was the first *maqama* to be composed, though in the final rearrangement it is placed as the forty-eighth. See, for example, Steingass, p. 163.

³⁶V. 6, pp. 167-168.

³⁷De Sacy quotes this information in his commentary on the 48th *maqama*, v. 2, p. 643.

³⁸The same story was also quoted by Hajji Khalfah, v.6, p. 57.

³⁹The name according to *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya* is Ibn Sallar, v.4, p. 296. Prof. Mac-Kay also quotes this name as Ibn Sallar, p. 29.

ibn Sa'id ibn al-Dhubaythi.⁴⁰ This original Abu Zayd is also referred to by al-Subki,⁴¹ but with less confidence. He just said that the story was related by "some people". The two Abu Zayds, therefore, seem to be quite separate. Professor MacKay⁴² himself has not been able to find any explicit reference to Abu Zayd "al-Saruji" then "al-Basri". But according to him again, there is enough detail to justify the belief that Abu Zayd ibn Sallar existed, so he continues to suspect that Abu Zayd ibn Sallar was not the same person as Abu Zayd al-Saruji.⁴³

If we look into the account given by Hariri himself in his preface, we discover that he states that it was a conversation about the *Maqamat* of al-Hamadhani that inspired the person "whose suggestion is a decree, and obedience to whom is a prize" to request him to compose some after that model, "in spite of what I suffered from frozen genius, and dryness of imagination and failing judgement".⁴⁴ This statement of Hariri offers no connection with the character Abu Zayd who, according to the story above, visited him in the mosque and made him compose the *Maqamat*. It may be possible to suppose that Hariri, being astonished with Abu Zayd, composed his first *maqama*, and that the first composition of this kind of writing was received with great interest by people, including the "person" who, having read the first *maqama*, asked him to compose others.

This discussion, however, leads to the question : for whom did Hariri compose his *Maqamat*, or, in particular, whom did Hariri mean in his preface by "the person" that asked him to compose the *Maqamat*? Here again, we are confronted with the general tradition from his biographers that "the person" in the question was Sharaf al-Din Anu Shirwan ibn Khalid, *wazir* to the caliph Mustarshid Billah and to the Sultan Mas'ud. The author al-Razi quoted Hariri as saying⁴⁵ "..... when it⁴⁶ was finished, I read it to a group of the chief people, who admired it exceedingly, and brought it to the knowledge of the *wazir* Sharaf al-Din Anu Shirwan ibn Khalid. He pressed me to compose others like it, and I complied." This is the common belief of most of Hariri's biographers, including Yaqut⁴⁷ and Hajji Khalfah⁴⁸ who

⁴⁰ Yaqut, v.6, p. 173.

⁴¹ *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya*, v.4, p. 296.

⁴² MacKay, p. 28.

⁴³ MacKay, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁴ For English translation of the preface of Hariri see for instance Chenery, p. 105.

³⁵ According to al-Razi, this story was related to him by al-Fanjadihi, who heard it from Abu Bakr al-Barazini, who heard it from Hariri. For the quotation see De Sacy, v.2, p. 643.

⁴⁶ He means the first *maqama*.

⁴⁷ Yaqut, v.6, p. 168.

⁴⁸ Hajji Khalfah, v.6, p. 57.

quoted the same story, which indicates their belief that the *Maqamat* were dedicated to Anu Shirwan ibn Khalid. But this common belief was criticized by Ibn Khallikan in his biography of Hariri. He claims that in Cairo in the year 656 he saw a copy of several of the *Maqamat* written by Hariri himself with, on the cover, a declaration that he had composed them for Ibn Sadaqa, another *wazir* of Mustarshid Billah.⁴⁹ But Ibn Khallikan himself does not seem to be very sure about this since he relies only on the statement on the cover, the authenticity of which depends on the authorship of the hand-writing. Thus he concludes with the phrase "God knows the truth." Here again Professor MacKay expresses his doubt that the *Maqamat* were written for Anu Shirwan or Ibn Sadaqa. After studying the authority for the content of the earliest manuscript of the *Maqamat*,⁵⁰ Professor MacKay concludes that the familiar question raised by Ibn Khallikan about the dedication is largely irrelevant. "The *Maqamat* were written neither for Anu Shirwan ibn Khalid nor for Abu 'Ali ibn Sadaqa. They were written for the literary world of Baghdad"⁵¹ On Ibn Khallikan's belief that Ibn Sadaqa's copy was in Hariri's hand throughout, Professor MacKay says that he is not sure about that since it seems to depend solely on Ibn Khallikan's expertise as a palaeographer; and in connection with Hariri's word in the preface about "the person", he mentions that it "could refer to anyone, from God himself on down."⁵²

In any case, it seems that the composition of the first *maqama* of Hariri was based on a real incident coloured by his own imagination and fictional power that made his characters Abu Zayd and Harith ibn Hammam, his narrator, into itinerants, full of learning and knowledge. All *Maqamat* composed by Hariri, following the first are variations on the theme of the same ill-dressed, old man, roaming from place to place, with no means of support except his marvellous powers of language, while Harith ibn Hammam is always an admirer of Abu Zayd, searching for him and always paying liberally for the pleasure of meeting him. As a great scholar, he narrates the adventures and performances of his friend in the highest style of Arabic eloquence. In this point, Hariri seems to surpass his predecessor, al-Hamadhani, who in some of his *Maqamat*, such as in the *Maqamat of Nahid*,⁵³ *Baghdad*⁵⁴ and the *Dinar*,⁵⁵ ignores his character Abu

⁴⁹ Ibn Khallikan, v.1, p. 531.

According to him, MS *Adab* 105 in the National Library of Egypt is the earliest ms of the *Maqamat*. see note 2 above.

⁵⁰ MacKay, p. 26.

⁵² loc. cit.

⁵³ *Sharh Maqamat al-Hamadhani*, p. 244.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 70.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 374.

al-Fath al-Iskandari. And in some other *maqamat*, as mentioned by Professor Beeston,⁵⁶ al-Iskandari makes no appearance at all or "His name is dragged in awkwardly at the end, having played no part whatsoever in the main episode." Indeed, in *Baghdad* it is the narrator, 'Isa ibn Hisham, who plays the sort of trick that one would, in Hariri's *Maqamat*, expect to be played by Saruji. In addition, in some of al-Hamadani's *Maqamat* the two characters of the drama are not introduced, and the author speaks on his own behalf. In contrast, Hariri always, makes his two characters meet, sometimes in a highly dramatic manner, though the main object of the author is to display his eloquence, his learning and poetical power. Even if some of his *Maqamat* consist only of poetry with little narrative action, such as the third *maqama* (*al-Dinariyya*) where Abu Zayd recites his poems in praise and blame of the *dinar*, these poetical pieces are highly polished and extremely effective.⁵⁷

Abu Zayd always appears as a person of genius and learning, to create the impression that the new composition is not merely "to amuse the loiterers of the cafe or the seraglio, but to elaborate the result of the literary system of a period in which not only the sciences but the useful arts of life were sacrificed by the ingenious and studious of a great nation to profound grammatical and rhetorical research into the structure and resources of their own most copious language".⁵⁸ Hariri discusses the forms of Arabic words in many places in the *Maqamat*. In the sixth *maqama*, for example, there is an address in which the words are alternately with or without dotted letters. In the twenty-sixth the address is varied, and each alternate letter is dotted, the others being undotted. In the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth, there are passages in which every word written is devoid of dotted letters. In the thirty-second, Hariri introduces a person who says that he has gathered a hundred questions from people learned in the law, and he propounds them one by one to Abu Zayd. The peculiarity of these questions is that each contains a word which may be understood in two senses, the aim of the questioner being to test the knowledge of Abu Zayd as a scholar of the law and of the rarest idioms of the Arabic tongue.

These remarkable instances show us Hariri's marvellous facility in his language, and that the great object of his work is to explore and expound the niceties of the Arabic language and literature, besides exhibiting the style of his composition. This is, as has been mentioned, a continuous display of rhetorical artifices, full of alliteration,

⁵⁷ Op. cit. pp. 10-11.

⁵⁸ See some details of this point in Beeston, op. cit. p. 11.

⁵⁸ Preston, p. ix.

rhyme, assonance and other poetical elements from beginning to end. But Hariri never forgot that the primary purpose of the *Maqamat* was to amuse and entertain, and throughout his work “the wit of the descriptions and the dialogue is set off by the delicacy and charm of the verses and the more serious passages.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ H.A.R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, Oxford, 1963, p. 125.

ABBREVIATIONS

- Chenery : Thomas Chenery, *The Assemblies of al-Hariri*, volume 1, London, 1867. Republished by Gregg International Publishers Ltd., Hants., England, 1969.
- De Sacy : Silvestre De Sacy, *Les Seances de Hariri* (2 vols.) Paris, 1847. Republished, Amsterdam, 1968.
- GAL* : C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, (2nd edition, 2 vols.) Leiden, 1943, 1949, Suppl., (3 vols.) Leiden, 1937 — 1942.
- Hajji Khalfah : *Kashf al-Zunun 'an al-Asami wa al-Funun*, Published for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland (7 vols.) Leipzig/London, 1835 — 1858.
- Ibn Khallikan : Ahmad Ibn Khallikan, *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, translated from the Arabic of *Wafayat al-A'yan wa Anba' Abna' al-Zaman*, by Mac Guckin de Slane, (4 vols.) London, 1842 — 1871
- Al-Kamil* : Abu al-Hassan 'Ali ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*, (12 vols.) Cairo, 1303/1885.
- Mackay : Professor Pierre Mackay, *Certificates of Transmission on a Manuscript of the Maqamat of Hariri (Ms. Cairo, Adab 105)*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, Philadelphia, vol. 61, Part 4, April, 1971.
- Preston : Theodore Preston, *Makamat or Rhetorical Anecdotes of al-Hariri of Basra*, London, 1850.
- Sharh Maqamat al-Hamadhani* : Muhammad Muhyi al-Din 'Abd al-Hamid, *Sharh Maqamat Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani*, Cairo, 1962 (second edition).
- Steingass : F. Steingass, *The Assemblies of al-Hariri*, volume II, London 1898. Republished by Gregg International Publishers Ltd., Hants., England, 1969.

- Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya* : Taj al-Din 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubra*, (6 vols.) Cairo, 1905-6).
- Yaqut : Yaqut al-Rumi, *Yaqut's Dictionary of Learned Men entitled Irshad al-Arib ila Ma'rifat al Adib*, ed. D.S. Margoliouth (7 vols.) partially revised, E.J.W Gidd Memorial Series VI, London/Leiden, 1923 — 1931.