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Muḥammad ‘Awfī and the Persian *maqāma*

Abstract

The influence of Arabic *maqāmas* on Hebrew literature has received some attention, but their influence on Persian literature has been less intensively studied. However, *maqāmas* were eagerly received and imitated in 12th-century Persia. A Persian author, Muḥammad ‘Awfī (d. after 628/1230–1) deserves attention when assessing the early Persian *maqāma*. In his *Ġawāmi‘*, he gives the translation of one Ḥarīrian *maqāma* and relates two or three stories which would easily qualify as *maqāmas*. They also show that the influence of the *maqāma* on Persian literature is stronger than is usually suggested. Persians may not always have labelled their texts *maqāmas*, which, after all, remained a foreign genre for them, but at the same time *maqāmas* did influence Persian prose literature more deeply than is usually recognized.

The influence of Arabic *maqāmas* on Hebrew literature has received some attention, but their influence on Persian literature has been less intensively studied. The *maqāmas* of very few Persian authors, except for Ḥamīdaddīn Balḥī (d. 560/1164), are even mentioned by Western scholars. Most of the few studies on the Persian *maqāma* have been written in Persian and published in Iran and are hard to access in the West.¹

The reception of Arabic prose in Persian literature has been briefly studied by Marzolph (1992) I: 89–133, who mainly focuses on the anecdotes and mentions *maqāmas* only in passing. However, *maqāmas* were eagerly received and imitated in 12th-century Persia. Ḥamīdaddīn’s *maqāmas* were an instantaneous success as may be seen in his early canonization in Nizāmī-ye ‘Arūḍī’s (d. after 552/1157) *Čahār*

¹ E.g. Ḥarīrī (1383 A.H.Sh.).

maqāla (p. 22 = Browne 1921: 25), where he is mentioned on a par with the great Arabic maestros, Al-Hamaḍānī and Al-Ḥarīrī.²

Another Persian author, Muḥammad 'Awfī (d. after 628/1230–1)³ deserves our attention when assessing the early Persian *maqāma*. In his *Ġawāmi'*, he gives the translation of one Ḥarīrian *maqāma* (III/1: 136–139: no. 49 *As-Sāsāniyya*) and relates two or three stories which would easily qualify as *maqāmas*, though they are not explicitly labelled as such (III/1: 139–148;⁴ 150–152; 153–155).

Before discussing these stories, it should be added that 'Awfī translated the *Kitāb al-faraġ ba'd aš-šidda* by At-Tanūhī⁵ and also included many of these stories in his *Ġawāmi'*, so that several *maqāmaesque* stories found their way into the collection, especially in the fourth volume. The narrative context of 'Awfī was very receptive of *maqāmas*.

Let us first study the translation of the Ḥarīrian *maqāma*. As 'Awfī's text does not seem to have been previously translated, I will first give the text in translation.⁶

Translation

Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥarīrī has told in his *maqāmas*:

When death approached Abū Zayd Sarūġī and it was time for him to release the soul back to the Creator of souls, he called for his son and said to him:

Oh son, know that for a long time I have spent the cash of my labours trying to catch the fugitives (of daily bread) and used the decoy bird tied to the net of deception to hunt down the birds of the heart. Today it is time for the bird of my soul to fly upwards into the celestial air. I will now make my testament to you. Know that your earthly prosperity will depend on this testament.

² Cf. also a poem on him by Anwarī, translated in Browne (1906) II: 347. For a recent study on Ḥamīdaddīn, see Behmardī (2006). See also Browne (1906) II: 346–349.

³ For a short biography of 'Awfī, see Matīnī (1989). Marzolph (1992, I: 101–103) also briefly studies 'Awfī but restricts himself exclusively to anecdotes and uses only the brief selection of his stories by Nizāmu'd-dīn (1929).

⁴ The protagonist of this story, Šayḥ 'Abbās, is also mentioned in the following story, III/1: 148–150.

⁵ This translation has been lost, but the somewhat later one by Ḥusayn Ibn As'ad Dahistānī is preserved and has been edited by I. Ḥākīmī (3 vols, Tihirān 1363–1364 A.H.Sh. / 1984–1985).

⁶ Whether 'Awfī translated this *maqāma* or found it already translated is not clear. In the latter case, there remains the further question whether he abbreviated the piece or not. As long as we cannot locate the source for this translation of Al-Ḥarīrī the question will remain open, but it should be noted that there is nothing in the style of the translation that would exclude 'Awfī himself from being the translator.

Certainly, men are four classes. First are the kings, secondly the viziers and the governors, thirdly the merchants and fourthly the market-men (*bāzāriyān*) and artisans (*arbāb-e ḥirfat*).⁷

There cannot be any doubt, but that kingship is the place of a thousand calamities and a cause for many fears. A sage has said that a king sitting on his throne is like a man above whose head there is a sharp sword attached by a single hair. Every moment he is waiting for that hair to snap and the sword to fall upon his head and kill him.

Being a vizier, an emir or a *dihqān* is also connected with various difficulties and different afflictions. In his proximity to the king, the vizier will be afflicted with great labours and he will have many eminent enemies. There will always be arrows pointed at him. Often they hit their mark and their heads find their way to pierce him. For a *dihqān* the tasks of cultivation involve baseness and meanness because the paying of *ḥarāğ* taxes is very hard for a noble man. And how it is with owners of cattle⁸ is well known.

Being a merchant is all pain and toil. He must put his life and property at stake: “the traveller and his property are in danger.” After bearing all the troubles and gulping down the goblet of treacheries, he either makes a ten-percent profit – or does not. Gaining a profit in this way cannot be free of toil.

The earnings and the profession of a market-man are also associated with toil and trouble. His living comes to him day by day and if on one day sickness overcomes him, he will lose (the profits of) that day.

So, my son, beware all these professions and tasks and know for sure that the dominion without headache and the occupation without trouble and the trade without merchandise and the profession without tools is beggary. Its capital is asking and its adornment is liberality. That merchandise sells in every market and that harvest⁹ is saleable in every town.

Where there is a city, there is our estate,
whether we go to Iran or Turan.

⁷ Others would, presumably, have fallen into the class of riffraff, not worthy of the name of people. In the end we learn that beggary actually wins the day against all these four classes.

⁸ This seems to be the meaning of the perhaps garbled Arabic sentence intervening into the text (*wa-maṭal al-laḍī fī arbāb al-baqar mašhūr-ast*). The editor admits that he does not understand this passage and emends *la-baqar* to *al-naḡar* (“leaders of troops”?).

⁹ I read *ḥirman*.

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Even at first glance, the differences between 'Awfī's text and its original are conspicuous. Not only does the text lack the *isnād* and the narrator, so basic to Arabic *maqāmas*,¹⁰ but it also uses in the original Persian a rather straightforward language with only occasional use of rhymed sentences, far removed from the artistic prose of Al-Ḥarīrī.¹¹ This shows that the style of the *maqāma* was, after all, less important for 'Awfī than its witty content.

When one compares the Persian text with its source, one soon realizes that the two are only loosely connected.¹² The Persian text is a very free paraphrase of Al-Ḥarīrī's, taking the basic idea and the name of the protagonist from Al-Ḥarīrī, but otherwise freely retelling the story, even dropping the mention of Abū Zayd's position as the leader of Sāsānians, a term that is not even used in the Persian version, whereas in the Arabic version it is a pivotal term.¹³ The Persian version condenses the Arabic original, and the latter half of the *maqāma* has been omitted.

What is remarkable is that the original has left few influences on a lexical level. One might expect to see at least unconscious borrowings from the Arabic text, but the lexical similarities are so few that they may be taken as natural similarities between Arabic and the Arabicized Persian of the period: saying the same thing in these two languages often involves the same lexemes even in unrelated texts. Even when the translation is, in the few cases, rather faithful, the Arabic lexicon of the original has scarcely left any traces to the Persian text. The Persian text even uses Arabic, non-Persianized lexemes and expressions, which are not found in Al-Ḥarīrī's original. Hence, e.g., it uses the expression *iṣṭiyād-e šawārid* (p. 137) where Al-Ḥarīrī says: *innī ġarrabtu ḥaqa'iq al-umūr wa-balawtu taṣārīf ad-duhūr*. However, *šawārid* (sg. *šārid*) does not belong to the standard Persian loans from Arabic (not attested, e.g., in Steingass 1892), though it must have been familiar to an educated author. One might expect to see some phrase like *tağrīb-e ḥaqa'iq-e umūr* in its stead, but our author freely uses his Arabic words without consideration of the original.

Content wise, one might take as an example the four categories of people in Al-Ḥarīrī and the Persian text. For Al-Ḥarīrī, the four categories are *imāra*, *tiğāra*, *zīrā'a* and *šinā'a*, but the Persian text divides the first category into two (kings and viziers) and drops *zīrā'a* altogether, for no obvious reason.¹⁴ Husbandry and cultivation were important categories for the ancient Persian culture which could easily have received

¹⁰ It should be noted, though, that in this particular *maqāma*, the narrator's role is unusually superficial.

¹¹ Ḥamīdaddīn's *maqāmas* use a much more ornamented language.

¹² Ḥamīdaddīn shares this free attitude towards Arabic sources. Cf., e.g., Behmardi (2006).

¹³ For Sāsānian beggars, see Bosworth (1976).

¹⁴ Later, in discussing the first category, the Persian text adds the subcategory of *dihqān* which resembles Al-Ḥarīrī's category of *zīrā'a*, but it is given as a subcategory of kingship or dominion.

the original division into four by Al-Ḥarīrī, so there was no compelling reason for the change.¹⁵

The changes in the content concern the relation between these two specific texts of ‘Awfī and Al-Ḥarīrī. More important for the whole genre are the changes in the structure. Generally, the use of highly polished artistic prose and the narrative device of a pseudo-*isnād* and a fictitious narrator are considered the most basic features of the *maqāma*.¹⁶ ‘Awfī does without them in both the “translation” from Al-Ḥarīrī, explicitly labelled as a *maqāma*, and in the other texts, to be discussed below. When it comes to *isnād*, Ḥamīdaddīn’s *maqāmas* fall midway, using an anonymous narrator (*ḥikāyat kard marā dūstī ke...*), which makes the narrator’s position less acute and depersonalizes him by leaving him in the shadows of anonymity.

This is a healthy reminder against reading too much into the use of a fictitious narrator. For contemporary audience, and the immediately following times, the key to reading *maqāmas* was not, e.g., an unreliable narrator, and it seems unwarranted to read them in a highly complicated manner and in the light of modern literary theories. For ‘Awfī, at least, the frame of the *maqāma* is disposable and the gist lies in the sermon of Abū Zayd. The *maqāma* is, appropriately, put in the chapter *Dar laṭāyif-e kalimāt-e gadāyān o-ḥikāyat-e* (sic, not *ḥikāyat-e*) *iṣān*, thus underlining the mendicant content of the *waṣīyya*.

Against this background, the next story about Šayḥ ‘Abbās, may easily be discussed as a *maqāma*, in an ‘Awfian sense. The term *maqāma* is found in the middle of the text (p. 143, l. 1), not designating the whole, but only the core episode of the performance by Šayḥ ‘Abbās, the hero of the piece. Yet, its use shows that in writing this piece the author¹⁷ had *maqāmas* in mind and would, presumably, have called it a *maqāma*.

Space does not allow us to translate the whole story, but a brief outline may be given. Instead of a fictitious *isnād*, the story begins with the neutral standard formula *āvurde-and* “it has been told”. As in most *maqāmas* (but not in Al-Ḥarīrī’s *As-Sāsāniyya*), the action is geographically located, this time in the city of Nishapur, and the hero is a merchant, who is spoken of in the 3rd person – the *maqāma* narrator would tell the story in the first person, but lacking a fictitious narrator, the text uses the 3rd person.¹⁸ A beggar girl in rags and tatters appears to a company of merchants, her beautiful body shining through the patches, “like the sun from behind the clouds.” The girl tells her sad story – she is of better origin, but has fallen into poverty – and all the gentlemen give her ample alms.

¹⁵ One is tempted to think that the Persian paraphrase is based on a half-remembered story, but Al-Ḥarīrī’s early fame makes such a suggestion problematic.

¹⁶ Cf., e.g., Hämeen-Anttila (2002): 39–40.

¹⁷ I have been unable to locate this text in earlier literature, Arabic or Persian. The Persian setting might favour a Persian origin for the piece.

¹⁸ This also shows that there never was a fictitious narrator to this text. Had the text been abbreviated by ‘Awfī and had the original contained an *isnād*, the first-person singular would, presumably, have been retained by the technical addition of *rāwī mī gūyad*, cf. below.

Enchanted by her beauty the merchant proposes to her, but the girl tells him to ask for her hand from her father. The father turns out to be a wealthy man, and after dining with him the merchant finally asks for and receives an explanation: his future father-in-law's wealth derives from beggary. He invites the merchant to witness his stratagem the next day in the mosque. There he and his wife make their appearance, the old man claiming to be a poor man who has found a purse full of valuables. Because of his piety he does not want to keep it and calls for the purse's owner. The crowd rewards his honesty by giving him alms which amount to the substantial sum of ten dinars.

After this, the old woman arrives and cries for having lost her mistress's purse and is now afraid of being accused of stealing it. She is asked its description and the purse, of course, turns out to be the one "found" by the old man and is duly returned to her. She swears to give up her profession as a *maššāṭa* "hairstresser; bride-dresser" after this close shave and the crowd gives her some alms, too, as compensation for her giving up her profession.

After showing him their tricks, the old man tells the merchant that he may marry his daughter, but only if he gives the dowry from money earned by beggary. Then he proceeds to tell the merchant how the trick is done, and the merchant leaves his earlier profession, becomes a beggar, earns his dowry and gets the girl. The story is appropriately put after the Persian version of Al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāma* and in its way it illustrates the teaching of Abū Zayd: beggary is the supreme profession, better than commerce and, by implication, any other profession.

The story could easily be changed into a regular *maqāma* by adding a fictitious *isnād*, the concomitant first-person narration, and the scene of recognizing the old man as the recurring *maqāma* hero, and by using more ornate language. The recognition scene, though, is in a certain sense present: only after showing his tricks is the old man given a name. Almost at the end, where the recognition usually occurs, he is for the first time spoken of by his name, Šayḥ 'Abbās (p. 146), but the difference is that the name does not seem to say anything to the merchant – Šayḥ 'Abbās is not an old friend of his. Likewise, the travel theme is present, as the person who takes the role the narrator would have in a proper *maqāma* is a merchant and hence, by definition, itinerant.

Also the third story of this chapter (pp. 148–150) shows some resemblance to *maqāmas*, but it is especially the fourth that is again very close to *maqāmas*. Its provenance is an otherwise little-known book, *Miftāḥ an-naṣāḥ* by, or about, Qāḍī-ye Ūš.¹⁹ This story tells how the Qāḍī of Ūš decided to fleece the Sistanians, proverbial for their avarice. He came to Sistan, acting the role of a dumb man. In order to atone for his sins, he went around giving water to people and asking them – by signs – to pray that he would regain his ability to speak. When he had become famous, one night he came to the local *qāḍī* and told him about a miracle. He had seen the Prophet in his dream and had been cured of his dumbness. The next day he tells this miracle in the mosque and receives ample alms, one thousand dinars, before leaving the city.

¹⁹ See the Preface to *Čawāmi'* III/1: 49, sub no. 86.

What makes this story interesting is its finale. After returning to Ferghana, the Qāḍī of Ūš sends a poem to the gullible inhabitants of Sistan, explaining his trick:

May the nobles of Sistan live long
and may they drink the draught of quiet and ease!
Those nobles fell prey to my subtle pranks,
despite all their wisdom and sense.
I was no dumb vendor of water, but
the world of wisdom himself, the Qāḍī of Ūš!

This written envoi, *ruqʿa*, is exactly what one rather regularly meets in *maqāmas* since Al-Ḥarīrī but only rarely in anecdotes.²⁰

The final piece to be discussed is the fifth story (pp. 153–155). In contrast to the others, this story is written in rhymed, although not too complicated, prose. It begins with “I have heard” and tells of a sharper of Rayy who went to a city in Iraq, acted as a pious man and gained some fame for his piety. Once, a stranger comes to accuse him of having killed his father. The furious crowd is ready to lynch the stranger who accuses the pious man, but the latter bursts into tears and admits the deed which he had committed in the folly of youth. The crowd insists on the young man contenting himself with blood money and sparing the life of the pious man and they collect one thousand dinars for him. At the end of the story, a narrator suddenly appears with the formula “*rāwī mī gūyad*”, which is not rare in all kinds of narratives (also in Arabic: *qāla ar-rāwī*), but here it has more significance. The anonymous narrator takes the role of the fictitious narrator of the *maqāma* and tells how he later, in Nishapur, meets with both men who carouse in a tavern. They laugh and tell him that they are drinking off what they gained from their plunder and when the money runs out they will do another trick.

The main character is not named and there is no *isnād*, but with a couple of rather mechanical additions the text would pass as a regular *maqāma*.

These anecdotes show how close *maqāmas* remained to beggar and *makāyid* anecdotes in the early Persian tradition. The Arabic tradition made a clearer distinction between the two genres, but the distinction is based on rather mechanical devices. To make a regular *maqāma* out of an anecdote, one often needs no more than a fictitious *isnād* and a few additions of a technical character.

The stories also show that the influence of the *maqāma* on Persian literature is stronger than is usually suggested. Persians may not always have labelled their texts *maqāmas*, which, after all, remained a foreign genre for them, but at the same time *maqāmas* did influence Persian prose literature more deeply than is usually recognized.

²⁰ See Hämeen-Anttila (2002): 152–153.

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