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An Old-Fashioned Genre – Maqāma in the 18th Century

Abstract

The eighteenth century was crucial for the development of Arabic literature. While some genres were more prone to change, the *maqāma* remained a conservative and elitist genre. Yet it did enjoy a kind of renaissance in the eighteenth century. The *maqāmas* of the eighteenth century were a varied lot, both qualitatively and content wise. Al-Ḥarīrī remained the favourite model for eighteenth-century authors. Also other great authors of the past, such as Az-Zamahṣārī and As-Suyūfī, were often imitated. The article surveys the production of *maqāmas* in the eighteenth century.

Keywords: *maqāmas*, 18th century, history of literature

The eighteenth century was crucial for the development of Arabic literature. While old styles and ancient genres remained alive and dominated the cultural atmosphere, new trends started slowly developing. Little by little the tradition was modified, and new themes and stylistic modifications appeared. By the end of the century, European, mainly French, influences found their way into Arabic literature with an unprecedented strength of impact. For almost a millennium, Arabic literature had remained immune to foreign influences of this magnitude and one has to go back to the early ‘Abbāsīd period to find an influx of similar importance, that time from Persia.¹

¹ For the 18th century and the beginnings of modern Arabic literature, see the articles in Roger Allen, Roger, D.S. Richards (eds.), *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, Cambridge 2006, M.M. Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge 2006. For the Persian influence, see C.E. Bosworth, *The Persian Impact on Arabic Literature*, in: A.F.L. Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 483–496.

While some genres were more prone to change, the *maqāma* remained a conservative and elitist genre.² Yet it did enjoy a kind of renaissance in the eighteenth century. At least, we know of more *maqāma* authors from this century than from the previous ones and the success continued during the following century. According to my listing of *maqāma* authors,³ there are 29 authors who died between 1700 and 1799, whereas the previous century can only boast of twelve authors. From the nineteenth century we know about the same number of authors, 31. While the list could be expanded, the numbers are comparable and we may clearly see that the oncoming modernity was actually signalled by an increase in the number of authors working within this very conservative genre.

To be able to follow the development of the genre, we have to start by discussing the definition of the term *maqāma* and the boundaries of the genre. Basically, we have two ways of defining what a *maqāma* is at any given period of time. We may start with the definitions given by the authors and/or their biographers or anthologists and call those and only those texts *maqāmas* which are so labelled in the sources. This, however, is not a very satisfactory way to proceed, as there seems to be much confusion in the use of the term. Native literary theory never defined the genre, so that we do not have a well-defined answer from pre-Modern times to the question: “What, exactly, is a *maqāma*?” In the beginning, *maqāmas* were understood in vague terms of imitating Al-Hamaḍānī and, since the early twelfth century, Al-Ḥarīrī, but the later we get the more amorphous the term’s use becomes and the difference between a Hamaḍānian or Ḥarīrian *maqāma* and any piece of rhymed prose becomes blurred. Not even the use of a fictitious *isnād* is always kept in later *maqāmas*, nor is it restricted to them, and very often it remains the only common feature, besides the use of *sağʿ*, between a late text labelled “*maqāma*” and the work of Al-Hamaḍānī and Al-Ḥarīrī. Incidentally, even the formal element of the *isnād* is problematic. In later *maqāmas*, the fictitious narrator often bore the name of the author himself and, especially in anthologies and biographical dictionaries, the *isnād* was sometimes dropped. Hence, e.g., Ar-Rasmī’s ([171] d. 1197/1783) *Al-Maqāma az-Zulāliyya al-Baššariyya*, as it stands in Al-Murāḍī’s *Silk ad-durar* (I: 74–77), starts abruptly, without the speaker having been identified in an *isnād*.

The self-definitions being often misleading and a native theoretical definition lacking, we are left with another possibility. We have to define the genre on the basis of internal criteria and take the titles of the texts as of only secondary importance. Thus, many texts labelled *maqāmas* need not be taken by us to belong to the genre and, *vice versa*, we may add texts which are not called *maqāmas* but which do fulfil the requirements of the genre as we define it. Without going into more details here, let it suffice to say that I understand three features as the cornerstones of a *maqāma*, viz. a fictitious *isnād* (or, at least, an implicitly fictitious scene of narration), a fictitious hero (often, but not always, accompanied by a fictitious narrator who may use the name of the author) and,

² For vulgar *maqāmas*, see Shmuel Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arabic World*, Edinburgh 1992, and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama. A History of a Genre*, Wiesbaden 2002, pp. 335–339.

³ Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama*, pp. 396–407. Numbers in square brackets after an author’s name refer to this list.

finally, the use of *sağ*‘. It should be emphasized that we cannot limit the genre to the picaresque *maqāma*, which is the most famous but not the only, nor even the most popular, subgenre.⁴ Distinguishing the genre from the *munāẓara* is especially problematic from at least the fifteenth century onwards, when personified non-human characters started appearing more and more often as *maqāma* heroes, as in the flower *maqāmas* of As-Suyūṭī ([119], d. 911/1505).⁵ They being among the most famous *maqāmas*, it would be somewhat awkward to rule them out from the genre, yet, in fact, it would be easier to classify the texts as *munāẓaras* rather than *maqāmas*.

The *maqāmas* of the eighteenth century were a varied lot, both qualitatively and content wise. To give an idea of the variety of *maqāmas* in the eighteenth century, we may select some authors who died between 1700 and 1799 and who wrote widely different *maqāmas*. Hence, e.g., Aṣ-Ṣibāmī ([149], d. 1115/1703) wrote *maqāmas* after the fashion of Az-Zamaḥsharī in the tradition of exhortatory *maqāmas*. Al-Fāsī ([154], wrote in 1120/1708) composed eulogies on the prophet after the model of Al-Ḥarīrī, and Al-Marīnī ([159], d. 1145/1732) wrote panegyric *maqāmas* on his patron – in later centuries, the genre was more and more drawn into the tradition of panegyric court literature with its mercenary aims. The process was, of course, already set in motion by Al-Hamaḍānī himself, among whose *maqāmas* there are several written for Ḥalaf Ibn Aḥmad,⁶ but the full impact of this development was seen only centuries later, when more and more often the heroes in the end are advised to go and see the patron, or patron-to-be, of the author. Whether there was at any time a conscious imitation of the panegyric *qaṣīda*, remains a point to be studied, but the structural similarities of the two genres are unmistakable.

To come back to the variety of the 18th-century *maqāma*, ‘Abd al-Bāqī ‘Arīf ([155], d. 1125/1713) celebrated conquests in his *maqāmas*, while Al-Warḡī ([169] d. 1190/1776) personified a tavern pulled down by ‘Alī Bāṣā, clearing the ground for a *madrasa*. Al-Ḥifnī ([164] d. 1178/1764) wrote *munāẓaras* between wine and flowers using the *maqāma* structure, after the fashion of As-Suyūṭī who had made this subgenre one of the most popular ones since the 15th century. No city *maqāmas* seem to have been written by authors of the 18th century, but this seems accidental, and an early 19th-century author, Ar-Rāfi‘ī ([181] d. 1230/1815), wrote a *maqāma* entitled *Maqāmat al-muḥāḥara bayna Ḥimṣ wa-Ḥamā*. The boundaries of the genre remained wide apart and *maqāmas* covered topics from obscene pieces to learned discussions and pious sermons. Whatever one may say of eighteenth-century authors, one cannot blame them for not putting all possible varieties into use.

Al-Ḥarīrī remained the favourite model for eighteenth-century authors. Also other great authors of the past, such as Az-Zamaḥsharī and As-Suyūṭī, were often imitated – one might add that, contrary to the interests of modern scholars, Al-Hamaḍānī was not

⁴ For the subgenres, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama*, pp. 55–61, 281–284.

⁵ As-Suyūṭī: *Maqāmāt* = Samīr Maḥmūd al-Durūbī (ed.): *Sharḥ maqāmāt Jalāladdīn al-Suyūṭī*, I–II, Bayrūt 1409/1989.

⁶ Cf. Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama*, p. 60.

popular and his *maqāmas* were often considered somewhat simple. He had been eclipsed, once and for all, by Al-Ḥarīrī and he never regained his popularity before modern times, as one may easily see when comparing the number and provenience of the manuscripts of each. Al-Hamaḍānī's *maqāmas* were also rarely anthologized after Al-Ḥuṣṣrī's *Zahr al-ādāb*, in clear contrast to Al-Ḥarīrī's.

The debt of eighteenth-century *maqāmas* to Al-Ḥarīrī and others may be seen both by an analysis of the texts and the explicit comments on them in contemporary sources. Writers of biographical dictionaries often explicitly state that the authors vied with, or imitated, Al-Ḥarīrī in their production.

In the eighteenth century, the genre was varied, but very much bound to tradition. Its development was primarily an internal one. The majority of *maqāmas* written during the century follow earlier models rather closely and cannot be called innovative in theme, style or technique. Their variety arises from an intensive use of the whole width of the genre, not so much from inventing new forms or making new conquests. There were, however, changes in the statistical profile of the genre: some subgenres gained in favour, others lost, but no new subgenres were developed nor were important innovations made that would have gained access to the standard repertory of the genre. Compared with earlier centuries, we may see a slight preference for the panegyric *maqāma* and a continuation of the neglect of narrative in favour of rhetoric, which may be seen in the comparative lack of picaresque *maqāmas*. Picaresque *maqāmas* were occasionally written in the eighteenth century, but it has only been modern taste that has pointed them out as the most interesting pieces of the genre and this has caused a misguided evaluation of their importance in the development of the genre. The heavy rhetoricization of the genre began with Al-Ḥarīrī and went further with each successive generation of *maqāma* authors, perhaps culminating in Ibn aṣ-Ṣayqal ([82], d. 701/1301) whose *maqāmas* verge on the unreadable. Narrative gave place to linguistic finery.

The role of Al-Ḥarīrī in the following, nineteenth century deserves a short note. The often-repeated legend of Al-Yāziǧī ([193] d. 1287/1871) "finding" Al-Ḥarīrī thanks to Western incentives should be erased from histories of modern Arabic literature. He did model himself on Al-Ḥarīrī and he did study Al-Ḥarīrī's texts intensively while correcting the proofs of the second edition of Silvestre de Sacy's edition of the *maqāmas*, but the idea that he, or for that matter, any Arab gentleman of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century could have been ignorant of Al-Ḥarīrī is preposterous. The numerous imitations of, and competitions with, Al-Ḥarīrī throughout these centuries show that there is no point in claiming that someone could have "discovered" Al-Ḥarīrī.⁷ Al-Yāziǧī knew Al-Ḥarīrī perfectly well before coming across Silvestre de Sacy's edition which is why he was given the task of correcting the edition in the first place. What may be counted as Western influence in the nineteenth-century *maqāma* is that his labour with the Western edition brought Al-Yāziǧī into intimate contact with the *maqāmas* which he knew well,

⁷ See Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama*, pp. 351–352.

and this inspired him to write his *Majma' al-baḥrayn* which could well have remained unwritten had Al-Yāziǧī not worked with an edition of Al-Ḥarīrī.

One can hardly call the eighteenth-century *maqāma* an innovative genre. The genre was, though, not thoroughly imitative and adverse to new developments. There are individual pieces of interest which have remained little studied, mainly, I think, because they fall in between Classical and modern literature. For Classical scholars, they are, perhaps, too late to kindle interest, and modern scholars tend to be more interested in those works that can be perceived as predecessors of modernity, which in the case of *maqāmas* is rarely the case. The eighteenth-century *maqāma*, thus, falls in between two different interests, neither of which fully covers the eighteenth-century literature.

Of the more interesting *maqāmas* several were written either by members of the Baghdadian As-Suwaydī family or their dependents. A curiously constructed *maqāma* that deserves attention is Al-ʿUmarī's ([170] d. 1193/1779) *Al-Maqāma ad-Duǧailiyya*,⁸ which contains a long exposition of heresies inserted within a well-told *maqāma* frame, and ends with a panegyric reference to two of the As-Suwaydīs. The narrative parts show dramatic sensitivity and the author is in creative dialogue with tradition. This is at its clearest in the beginning, where we have the typical scene of a company of elegant youths in a garden being disturbed by an intruder. What is new is that here the intruder is the narrator and the hero is one of the elegant youths, which turns the usual setting upside down. The innovative feature is, however, in a sense also extremely conservative. It inverts one of the basic topoi of the *maqāma* since Al-Hamaḍānī and, for its effect, depends on the familiarity of the topos. The innovation is based on internal development within the genre and it receives its piquancy from the fact that it stands in dialogue with the tradition.

The central part of Al-ʿUmarī's *maqāma*, the learned discussion of heresies, is basically an overly long showpiece of the hero's eloquence and erudition. It differs from, e.g., Al-Ḥarīrī's respective pieces only in two points, viz. its length and also perhaps its topic, which is less concerned with linguistic mastery than earlier *maqāmas* tended to be. When Al-Ḥarīrī gave his attention to the *fatāwā al-ʿarab*,⁹ it was not so much the religious content of the *fatāwās* that was the point than the linguistic legerdemain involved in them. It is no wonder that the technical part in Al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāma* was quoted by As-Suyūṭī in his linguistic encyclopaedia,¹⁰ not in any of his religious works. Al-ʿUmarī's learned discussion is, moreover, written in a lively way which, rather surprisingly, is able to capture the attention of the reader through the lengthy exposition of heresies.

Another innovative *maqāma* written by the dependents of the As-Suwaydī family is *Al-Maqāma az-ẓarʿiyya* by Abū al-Faṭḥ Naṣr Allāh al-Ḥusaynī ([162], presumably from the mid-eighteenth century), which, on first sight, might seem astonishingly modern in

⁸ O. Rescher (ed.), *Maqāmāt al-Hanafti wa-Ibn Nāqiya wa-ghayrihimā*, Istanbul 1330 A.H., pp. 199–285.

⁹ In *al-maqāma al-Taybiyya* (32). The technical part, for which see, e.g., Aṣ-Ṣarīṣī: *Ṣarḥ maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Munʿim Ḥafaǧī, Bayrūt s.a., vol. III, pp. 140–149, forms the core of the *maqāma*.

¹⁰ As-Suyūṭī: *Al-Muẓhir fī ʿulūm al-luǧa wa-anwāʾihā*, eds. Muḥammad Aḥmad Ġād al-Mawlā Beg, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Biǧāwī, Ṣayḍā/Bayrūt 1406/1986, vol. I, pp. 622–635.

tenor.¹¹ In this *maqāma*, the narrator (who bears the same name as the author) listens to complaints by the neglected crop made against the new town-dwelling owner of the field. The *maqāma* sounds like a eulogy on agriculture and is most untypical of Classical literature, which always remained either urban or Bedouin in tone. It could be read as social criticism and, hence, taken as an indication of changing times and changing social conditions and attitudes. Yet I am doubtful about such a reading, however tempting it might be. The tone of the *maqāma* is far from serious and it difficult to discern any real social agenda behind the lamentations by the crop. It is not the aim of the author to draw attention to the neglected agricultural system in eighteenth-century Iraq, however much it would have deserved attention. Instead, the *maqāma* is a playful petition to a patron and the rural point of view is there, I believe, to make the listeners/readers laugh, not to awaken them to the social malaise in the countryside. In this, it is somewhat similar to Aṣ-Širbīnī's ([144], d. after 1099/1687) *Hazz al-quḥūf*, which laughs at the villagers and their customs, but does this by presenting their life in a way which to a modern reader may bring social criticism to mind.¹² *Al-Maqāma az-zar'īyya* does, however, widen the scope of *maqāmas* by introducing a rural setting. It may also be that the gradual awakening of an interest in things outside contemporary cities and past fantasies of the imagined desert does foreshadow a change in social relations and attitudes and, hence, the *maqāma*, despite its basically conservative attitude may be taken as a sign of a changing world.

The As-Suwaydī family not only patronized *maqāma* authors. Some of them also tried their own hand at the genre. The most successful of the As-Suwaydīs was Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Abī al-Barakāt ([176] d. 1210/1795), whose romantic *maqāma* successfully describes garden scenes and romantic involvements, skilfully avoiding *muğūn*, yet playing with erotic overtones.¹³ The end of the *maqāma* turns to panegyric aims: the Lady, in whom the narrator-cum-author has fallen in love, advises him to turn to 'Uṭmān Efendi al-'Umarī, a *maqāma* author himself (cf. above), who will certainly be attentive to the eulogies which close the *maqāma*. A homoerotic *maqāma* of the late eighteenth century by Aḥmad al-Rasmī ([171] d. 1197/1783), ultimately inspired by Al-Hamaḍānī's *Al-Maqāma al-Asadiyya* and the tradition starting from there, is less successful, and descends at points into the obscene.¹⁴ In fact, it seems that homoerotic themes more often verge on the obscene than heteroerotic ones. This phenomenon is already to be seen in, e.g., the *ghazals* of Abū Nuwās, whose *muḍakkarāt* are often bolder than his *mu'annaṭāt*.¹⁵

Eighteenth-century *maqāmas* did, then, sometimes introduce minor innovations. But where does this innovativeness come from? Changes in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries are often attributed to European influence. In the case of *maqāmas*

¹¹ Rescher, *Maqāmāt*, pp. 311–328.

¹² H.T. Davies (ed. and transl.), *Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī's Kitāb Hazz al-Quḥūf bi-Sharḥ Qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* ("Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded"), I–II, Leuven 2004–2007.

¹³ Rescher, *Maqāmāt*, pp. 286–311.

¹⁴ Al-Murādī: *Silk al-durar fī a'yān al-qarn t-tānī 'aṣar*, I–IV, Al-Qāhira 1291–1301 A.H I, pp. 73–77.

¹⁵ Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Abū Nuwās and Ghazal as a Genre*, in: Thomas Bauer, Angelika Neuwirth (eds.), *Ghazal as World Literature I: Transformations of a Literary Genre*, Beirut 2005, pp. 87–105, 89–91.

it seems, though, that these changes are unlikely to be due to any European or outside influence. They grow from the tradition of the genre itself, crossbred mainly by the adjacent genre of *munāẓara* as well as romantic tales. Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār ([188] d. 1250/1834) did, to be sure, write a *maqāma* on the coming of the French and it certainly does take up an unprecedented theme, yet it hardly evidences European *literary* influence.

There was nothing new in making slight changes and introducing minor innovations in the genre. Most authors had always written strictly within the framework delineated by their predecessors, most notably by Al-Ḥarīrī, but there had always been exceptions, innovative authors searching for new ways of using the structure of the *maqāma*. Islamic Spain had been the hothouse of such innovations and some steps were taken there by authors such as Ibn aṣ-Ṣāhīd ([12], late 5th/11th century) or even Ibn al-Aṣṭarkūwī ([29] d. 538/1143) towards writing a kind of precursor to the modern novel, though the authors never took the final steps. After that, in late Medieval and Early Modern times, the *maqāma* made other innovative attempts. Limited innovativeness was part and parcel of the Classical tradition, and not every innovation needed to be backed up by foreign influence, literary or social. Classical Arabic literature in later centuries was conservative but not paralysed.

The eighteenth-century *maqāma* thrived within the Classical tradition, though this, perhaps, was its undoing. Al-Yāziǧī’s attempt to revive the genre was in a way fundamentalist. His *maqāmas* are strictly Ḥarīrian and it is no surprise that they could not revive the genre in the changing literary environment despite their own success. When Classical Arabic culture dwindled, *maqāmas* more or less dwindled with them.

After the eighteenth century, the development of the *maqāma* was twofold. Classical *maqāmas* were, and still are, written but more as an antiquarian hobby than as modern literature. Some, like Al-Ġabārī ([211] d. before 1331/1913), made slight innovations, but still remained strictly within the framework of the Classical tradition.¹⁶ Al-Ġabārī’s use of substandard language in his otherwise rather Ḥarīrian *maqāmas* might seem a European-inspired innovation, especially as the author worked as a civil servant for the French, yet this actually follows the tradition of the vulgar *maqāma*, which originated in the late twelfth century.

At the end of the 19th century and later, the Classical *maqāma* was crossbred with modern, Western-influenced literature by men such as Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq (d. 1305/1887), Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī (d. 1349/1930), Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (d. 1351/1932) and Bayram at-Tūnūsī (d. 1380/1961). Yet the *maqāma* is merely one constituent part in their respective works and not perhaps the most seminal one. In other words, these authors wrote within the tradition of modern, Western-inspired literature and merely borrowed the title and/or some technical features from the *maqāmas*. Their works do not grow out of the *maqāma* genre, but only borrow from it. One may borrow the use of

¹⁶ G. Faure-Biguet, M.G. Delphin, *Les Séances d’El-Aouali. Textes arabes en dialecte maghrebin*, “Journal Asiatique”, Onzième Série 2 (1913), pp. 285–310; 3 (1913), pp. 303–374; 4 (1913), pp. 307–378.

complicated language, or even *sağ'*, or a picaresque hero, but the result is only loosely connected with Classical *maqāmas*, even when the term *maqāma* is used in the title.

Maqāmas may perhaps exemplify the situation of early modern literature in general. The Classical literary tradition did live on, but it was not very vivid. In time, it gave way to new genres which were only marginally influenced by the older tradition. In modern literature, the *maqāma* perhaps fared less well than some other genres. What, then, were the causes of the demise of the *maqāma*? Such questions are never answerable and proposed answers must always remain speculative. But if I am allowed to speculate on this, I would like to point out the highly specialized style of the *maqāmas*, which are defined more by their technique than by their content. Once you take the linguistic legerdemain out of a *maqāma* the cornerstone of the genre is lost and what remains is a variety of prose texts that may make excellent reading, but hardly differ from anecdotes and other genres. Obviously, anecdotes were the origin of picaresque *maqāmas*, which one might call long anecdotes with certain stylistic additions. Once these stylistic features are taken away, we are back to the anecdotes and the genre of *maqāma* has vanished into thin air.

Finally, one should not forget that even if we may be more interested in texts that presage the nascent modern literature, the eighteenth-century was still predominantly Classical. There were few texts that were in any sense modern and the (largely un-interesting) bulk of literature, quantitatively speaking, remained Classical or post-Classical. And when it specifically comes to *maqāmas*, one is hard put to point to any significant departures towards modernity in this genre.