Introduction

In the Beginning, there was the Maqāma

When I was 13 or 14 years old, I chanced upon my uncle's old schoolbooks. Among them, I found a Moroccan high school textbook from 1982. It was called *nuṣūṣ adabiyya*, or literary texts. The textbook was arranged in ascending order of difficulty, proceeding from easier to more difficult texts. It opens with newspaper articles, then moves to letters, literary prose texts, and poetry, before concluding with examples from the *ḥadīth* tradition and the *maqāmāt*. All the words were familiar, except for one: *maqāma*. Checking the corresponding section, I found a text by Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008), entitled *al-Maqāma al-Dīnāriyya*. The plot was hilarious: a rich man called 'Īsā ibn Hishām challenges two beggars to insult one another. The one that caused the most offense was to receive a dinar as a prize. The two beggars jumped on the opportunity and composed long series of creative and witty insults, such as:

> "O dog in strife! O monkey on the carpet! O pumpkin with a pulse! O less than nothing! O fumes of naphtha! O stench of the armpit!… O tartar of teeth! Of filth of the ears!"[1]

> يا كلبًا في الهراش، يا قردًا في الفراش، يا قرعيّة بِماشٍ، يا أقلّ من لاشٍ، يا دخان النفط، يا صنان الإبط... يا قلح الأسنان، يا وسخ الآذان."[2]

Astonished at their impudence and unable to choose the most insolent of them, 'Īsā ibn Hishām throws the dinar between the two beggars and leaves. After reading the text, I came up with a tentative definition for the *maqāma*: It must be an old word to designate a humorous anecdote about beggars exchanging insults for money.

A few years later, in 2010, I encountered another *maqāma*, this time in my own high school curriculum. The main theme of the didactic unit was "Literary Prose from the Abbasid Period." The selected *maqāma* was by Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn 'Alī al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122). I do not recall the title of this particular episode or its plot. I remember, however, that it was preceded by an introductory note stating that it belonged to the period of decadence ('aṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ), in which the literati composed meaningless and ornate texts, focusing on form, *badī'* (figures of speech), and rhyme (*saj'*). Each time we inquired about the meaning of an ambiguous term, and there were many, the teacher would refer to this preface. al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāma* was taught as a sample of old writing and understanding it was secondary, if not optional. To the class, al-Ḥarīrī was both linguistically and chronologically alien, an archaic figure that we hoped we would not encounter on the exam.

Reading al-Ḥarīrī's ambiguous episode, I started questioning my earlier understanding of the genre. Perhaps the *maqāmāt* were not only about exchanges of funny insults but also of strange and learned terms. They were certainly not humorous because humor was not

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[1] Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *The Maqāmāt of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, trans. W. J. Prendergast (Madras: S.P.C.K. Press, 1915), 166.

[2] al-Hamadhānī, al-*Maqāmāt*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abduh (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005), 250.

supposed to be this hard! Perhaps they were indeed funny but al-Ḥarīrī did not know how to write humor. I retained my skepticism about the *maqāma* genre and my prejudices against al-Ḥarīrī for years, even, as I started to work on this book, still believing that his work was incomprehensible, unintelligible, and untranslatable. Little did I know that I was simply joining a long line of scholars and intellectuals who, since the 18th century, had depicted al-Ḥarīrī as "flowery," "laborious," and "decadent," and who have continued to do so in curricula and academic scholarship up to the present time.[3]

It took me a while to realize that the problem was not al-Ḥarīrī's language nor his style but rather the literary conventions that were introduced by modern European scholars (see Chapter 2) and then adopted during the Arab cultural upsurge or *Nahḍa* in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (see Chapter 3). These new conventions encouraged clarity, simplicity, and functionality for pedagogical purposes and had little interest in playfulness, belle-lettres, and ambiguity for their own sake. Works that possessed these attributes were categorized as part of the so-called *ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*[4] or the age of decadence, that is, the centuries between the fall of Baghdad and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a period in which Arab culture supposedly entered a "fallen state"[5] (see Chapter 3). The term *inḥiṭāṭ* appears for the first time in Buṭrus al-Bustānī's (d.1893) *Khuṭba fī ādāb al-ʿarab*" (A Speech on the Literature of the Arabs) in 1859.[6] Throughout the *Nahḍa* period, *inḥiṭāṭ* was a trending term that encompassed connotations of backwardness, irrationality, moral decline, and obsolete style, all of which were part of a past that was no longer welcome. Consequently, as Thomas Bauer notes,

> toward the end of the nineteenth century … the standard theory of Arabic rhetoric vanished from school curricula. Poetry was no longer allowed to be playful and permeated by ambiguity but was supposed to express "true feelings in an unaffected manner." Arabs began to be ashamed of their own traditions. Even today, Arab intellectuals would like to erase from history a whole millennium (if not more than that) of Arabic literature.[7]

The changing reception of the *maqāma* genre is a good illustration of the effect this change of attitudes had, replacing the general acceptance of ambiguity, playfulness, and humor with clarity, seriousness, and functionality. The "shame" toward the literary past alienated literary production that spanned ten centuries and "erased" many figures that proved incompatible with the new era. The repercussions of this shift are still felt today. They are visible in schoolbooks that present scattered samples of premodern literature, showcasing them as intellectually and

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[3] There are some notable exceptions, which I discuss below.

[4] For a thorough discussion on the narrative of decadence, its history and the various implications, see Reinhard Schulze, "Mass Culture Production in 19th century Middle East," in *Mass Culture, Popular Culture, and Social Life in the Middle East,* ed. Georg Stauth and Sami Zubaida (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1987), 189–222; Syrinx Von Hees, ed., *Inḥiṭāṭ – The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2017).

[5] Josef Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 8.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University, 2021), 28.

chronologically foreign. The negative sentiments toward the literary production of the past are also visible in monographs that continue to reproduce the narrative of decadence and associate it with al-Ḥarīrī's name and those who emulated his aesthetics. Furthermore, these stereotypes around al-Ḥarīrī and his work have affected contemporary Western scholarship, in the sense it indirectly denies the literariness of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*, treating it as a mere display of rare lexical terms and constrained writing or ignoring it altogether.[8] This is further exacerbated by the fact that the scholarship favors al-Hamadhānī over al-Ḥarīrī, studying the former's founding *maqāmāt* extensively while reducing the latter to "ponderous obscurity."[9]

Examining the reception, rare vocabulary or *gharīb*, and the theme of strangerhood or *ghurba* in *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, a key book of pre-modern Arabic *adab* that is neglected today in its immediate context, this book aims to approach the work from different perspectives in order to question the impact of modernity on the current understanding of literary past, and of al-Ḥarīrī in particular. For this reason, I approach al-Ḥarīrī's work according to his own terms and those of his first readers and contemporary context. Engaging with the varied readership of the *Ḥarīriyya*,[10] its language, and accounts of trickery therein, I primarily argue that ornate language, ambiguity, strangeness, and elaborate forms of writing do not equal shallowness. On the contrary, they offer insight into al-Ḥarīrī's brilliant and playful understanding of strangerhood and estrangement, which the *Maqāmāt* depicts as an ambiguous and constitutive experience of being a sophisticated wordsmith, master of rhetoric, and witty trickster roaming the Islamic dynasty to sell rare and erudite material to an audience preoccupied with the exotic and the strange. The implications of this argument make peace with one thousand years of Arab literature and perhaps even recognize the timelessness of the ideas and lessons some of its representative works contain.

Strangeness as Key to the Maqāmāt

In the 4th/10th century, the Buyid scholar Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī invented the *maqāma* genre in which a fictional trickster with a silver tongue delivers sacred and secular speeches in exchange for money. According to one of his early readers, al-Hamadhānī improvised his episodes at the end of literary gatherings.[11] He experimented with different plots and protagonists and did not provide a clear definition of what a *maqāma* was. Readers and emulators later noticed recurrent patterns and devised their own definitions.

The oldest definition of the *maqāma* belongs to the Tunisian scholar Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn 'Alī al-Ḥuṣrī (d. 413/1022), a contemporary of al-Hamadhānī who quotes twenty of his

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[8] The recent *EI3* contains no entry for the *maqāma* genre. In the four different entries on *adab*, al-Ḥarīrī's name is never mentioned. The *maqāma* genre is only mentioned in the entry, "Adab a) Arabic, early developments" by Hämeen-Anttila, yet he only refers to al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt*. Curiously, Hämeen-Anttila is the author of the entry "al-Ḥarīrī" in the same edition of *EI3*, which implies that he deliberately left him out while addressing the concept of *adab*.

[9] Brockelmann and Pellat, "Maḳāma," in *EI2*.

[10] The *Ḥarīriyya* refers to *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*. Similarly, the *Hamadhāniyya* refers to *Maqāmāt al-Hamadhānī*.

[11] "al-Hamadhānī also fabricated [*zawwara*] highly ornamental *maqāmāt*, improvising [the stories] at the end of his literary sessions. He would ascribe them to a narrator who had told him the story and whom he called 'Īsā ibn Hishām." Ibn Sharaf al-Qayrawānī (d. 460/1067), *A'lām al-kalām*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Amīn al-Khānijī (N.C.: al-Khānijī, 1922), 13-14.

episodes in the literary anthology *Zahr al-ādāb*. Examining Abū Bakr ibn Durayd's (d. 321/933) and al-Hamadhānī's works, al-Ḥuṣrī introduces the origins of the then-fresh and unknown genre of *maqāmāt* as follows:

> When al-Hamadhānī observed that Abū Bakr Ibn Durayd the Azdite (A.H. 223-321) had composed forty strange accounts* on a variety of subjects expressed in strange sounding speech and obsolete and incongruous words such as men's natures would shrink from and their ears be closed against, which he said he had produced from the springs of his breast, extracted from the mines of his thought, and exposed to public view and perception, al-Hamadhānī met him with four hundred *maqāmāt* on mendacity.[12]

> ولمّا رأى أبا بكر محمّد بن الحُسَين بن دُرَيْد الأزْدي أُغْرَبَ بِأَرْبَعِين حَدِيثًا، وذكر أنه اسْتَنْبَطَها من يَنَابيع صَدْرِه واسْتَنْخَبَها من مَعَادِن فِكْرِه وأَبْدَاهَا لِلْأَبْصَار والبَصَائِر، وأَهْدَها لِلْأَفْكَار والضَّمَائِر في مَعَارِض أَعْجَميّة وَأَلْفَاظٍ حُوشِيّة، فجاء أَكْثر ما أَظْهَر تَنْبُو عن قُبُولِه الطِّبَاع ولا تَرْفَع لَهُ حجبَها الأَسماع وتَوسَّع فيه إذ صَرَّف أَلفاظها ومعانيها في وجوه مختلفة وضُرُوبٍ مُتَصَرِّفَة، عَارَضَها بأربعمائة مقامة في الكُدْيَة.[13]

This statement figures repeatedly in *maqāma* scholarship. However, not because it is one of the first instances of the reception of the genre, nor because of its constituent elements. Rather, it has become prominent in the scholarship because it gives an account of the reasons that might have inspired al-Hamadhānī to invent the genre, and that is a favorite theme of *maqāma* scholarship (see below). No contribution has discussed the implications of the key term found in the first sentence in al-Ḥuṣrī's account: *aghraba,* meaning to compose something strange. According to al-Ḥuṣrī, the crucial element that al-Hamadhānī "observed" in Ibn Durayd's accounts was their strangeness, which manifests in an "incongruous" lexicon, "strange sounding speeches," and invented nature. These aspects, as al-Ḥuṣrī notes, drew little acclaim and caused much dismay among Ibn Durayd's readers.[14] Noticing this problem, al-Hamadhānī introduced *kudya,* "a term which includes not only begging but also the whole sphere of conman tricks, roguery, and everything picaresque,"[15] and placed his philological material in the mouth of a fictional character, who either collects curious accounts and vocabulary or invents them to gain money. This solution creates the classic *maqāma*, a story of trickery or deception in which different forms of language are displayed to blend both entertainment and instruction. Consequently, as opposed to Ibn Durayd, al-Hamadhānī did find approval with readers. This is how the *maqāma* became a genre for many practitioners.

The *maqāma,* as a story of trickery, through its variety and different protagonists, is a device for entertaining readers and introducing them to different kinds of lexicons and odd speeches without causing them undue stress. This does not imply that the story is a mere

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[12] al-Ḥuṣrī quoted in Prendergast, "Introduction," in *The Maqāmāt of Badīʿ al-Zamān,* 16. [adapted]
*I replaced Prendergast's "rare stories" with "strange accounts" to provide a more accurate translation of the sentence "*ʾaghraba bi-arbaʿīna ḥadīth.*"
[13] Abū Isḥāq al-Ḥuṣrī, *Zahr al-ādāb wa-thamar al-albāb*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, vol. I (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1953), 261.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002)*,* 82. See also: Pellat, "Mukaddī," in *EI2.*

pretext in the *maqāma*, as many scholars have argued,[16] but rather that the classic *maqāma* is only possible because it brings storytelling and language together. The plot functions as a frame that contains and foregrounds the strange language that is the central element.

According to Abdelfattah Kilito, a sophisticated literary work during the premodern period of Islam was one that resisted immediate comprehension, one that initiated discussion, interpretation, and commentary.[17] By amplifying language, the *maqāma* genre provoked its audience and produced a long tradition of commentaries, transmissions, translations, and imitations. Premodern readers shared the *maqāmat*'s taste for complex and demanding language. al-Ḥuṣrī's statement above is a case in point. The problem is that the taste for strangeness is not widely recognized in current *maqāma* scholarship. The one scholar, to my knowledge, who has noted the function of strange language in al-Hamadhānī's *Maqāmāt* is Daniel Beaumont, who argues that the *maqāma* pushes language to its extreme and uses it as "an instrument of aggression rather than communication"[18] thereby transforming it into a "shell game which seeks to conceal and frustrate."[19]

In their search for stories and fiction, and with their lesser interest in philology, modern and contemporary scholars ignored language as a central aspect of al-Hamadhānī's episodes and read him, instead, with an emphasis on comical plots, "critical intentions,"[20] and relative simplicity.[21] As a result, they praised him for being "the first who frankly admits that his stories are fictional"[22] in the context of Arabic literature, for "studying society"[23] in his episodes, and for being "less shocking"[24] and "less pompous"[25] than those who wrote the *maqāmāt* after him. In other words, they dismiss his taste for rare vocabulary, which he explicitly announces in *his maqāmāt* and his correspondence with other writers (see Chapter 5). They rebrand him as a storyteller and a social critic, which, in the case of modern European scholarship, fit the conventions of modernity, which encourage simplicity and fiction. This rebranding is of critical importance in this book for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the difference between premodern readers (al-Ḥuṣrī), who accepted al-Hamadhānī according to his own terms, and modern European readers, who altered the core of his work to fit their own conventions and tastes

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[16] Shawqī Ḍayf, for example, argues that *maqāmāt* "do not contain a plot," and that al-Hamadhānī included style and terms in a story form (*sūra qaṣaṣiyya*), with "limited conversation" to draw the attention of students. Shawqī Ḍayf, *al-Maqāma* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1954), 8-9.

[17] Abdelfattah Kilito, *al-Adab wa-l-gharāba* (Casablanca: Toubqal, 2007), 18.

[18] Daniel Beaumont, "A Mighty and Never-Ending Affair: Comic Anecdote and Story in Medieval Arabic Literature," in *Journal of Arabic Literature,* n.24 (1993), 140.

[19] Ibid, 144.

[20] Yūsuf Nūr ʿAwaḍ, for instance, defines al-Hamadhānī's *maqāma* as "a short story, figuring a human picaro and a beggar, and expressing a certain kind of criticism, rebellion, or sarcasm." Yūsuf Nūr ʿAwaḍ, *Fann al-maqāmāt bayna al-mashriq wa-l-maghrib* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1979), 8. Similarly, Iḥsān ʿAbbās argues that al-Hamadhānī created a mask to critique "social and literary life in all their manifestations." Iḥsān ʿAbbās, *Malāmiḥ yūnāniyya fī al-adab al-ʿarabī* (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya, 1993), 189.

[21] This form of praise for al-Hamadhānī's work started with modern European readers (see Chapter 2).

[22] A.F. L. Beeston, "The Genesis of the *Maqāmāt* Genre," in *Journal of Arabic Literature,* n.2 (1971), 9.

[23] Fakhrī Abū al-Suʿūd, "al-Qiṣaṣ bayna al-adabayn al-ʿarabī wa-l-injlīzī," in *al-Risāla*, no.198 (April 1937): 654.

[24] See Silvestre de Sacy's description of al-Hamadhānī in Chapter 2.

[25] Zakī Mubārak, *al-Nathr al-fannī fī al-qarn al-rābiʿ al-Hijrī* (Cairo: Hindawi, 2012), [First edition in French, Paris: 1931], 204.

(see the conclusion of Chapter 3). Second, it shows that scholarship justified al-Hamadhānī's choices and approved his work, acknowledgments that other authors of the *maqāmāt*, especially al-Ḥarīrī, were denied.

Two of the open questions that *maqāma* scholarship still must answer are: Why has the reception of the *maqāma*, thus far, not benefited from the aesthetics of the postmodern period which encourage estrangement and defamiliarization?[26] Furthermore, why, until recently, have readings of the *maqāma* been constrained by conventions of modernity that do not capture its ambiguity nor its taste for strangeness? If the conventions and methods used when approaching classical Arabic literature were to change, al-Ḥarīrī's book would certainly become the subject of serious study examining the relationship between his language and storytelling instead of propagating impressionistic criticism that reduces his *Maqāmāt* to its elaborate form, strange vocabulary, and "laborious" composition (see Chapters 2 and 3). This book contributes to filling this gap.

Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī: Frame and Body

al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* consists of fifty episodes and was completed in 504/1110. The episodes were written as a collection and accompanied by a detailed preface declaring the author's intentions, corpus, inspirations, and contribution.[27] They open with an introductory *maqāma* (*Ṣanʿāniyya* (M1)) in which al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, the *adab* collector—in both its ethical and literary senses—and narrator of the *Maqāmāt*, meets the encyclopedic trickster and source of curiosities, Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, for the first time. The work ends with a concluding episode (*al-Baṣriyya* (M50)) in which the latter repents and the former ends his journey because there is no longer a curious figure and source of *adab* to pursue. The meeting and parting sequence repeats in almost every episode in the *Maqāmāt* and functions as a framework in which the narrator and the tricksters express their feelings toward space, home, voyage, family, and companionship. Within this framework, between the two acts of arrival and departure, the two protagonists meet briefly, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of others, to exchange words for money. Thus far, the *maqāma* scholarship has focused mainly on these exchanges of rare terms and curious anecdotes for rewards, ignoring the framework in which *ghurba* (strangerhood), homesickness, and farewell are expressed. The assumption, thus far, has been that al-Ḥarīrī focused, mainly, on ornate language and had little interest in anything else. This study challenges this assumption in the third part (see Chapters 7, 8, 9) which is dedicated to the long-ignored topic of strangerhood and the trickster's relationship with space in *al-Maqāmāt Ḥarīriyya*.

al-Ḥarīrī's Language and Storytelling

In order to surpass the father of the genre, al-Ḥarīrī amplifies strangeness in the *Maqāmāt* by displaying all kinds of erudition, rare and transgressive lexicons, and *badīʿ* (figures of speech). In the preface of his work, he boasts about this when he informs his readers that his episodes contain

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[26] See for instance Jan Mukařovský's concept of "foregrounding" and Shklovsky's *ostranenie* or "making strange."

[27] al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt Abī Zayd al-Sarūjī*, ed. Micheal Cooperson (NY: New York Press, 2020), 3-6.

Arab proverbs, literary delicacies, grammatic riddles, linguistic edicts, innovative epis-
tles, embellished orations, tear-inducing sermons, and amusing diversions.

الأمثال العَرَبية واللطائف الأَدَبية والأَحاجِي النّحوِيةِ، والفَتاوِي اللّغَوِية والرَسَائِل المُبْتَكَرَة، والخُطَب المُحَبَّرَة
والمَوَاعِظ المُبْكِية والأَضاحِيك المُلْهِية.28

Although al-Ḥarīrī follows in al-Hamadhānī's footsteps by inserting rich linguistic and literary
material into funny stories about mendacity and trickery, al-Ḥarīrī's storytelling was dismissed
by readers in the modern period because they found it repetitive and barely comical, complain-
ing that it took "eloquence too seriously."29

al-Hamadhānī supplies different plots in his *maqāmāt*. One episode, for instance, features
a thief trying to rob a house and ending up being sexually violated multiple times by the owner
(*al-Maqāma al-Ruṣāfiyya*).30 Another episode tells of a brigand poet, or a *suʿlūk*, embarking
on various adventures to win the heart of his cousin (*al-Maqāma al-Bishriyya*). A third epi-
sode revolves around an erudite man taking revenge on fake companions by cutting their
beards while they are sedated (*al-Maqāma al-Saymariyya*). al-Ḥarīrī, in contrast, focuses on
providing variations on a single plot in which a trickster encounters a collector of curiosities
(the narrator) and exchanges his erudition for money. As a result, most of al-Ḥarīrī's episodes
more or less follow a set chain of events: (1) The narrator arrives in a new city, (2) The narrator
encounters the disguised trickster, (3) The two have a discourse (hero's literary performance),
(4) A reward is given, (5) The trickster's true identity is recognized, (6) The narrator reproaches
the trickster (7) The trickster justifies his actions, and (8) The two part ways.31 Such a plotline
has a twofold advantage. First, it provides an optimal context in which to display the literary
and linguistic material through both the trickster and the narrator. Second, the repeated se-
quence of events allows the readers to focus their attention on the thing that keeps changing
in each episode: the language.32 This repetitive and systematic use of a single storyline may, at
first, glance seem to imply that the al-Ḥarīrī's main preoccupation is merely displaying his er-
udition in the different forms of the *ʿarabiyya*. However, on closer inspection, one notices that
despite this methodical use of one plot, al-Ḥarīrī creates a trickster who changes his vocabulary
and discourse depending on his relationship with the addressees (see Chapter 6). He also com-
poses four episodes, *al-Naṣībiyya* (M19), *al-ʿUmāniyya* (M39), *al-Sāsāniyya* (M49)*, and *al-
Baṣriyya* (M50) that break the usual exchange of money for *adab* and show the trickster in a
state of weakness, failure, and strangerhood (see Chapter 9). The *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī may
lack flexibility and innovation in the narrative, but its use of language and plot is always mean-
ingful and systematic.

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28 al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, 4-5.

29 Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama,* 169.

30 ʿAbduh removes this story and keeps only its opening, due to the sexual nature of its subject matter. For an account
of ʿAbduh's censorship of al-Hamadhānī, see Bilal Orfali and Maurice Pomerantz*, The Maqāmāt of Badīʿ al-Zamān
al-Hamadhānī: Authorship, Text, and Contexts* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2022), 158-161.

31 Kilito, "Le Genre 'Séance': Une Introduction," in *Studia Islamica,* no.43 (1976): 48.

32 I develop this argument further in the context of discussing the framing device in al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*. See Asmaa
Essakouti, "(Un)veiling Language or Frames in Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt*," in *Articulations: Framing Narratives*, ed. Simon
Godart, Johannes Stephan, and Beatrice Gründler (May 2024). https://articulations.temporal-communities.de/contri-
butions/frames-in-al-hariris-maqamat/

al-Ḥarīrī's system beguiled premodern readers, prompting them to praise his episodes as the optimal combination of frivolity and learnedness. Children were made to memorize them along with the *Qurʾān*,[33] scholars described them as having the quality of inimitability (*iʿjāz*), and disciples traveled from distant countries to copy them (see Chapter 1). To modern readers, in contrast, al-Ḥarīrī's language sounded cryptic, laborious, and empty, and his stories seemed redundant, tedious, monotonous, and lacking imagination (see Chapters 2 and 3). This reading is still dominant today and, as a result, key aspects, such as mockery of the elite, language's impact on the audience, intellectual fascination with the exotic and the transgressive, precarity, survival, existential angst, *ghurba*, and trickster's backstory, are still widely ignored in the scholarship.

Creating an Ambiguous Trickster

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila has identified more than 200 writers of *maqāmāt* between the 10th and the 20th century.[34] In chronological order, al-Ḥarīrī is in 19th place. In between him and al-Hamadhānī, there are more than a dozen authors who wrote one or more *maqāma*. The most remarkable among them is the Baghdadi scholar Ibn Nāqiyā, who wrote ten *maqāmāt* featuring al-Yashkurī, a unique and insolent picaro. Al-Ḥarīrī does not mention al-Yashkurī nor his creator in his *Maqāmāt* referring only to al-Hamadhānī and his protagonist, Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī. Ibn Nāqiyā (410/1020-485/1092), however, was a contemporary of al-Ḥarīrī (446-1054-516/1122) and they both lived in Baghdad. It is highly likely, then, that al-Ḥarīrī was aware of Ibn Nāqiyā's *maqāmāt* and that he even emulated some of their features. I would venture to say that al-Ḥarīrī's trickster, Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, is the synthesis of al-Iskandarī's cynicism and al-Yashkurī impudence and rejection. From the former, al-Ḥarīrī borrows the rootless roving, the chameleon character, the charming tongue, and the comic ruses. From the latter, he adopts transgressive actions, a despicable presence, rejection, and failure. These two tricksters, in their relationship with language and space, are one of the many tools through which we can understand al-Sarūjī's ambiguity: his blending of trickery and sympathy, eloquence and failure, rootlessness and longing.

Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī is portrayed in the *Hamadhāniyya* as a rootless stranger, without affinities or social ties. His identities are temporary, his masks are numerous, and his words are beguiling and deceiving. He is eloquent, comic, and free. He does not call for empathy but for money. He cynically boasts of his outsiderness and detachment. He is, in his own words, "the spinning top of time (*khudhrūfat al-zamān*)" and "the everlasting inhabitant of the road" (*ʿammārat al-ṭuruq*).[35] The one time he is portrayed as an empathic character with a sad backstory is in *al-Maqāma al-Jurjāniyya* when he introduces himself by saying: "I am a citizen of Alexandria of the Umayyad frontiers."[36] Here, the trickster does not mean the city of Alexandria in Egypt, but rather the city occupied by the Byzantines back then, which was previously

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[33] Brockelmann and Pellat, "Maḳāma."
[34] Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama,* 368-411.
[35] al-Hamadhānī, *The Maqāmāt,* 52.
[36] Ibid, 53.

known as Alexandretta but is now known as Iskenderun.[37] He is, therefore, a refugee who cannot return home. This narrative, however, is merely a ruse that tricksters use to collect charity. It is even cited in Abū Dulaf al-Khazrajī's (d. after 365/975) ode, *al-Qaṣīda al-Sāsāniyya*, about the deceits of beggars[38] (see Chapters 5, 7, 9). Abū al-Fatḥ Iskandarī is, thus, a comic protagonist whose one moment of tragedy is a ruse to collect money (see Chapter 8).

Ibn Nāqiyā's trickster, al-Yashkurī, is always insolent, rarely eloquent, and never charming. He is an extreme picaro who robs graves (M2), appears naked in mosques[39] (M3), and behaves like an impudent drunk (Mt. 6, 9). Despite his eloquence and knowledge of rare vocabulary,[40] his words get him nowhere. No door opens to his pleas (M4), no one is charmed by his answers (M8), and he is even manipulated by other tricksters (M9). The act of speaking, which usually astonishes, beguiles, and charms al-Iskandarī's audience, is merely an occasion for al-Yashkurī to fail. He is therefore, in every possible sense, a failure, a rejected speaker, and an object of ridicule. The one occasion on which al-Yashkurī does not fail is when he follows the model of Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī and claims to be a refugee in exile. This occurs in the third *maqāma* by Ibn Nāqiyā in which al-Yashkurī laments his strangerhood and yearns for home. The anonymous narrator recounts:

> He began to pour forth his tears, reveal his anguish, and lament [his] strangerhood. He said: 'O, how I perpetually long for you. Alas, what sorrow for but a sip from the waters Baradā' ... Then he moaned like a bereft she-camel and described his yearning for the twilight hours of home and the solace found in returning to its watering places.[41]

وجعل يُفيضُ عبرَته ويُبْدي لَوعَته ويَنْدُب غُرْبَتَه، ويقول"وَا شوْقا إِليكم أبدًا، ووا حَسرةً على شَربة من ماء بَرَدَا" (...) ثم أرْزَمَ إِرزامَ أمّ حَايِل ووصَف حَنِين الأَصَائِل والتَعلُل بِوُرُود المَنَاهِل.

Hearing these words and the eloquent mix of poetry and pleas, a few men in the audience invite al-Yashkurī to eat with them and promise him a seat in their caravan. After he has greedily consumed both his and their share of food, he disappears leaving his hosts hungry and deceived. *Ghurba* (strangerhood) and exile are, thus, valuable ruses for otherwise failed tricksters who may resort to persuasion when eloquence proves insufficient.

Similar to al-Iskandarī and al-Yashkurī, Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī relies on the motif of *ghurba* to soften the hearts of his interlocutors, with a significant addition: He laments his spiritual alienation even when he does not need money (*al-Naṣībiyya* (M19)), even when he is alone (*al-Baṣriyya* (M50)), and even when the audience cannot understand his words (*al-ʿUmāniyya*

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[37] Devin Stewart, "Parody, Reverence, and Anti-Parody in the *Maqāmāt* Genre," (Lecture, Freie Universität, Berlin, December 01, 2022).

[38] In al-*Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya,* which enlists all the different ruses practiced by *mukaddīs*, Abū Dulaf refers to a specific type of tricksters called *al-maysarānī* "who begs, alleging that he has come from the frontier region." Abū Dulaf, al-*Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya,* in *The Medieval Islamic Underworld: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature*, vol.II (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 194.

[39] The narrator describes him as "naked, without clothes or shame; he has removed his rags, spread his cloth, and extended his right and left hands." See Ibn Nāqiyā al-Baghdādī, *Maqāmāt*, in *Maqāmāt al-Ḥanafī wa-Ibn Nāqiyā wa-ghayrihimā*, ed. Oskar Rescher (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿat Aḥmad Kāmil, 1914), 129.

[40] In the fourth *maqāma*, he is described as speaking "in the tongue of Bedouins (*yanṭiq bi-lisān al-aʿrāb*) and relies on rare vocabulary" (*yaʿtamid gharīb al-lafẓ*). Ibid, 132.

[41] Ibid, 129-130.

(M39)).[42] al-Sarūjī's *ghurba* is not a secondary motif that emerges in special circumstances but a permanent feeling that is expressed in long poems and speeches. His strangerhood is not limited to exile but is also felt in places of residence that are always associated with weakness, sickness, and fear of death. Unlike other tricksters in the *maqāma* genre, Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī does return to his homeland after it gains independence, but even there, he does not find peace and he remains anxious and afraid of his next home: the grave (see Chapter 9).

Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī is, thus, an ambivalent character who inspires both empathy and annoyance. He is a superb orator who always wins the argument, yet is also a banished figure who must prove his eloquence before he gains admission (see Chapter 8). He is a rootless traveler who refuses to settle down, as well as a refugee who cannot return to his occupied homeland. He is a liar and a charlatan around strangers, yet also a wise leader and a model among his people (see Chapters 6 and 9). He is a cynical trickster who refuses companionship and good deeds, yet also a fragile being who is afraid of life, death, and existence (see Chapters 8 and 9).

One main problem in the current *maqāma* scholarship is that scholars have paid much attention to Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī's language and trickery but little attention to the impact of his backstory on his conduct as a trickster. It is sufficient to notice, for instance, the correlation between the trickster's repentance and the independence of his homeland in the last *maqāma* (*al-Baṣriyya* (M50)), which insinuates that trickery, ambiguity, and crime only happen elsewhere, away from home, whereas a homecoming heralds a return to balance, both for the city that regains its independence and for the hero who finds his way back to God. Current *maqāma* scholarship has also yet to pay attention to the few occasions in which the trickster stops performing, accepts weakness (*al-Naṣībiyya*) and failure (*al-ʿUmāniyya* and *al-Baṣriyya*), and expresses his true fears and feelings. To grasp the nuances of Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, readers must go beyond modernity's categories equating ornate language with shallowness and, instead, accept the juxtaposition of the trickster masks, stories, and tongues.

Categorical and Ambiguous Readers

In 2022, the journal *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* published a special issue dedicated to the *maqāma* genre. The introduction to the issue gives the impression of committing a strange act that may surprise and annoy the readers. Anticipating critique from their audience, the editors address them as follows:

> The topic of this special issue may seem surprising to some readers. Should this subject not belong more properly to one of the many journals that deal with *Middle Eastern Literatures* past and present? How is the travel of a literary form such as the *maqāma worthy of interest* within the larger frame of intellectual history? What is "intellectual" about a phenomenon that appears to be so intimately tied up with what might first be dismissed as *the narrow concerns of belles-lettres and aesthetics*? What might intellectual historians *gain* from studying the *formal* features of texts?[43] [emphasis added]

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[42] See Chapter 9.

[43] Maurice Pomerantz und Jonathan Decter, "The *Maqāma* Genre and the History of an Islamicate Literary Form," in *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, no.10 (2022): 1.