

Introduction To Al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*

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Abstract:

Maqāma is a typical genre of classical Arabic literature in the Middle Ages cultivated throughout the Islamic world, including al-Andalus, which has been considered the antecedent of the Spanish picaresque novel. One of the main authors who wrote about this literary genre is Al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra (1054-1122). This article is an introduction to the *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī and includes the translation into English of some fragments of his important work.

Key Words: *Maqāmāt*; Al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra; Medieval Arabic Literature; Arabic Rhymed Prose; Arabic Literary Prose.

Introduction

Literary prose knew during the Abbasid times (750-1258) (Hitti 1970) a great development. One of the most outstanding characteristics of the prose in this period was, due to the influence of the Persians, the tendency to the affectation, the ornamentation, and a sophisticated style (Mubarak 1931). It was certainly rich in similes and elaborate metaphors and full of rhymes. In the artistic and cultural environment of this period, a new literary genre called *Maqāma* (Blachère 1953) is raised which many regards as an antecedent of the Spanish picaresque novel. *Maqāma* is a typical genre of classical Arabic literature in the Middle Ages cultivated throughout the Islamic world, including al-Andalus. It consists of a series of short stories, independent of each other, written in rhymed prose, which have the same central figure, the main protagonist, whose name varies according to the author. These stories relate the exploits, adventures, and misadventures of a rogue who is involved in diverse conflict situations from which he usually gets some profit. This framework allows the author to make a subtle portrait of the society of his time (Rescher 1914)

Both main representatives of this genre are the Persian author Al-Hamadhāni (968-1008) (Blachère 1971), who was the first to write a book of *Maqāmāt*, and the writer Al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra (1054-1122) (Brockelmann 1937), whose *Maqāmāt* exceeded in importance those of Hamadhāni's and were valued for more than seven centuries as a treasure and a masterpiece of Arabic literature, close to The Quran.

The *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra

The *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī (Arvide Cambra 2009), fifty in all, revolve around two central characters, the rogue Abū Zayd Al-Sarūjī, and the narrator of his exploits, Al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, pseudonym of the author himself. All the stories start with the same phrase (Al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām told), and each of them is usually titled according to the name of the town where the action takes place.

Regarding the narrative structure of Al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, several techniques coexist of which the most important is the dialogue that the author masters and the rhyme in both prose and verse, but it is also worth mentioning the sermon, the monologue, and the poetry. The language used is cultured and with many poetic licenses. The descriptive rhythm of the stories is masterful and plenty of narrative harmonies. Metaphors, similes, paragons, and puns, among others, proliferate. Al-Ḥarīrī shows an indisputable mastery in the knowledge of Arabic language and literary techniques, and that's why he has been considered the main representative of this genre.

According to the author himself, Abū Zayd Al-Sarūjī is based in a real person, possibly the bohemian Abū Zayd Al-Mutahhar ibn Salām Al-Baṣrī, with whom Al-Ḥarīrī maintained friendly relations (Yāqūt 1907-1931).

The date when the *Maqāmāt* were finished to be written is unknown, but it had to be before 1108 because as of this year the Andalusian Yūsuf ibn ‘Alī Al-Quḍā’ī made them known in Al-Andalus. Before dying Al-Ḥarīrī, in 1122, he was aware of the success of his work. The reasons for this success are due to the decline of the simple literary style, typical of *adab* genre, and the rise of affectation in use of language, usual characteristics in times of political and social crisis.

Editions of the *Maqāmāt*:

- 1) Albert Schultens (partial edition), in 1731.
- 2) Caussin de Perceval (full edition), in 1819.
- 3) Samuel S. de Sacy (full edition), in 1822.

Translations of the *Maqāmāt*:

1) Hebrew translation: Yehudah Al-Harizi (1165-1225): titled *Mahberoth Ithieland* (Percikowitsch 1931), published at London in 1872 and reedited at Tel Aviv by Yishaq Peres in 1951 (Schirmann 1931).

2) Latin translation: Jacobus Golius, in 1656 (*Maqāma I*).

3) German translations:

-Albert Schultens, in 1731 and 1740 (six *Maqāmāt*).

-Johann J. Reiske, in 1737 (the *Maqāma XXVI*).

-Friedrik Rückert, in 1826 and 1837 (forty-four *Maqāmāt*).

- Annemarie Schimmel, in 1966 (twenty-four *Maqāmāt*).

4) English translations:

- Thomas Chenery and Francis J. Steingass, in 1867 (full work) (Chenery & Steingass 1867-1898).

-Charles F. Horne, in 1917 (twelve *Maqāmāt*).

5) French translations:

-Albert Raux, in 1909 (partial).

-Léo Bercher, in 1922 (*Maqāma XXXV*)

6) Spanish translation:

-Luisa Arvide Cambra, in 2009 (eleven *Maqāmāt*).

As I mentioned, Al-Ḥarīrī’s work includes fifty *Maqāmāt*, and the order displayed on them does not correspond with the date of their writing. So, for example, the *Maqāma XLVIII* titled “The *Maqāma* of the Banū Ḥarām” was the first one that was written.

The rogue Abū Zayd Al-Sarūjī is shrewd, insightful, phony, impostor, bluffer, filibuster, rascal, trickster and swindler; but, at the same time, he is clever, cultivated, instructed, language craftsman and master of the Metric. But, in addition, he is also sensitive and emotional, especially when he talks about Sarūj, his birthplace, such as

the *Maqāma* XIV in Mecca or the *Maqāma* XXX in Tyre, where he weeps bitterly and with sadness remembering his remote homeland. He even sometimes regrets his acts as well as deceptions and lies done, like for example in the *Maqāma* L in Baṣra. In summary, Abū Zayd is a privileged mind who has preferred to be on the other side of the system and order.

For his part, Al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām represents the other side of the coin: he is honest and generous, carries out all his obligations as a good citizen and a man of faith, and lives integrated in society including the contradictions, like for example in the *Maqāma* XXVIII in Samarkand, in which he gets drunk together with Abū Zayd, or the *Maqāma* XIV in Mecca, in which he surrenders to lust during the pilgrimage. Al-Ḥārith has a love/hate relationship with Al-Sarūjī since, on the one hand, he condemns his actions but, on the other, admires him, is interested in his acts and becomes curious about his person. And that is why Al-Ḥārith many times ends sharing a cheerful evening together with Abū Zayd, looking for him when has lost track of him, feeling some pain when goes away or missing him when is absent, like for example in the *Maqāma* XXX in Tyre or the *Maqāma* XXXI in Ramla.

Both symbolize the two sides of the same coin: good and evil, the positive and the negative pole, the outlaw and the integrated, the rogue, and the honest. Each one lives in their territory with its contradictions and, therefore, sometimes these actions converge; thus, Abū Zayd sometimes shows signs of piety and emotion, while Al-Ḥārith moves away from morality and invades the terrain of the illicit and the illegal although he later may regret.

In short, these stories are a subtle portrait of man and society that transcends the geographical and cultural boundaries as well as the frontier of time since, except for some specific situations of each historical moment, civilization or belief, these same traditional paintings can be extrapolated to any period in history as well as to any country, religion or culture without being obsolete or inadmissible.

Appendix

Translation from Arabic to English of *Maqāmāt* fragments

- *Maqāma of Sanaa (Maqāma I):*

When, after exiling from my land, I settled in the city of Sanaa in Yemen, I fell into the most miserable poverty and was a toy of the fate vicissitudes. I entered there with empty hands and without provisions. I did not have enough means to survive nor did I have anything in my bag to put in my mouth, and I began to walk along its paths like a crazy wanderer, to wander through its neighborhoods like a vagabond and to go from one place to another where my gaze reached and where my days and my mood took me. In front of the respectable people I lost my dignity telling them about my needs, and in front of cultivated people, my affliction was relieved since their words quenched my burning thirst. Until everything was finished and the beginning of the bonanza took me to a very wide group of people. I entered to the center of the crowd to inquire the reason for the crying and saw in the middle of the circle a thin and slim person who was wearing the proper accoutrements for the trip and was crying with moans and laments. This person was expressing himself in an excellent rhymed prose and pierced their ears with the reprisals from his reprimands and admonitions (...). Then he remained silent and placed the wineskin on his arm and the club under his armpit as if to leave. When people, looking back, realized his impetus and saw him to be about to leave, they all put hands into pockets and filled the man with a bucket full of money (...). I, hiding, went after him - continued Al-Ḥārith - and I followed him from where he could not see me until he came to a cave and suddenly entered it. I waited a bit while he took off his sandals and washed his feet, and then I broke into the room. I found him talking to a student and eating semolina bread and a roast suckling lamb. In front of both, there was a jug of wine.

-Hey you! - I reproved him -. Is this what you preach and advise?

(...) Then he spoke to me:

- Come and sit down; but if you want, go away and recount!

I turned to his pupil and said:

- Since you hate harming, I invite you to tell me who is this.

-It is Abū Zayd Al-Sarūjī - he replied -, firefly of the expatriates and crown of the literary artists!

I went away by where I came, astonished by what I had seen.

- *Maqāma* of the Magreb (*Maqāma XVI*)

Al-Hārith ibn Hammām told:

I attended the evening prayer at a mosque in the Maghreb and, when I finished praying with the supererogatory act included, my eyes met a group of select and refined people who were sitting in a corner. They were talking and discussing, and I wanted to talk with them to tell them something useful or to give them some complementary literary instruction. I went to them running like a child and told them:

-Do you accept a newcomer stranger who is looking for gatherings and evenings, not a fruit garden, and who likes funny talks, not the loin of camel breeding?

-Hello! You are welcome! – they replied -.

I sat down with the speed of lightning or the gulp of a scared and bullied bird until a vagrant approached us, carrying a sack lung over his shoulder.

The man greeted us saying "Peace be with you all," and he headed to the mosque, making the two prostrations of prayer; then he spoke:

- Privileged and select minds, do you not know that the best offering to God is to alleviate sadness and that the firmest cause for salvation is to give to the poor and the needy? Certainly, if you allow me to get into your land and provide me the opportunity to plead you a favor, I am an exile from a distant place and the messenger of hungry children. Is there among all of you someone who can calm the vehemence of hunger?

-You, whoever you are and whatever you are called - we answered -. You showed up late, and we have nothing left but dinner leftovers. If you are satisfied with them, we have no inconvenient to give them to you.

-The brother of adversity - he said -, is pleased with the remains and the waste that is thrown away.

They all ordered their servants to supply him with what there was (...).

When he enchanted us - continued the narrator - with his prodigies and mocked us disguising his intentions, we praised him until he asked from us to stop and we gave him gifts until he was satisfied and said "enough."

Then he picked up his clothes, carried them on his shoulders, and stood up while reciting (...).

When – continued the narrator - someone arrived with the requested lamp, and the fire light illuminated the faces, I saw the one who had just looted us was “the very Abū Zayd.”

Conclusion

Al-Ḥarīrī of Baṣra is one of the most important writers of classical Arabic literature, and his work about *Maqāmāt* is a masterpiece of this genre.

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