For over eight centuries, the word Maqamah has evoked in any educated Arab the automatic response Ḥarīrī (d. 516). The fame of his maqamah has transcended that of all the many subsequent writers in the genre, right down to Muwaylihi. Moreover, although Ḥarīrī’s preface frankly acknowledges his indebtedness to the maqamah of Badi‘ al-Zamān al-Ḥamadhānī (358-398), Ḥarīrī’s fame has cast his predecessor’s work into a shadow which was only lifted when the nabīl movement of the end of the last century began to show a renewed interest in B. Whereas for centuries Ḥarīrī was a school text-book, it is now B.’s maqamah which occupy a corresponding place in curricula. Yet in spite of this renewal of interest, B.’s work still awaits a correct appraisal; how wide of the mark some criticism is, I hope to show later.

Any attempt at estimating B.’s work must start from an appreciation of what he was trying to do and what (if any) models he had. This formed the topic of a brief flurry of controversy in 1930 in the pages of al-Muqtaṣaf (with an echo in al-Masbih). Zakī Mubārak drew attention ² to a passage in Ḥusrī’s Zahr al-‘idiib which, stripped of its elaborate verbiage, states that Ibn Durayd (d. 321) composed forty tales (ahādidh) which were the products of his own imagination but expressed in ‘pompous, strange and forbidding language’, and that B. rivalled ‘āraḍa Ibn Durayd’s tales in his maqamah which ‘flowed with wit and dripped elegance’. Mubārak goes on to claim that some at least of Ibn Durayd’s tales can be traced in the Amālī of al-Qālī, and his conclusion is that the ‘commonly held opinion’ that B. is the true originator of the maqamah genre is erroneous.

Mubārak certainly laid himself open to criticism by announcing this as an ‘amazing discovery’; for which he was sharply attacked by Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfi‘ī. The latter derided Mubārak for naivety, both in announcing as a ‘discovery’ a text which had been in print

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³ مَلْعَ بِكَ أَنْتَ مَا أَظَنْ أَنِّي عَنْ قَبِيلَةِ الْمَطَابِعُ وَلَا تَفْقَرَ لِهِ حِجْبَهَا الْإِسْمَاعِ
⁴ تَذَاوِرُ ظُفْرًا وَتَفْقُرُ حَسَنًا

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for many years,¹ and for assuming that B.'s originality was a 'commonly held opinion'. Mubarak had indeed said that the originator of the 'error' was Hariri, whose preface-acknowledgement says that B. 'invented' (abda'a) the maqâmât. To the significance of this word I will return later, but it is certainly too much to say that it implies that B. was the creator of the genre.

It seems to me that if one is looking for the type of literature on which B. modelled the themes of his tales, it is useless trying to pin it down to one particular author belonging to the school of formal majâlis literature. B.'s closest parallel is with the kind of generally current anecdotes collected by Tanûkhi. The latter's life span (327-384) makes him a contemporary of B., though of an older generation, and the probable date of B.'s maqâmât (c. 382-3) places them just at a time when Tanûkhi's Faraj would have been gaining circulation.²

The Faraj, which is markedly more popular in tone than the same author's Nishwâr or Mustajâd, contains more than one tale which, apart from the style of diction, could easily have figured as one of B.'s maqâmât. Conversely, B.'s maqâmâ 'of the Lion', which is in fact two entirely separate tales, could easily have figured in the Faraj in ch. 9 (encounters with wild beasts) and ch. 11 (encounters with robbers). The Faraj also has a story of a destitute man ³ who writes to a neighbour, 'What think you of (mi dhâ tarâ fî) a kid, a casserole, and some cold dishes etc', but when the neighbour arrives for the expected banquet he is told 'I only said, "what do you think of?", I didn’t say I had the things': the point is identical with that of B.'s maqâmâ 'of the nabîd'.

There is one tale above all, however, in the Faraj which is of prime significance in relation to the Maqâmât. The tale is a fascinating one and deserves quotation for its own sake as well as for its bearing on the maqâmâ form. The tale ⁴ is told in the words of 'Amr b. Mas'âda. (d. 215 or 217, biography no. 480 in Ibn Khallikân). The prologue relates how 'Amr had been ordered by the caliph Ma'mûn to proceed to Ahwâz in order to bring to heel its recalcitrant governor Rukh-

¹ And, although perhaps Mubârak could not be expected to know this, B.'s first translator W. J. Prendergast (London, 1915) had mentioned the lJušrî passage in his introduction, p. 16.
² Rouchdi Fakkar, At-Tanûbî et son livre, la Délivrance, Le Caire 1955, p. 52, places the redaction around 373 or perhaps shortly after.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 240-3. The edition contains some bad misprints, but most of them are too obvious to need special notice.