THE MAQĀMĀT OF AL-HAMADHĀNĪ:
GENERAL REMARKS AND A CONSIDERATION OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

Much has been written about the origins of the maqāma, and the interpretation of the writings of Badr al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, his mind and purposes. His literary antecedents have been examined, why he wrote as he did has been the subject of speculation, but, in the absence of a critical edition of the maqāmāt, rarely, if at all, has it been asked what exactly did he write. These are questions that are still largely "subtilely obscure beyond the imaginings of soothsayers."

Much discussion has concentrated on the attempt to see precisely where lay the originality of Hamadhānī. This was based on the notion that Hamadhānī had created a new form called the maqāma. It remains common to call upon the evidence of Ḥarīrī, who in the introduction to his own maqāmāt wrote, with a certain false modesty, of his debt to his outstanding and unsurpassable predecessor. Nowhere, however, does he assert that Hamadhānī "invented (abdaca) the maqāma," to quote Mattock out of context.1 What Ḥarīrī says is that in the literary assemblies of his day there was "talk of the maqāmāt that Badr al-Zamān had invented." He is not talking of the maqāma as a form, newly invented or not, but in using the plural he refers concretely to the actual pieces written by Hamadhānī. This is made quite clear by the fact that Ḥarīrī goes on to say, "... and the active role within which he ascribed to Abū ʿI-Fath al-Iskandārī and the narration of which to Ḥisā ibn Hishām." In his Letters Hamadhānī twice referred to his maqāmāt in a way that has always seemed to me to take for granted the previous existence of something that could be called a maqāma, merely specifying the general topic that his were concerned with. The relevant passage in the Letters, with all the sentiments of which one need not agree, reads as follows: ...... man amlā min maqāmāt al-kudya arbaʿa miʾat maqāma lā munāsaba bain al-maqāmāt al-kt (lā) lafsan wa-lā maʾnān ......3

It is surely right to accept with Professor A.F.L. Beeston that the sense of "invent" (ibtadaʾa) in Ḥarīrī's introduction is not "to originate, create", as one might a new literary genre, but rather "to devise, to

make up imaginatively" a piece of writing. The belief that this is the correct interpretation of Ḥarīrī is buttressed by a passage in a work by Ibn Sharaf al-Qairawānī (d. 460/1067), in which he writes that Hamadhānī zawwara maqāmāt, literally "faked", or "fabricated some maqāmāt." This is stated just after mention of animal fables, which are clearly products of imagination, and leads into al-Qairawānī's saying that he similarly intends to compose some imaginary conversations on the topic of literature. On the other hand I have never quite understood Beeston's claim that Hamadhānī made a "frank admission that his stories are fictional", unless he had in mind the phrase in which al-Khwārizmī, who had criticized his literary output for being limited to the "maqāmas of al-Iskandari", was challenged by Hamadhānī to match him in producing khams maqāmāt aw ʿashr muftarayāt, "five maqāmas or ten made-up pieces." In Hamadhānī's Maqāmāt the characters' names are not burlesqued in any way - indeed, the narrator, Ḥūdī ibn Hishām, bears the same name as a Ḥadīth scholar who had taught Hamadhānī in his home town - and the inconsistency in the portrayal of the character of Abū Ḥāfīz, whatever significance one may wish to see in that, only becomes clear in the reading, emerges slowly from between the lines. The fictionality of each piece is no more immediately evident than it is in many other stories which were attached in their telling to known, historical characters.

The north-African writer al-Ḥusrī (d. 413/1022) claimed in a well-known passage that Hamadhānī was inspired to write his Maqāmāt by the desire to emulate "forty tales" devised by Ibn Duraid, the famous grammarian and lexicographer, from his own imagination. This has rightly been discounted, if taken in a narrow sense. Beeston holds that Hamadhānī drew his inspiration broadly from "the common stock of Arabic anecdotage current at the time." This would include the sort of anecdotal material that al-Qālī has preserved. Much of this material finds direct echoes in the Maqāmāt, including short episodes that are indeed quoted from Ibn Duraid. I suppose al-Ḥusrī could have named Ibn Duraid purely illustratively, as a significant forerunner in that sort of

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6 Masāʾil al-İntiqād, cd. Ch. Pellat, Algiers (1953), 4. See also the introductions of the Copenhagen Ms. of the Maqāmāt, cod. arāb. 224 fol. 1a, and Camb. Ms. Qq. 118, fol. 4b: maqāmāt ... yuzawwiruhu ʿalā liyān rawyā ... See B.M. Ms. Or. 5635, fol. 1b for same passage, but reading yaʿzūhā. This stock introduction in the Mss. seems to derive from the text in the MasāʾİL.


6 Rasāʾıl, 389-90.

7 It is true that Ḥarīrī (op. cit., 11) looked upon both characters as fictitious. However, behind al-Qairawānī's imaginary interlocutor, Abū Ḥāfīz al-Ṣalt ibn al-Sakan, lay a former teacher of his, Abū ʿl-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Abī ʿl-Riḍāl, as Pellat believed (MasāʾİL etc., 115).