The Maqāma: Finding the Third Way in Classical and Modern Arabic Literature

Joshua Bocher

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Overview

The pre-Islamic poetic form of the *qaṣīda* has always had a strong relationship with "officialdom," whether in the form of the tribal hierarchy of the *Jahilīya* (Age of Ignorance) or the courts of the Islamic empires (Umayyad and Abbasid). In the *qaṣīda*, the poet extolls the virtues of the rulers in order to validate their right to positions of leadership. With the spread of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries, and the replacement of the tribe with a vast state apparatus, a new class of educated secretaries (*kuttāb*) brought an end to the poet's monopoly on speech. The result was a literary golden age that saw the rise of prose and new poetic genres, albeit with strictly defined purposes (to inform and to evoke emotional responses, respectively). The conventions of the *qaṣīda* adapted to reflect the changing times. Poets and prose writers alike were no longer exalting the tribe or the caliph, but the city. The city elegy (*rithā' al-mudun*), whether poetic or prosaic, reflects the writers of the medieval Islamic world's attempts to delineate unique city-based identities. With the fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Persian-speaking Buwayhids' de-facto military rule over much of its land in the 10th and 11th centuries, the Arabic literary genre of the *maqāma* emerged, blending both poetry and prose and drawing from a wealth of literary traditions and sources. The conventions of the *maqāma* were revived by the Palestinian novelist Emile Ḥabībī in the face of a similar cultural threat, namely, the emergent State of Israel. Taking these factors into account, this paper will contend that the *maqāma* serves (in one way) as a critique of medieval and modern nationalism. It will demonstrate this element of the genre through a comparative analysis of the works of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, the progenitor of the *maqāma*, and the 20th-century novelist Emile Ḥabībī.

1. Introduction

Da‘ al-’aṭlāla tusfīhā al-janūbu wa tublī ‘ihda jiddatihā al-khuṭūbu

…

Wa lā ta’khudh ‘an al-a‘rābi lahwān wa lā ‘īshān fa-‘īshuhum jadību

Let the encampments lie in ruins, by the south winds, in defeat,

…

And take from the Bedouins neither tradition nor lifestyle, for their ways are obsolete.[1]

The above poetic verse written by the poet Abū Nuwās (756-814) represents the zenith of the Arabic literary tradition’s urbanization, which began with the rise of Islam.[2] In this anti-Bedouin invective, the renowned Abbasid-era poet directly satirizes the *nasīb*[3] of the classical *qaṣīda*,[4] a pre-Islamic poetic form that maintains a single meter and monorhyme spanning in some cases more than a hundred lines. The *qaṣīda* opens with the *nasīb*, in which the narrator pauses to lament the ruins of a former homeland. The *nasīb* describes an idyllic, often eroticized lost homeland that is compared to a beloved. In Arabic literary scholarship, this introduction has been described as “halting at the encampment.”[5] One of the most famous examples of the classical *qaṣīda*, the *Mu‘allaqah* of Imru’ al-Qays (501-544), begins as follows:

Qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībi wa manzili bi-siqṭi al-liwā bayna al-dakhūli fa-ḥawmu**li**,[6]

Fa-tūḍiḥi fa-al-miqrāti lam ya‘fu rasmuhā lammā nasajathā min janūbi wa shamā**li**[7]

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[1] Abū Nuwās, *Da‘ al-’aṭlāla tusfīhā al-janūbu*. In the medieval period, titles for poems were uncommon. In this citation, the first line of the poem stands in for a proper title.

[2] Shmuel Moreh, “Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature from Shawqī to al-Sayyāb,” *Studies in Modern Arabic Prose and Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 137.

[3] It appears that, within the context of poetry, this term does not have an English equivalent. For this reason, it will be retained throughout the course of writing in transliteration.

[4] In medieval and modern contexts, the word *qaṣīda* simply means “poem.” Therefore, this paper will maintain the term “classical *qaṣīda*” in order to distinguish the pre-Islamic poetic form from other forms.

[5] Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78.

[6] The final syllables of each transliterated line are highlighted in bold print in order to demonstrate the monorhyme format of the classical *qaṣīda*. In the case of this poem, this format is maintained for 77 lines.

[7] Imru’ al-Qays, *Qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībi wa manzili*. To reiterate, pre-modern Arabic poems are referenced by the first line. The title *Mu‘allaqat Imru’ al-Qays* is a later scholarly application for ease of reference. The latter will be used throughout for in-text citations.

Halt, my two companions,[8] and let us weep over the memory of a loved one and an encampment

[at the sand dune's rim][9] between al-Dakhūl and Ḥawmul,

And Tūḍiḥ and al-Miqrāt, whose traces were not destroyed by the weaving winds from the north

and the south.

The historical context of this classical *qaṣīda* is the poet's quest for vengeance after his father was killed by the Banū 'Asad specifically, and the wars between the nomadic tribes of Arabia in general. In the wake the destruction wrought by these wars, authors of the *qaṣīda* lamented the ruins of their encampments and literarily constructed a type of golden age, whether real or imagined, documenting the former glory of their tribes. The motif of boasting (*fakhr*) on behalf of the tribal elders in the *qaṣīda* underscores the importance of tribal kinship bonds and solidarity in the pre-Islamic era (*al-Jāhilīya*).[10] The importance of the tribe superseded even the bonds of blood, as the poet al-Shanfarā[11] illustrates in a *qaṣīda* retroactively entitled *Lāmīat al-ʻArab*:

'Aqīmū banī 'ummī ṣudūra maṭīkum fa-'innī 'ilā qawmin siwākum la-'amīlu[12]

Straighten, O sons of my mother, the breasts of your riding animals, for I incline to a tribe other

than yours.

Given the vast territorial reach of the Umayyad Caliphate at its peak, and the number of subjects that it entailed, administrative centers (*dawāwīn*) were established in cities throughout

[8] A literal translation of the Arabic text is simply: "Halt, let us weep over the memory of a loved one and an encampment." I have added to the "two companions" based on the dual command (*qifā*). The narrator is addressing two individuals.

[9] The translation of the bracketed prepositional phrase here is offered by Alexander E. Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 17. Abbreviated hereafter as *Looking Back at al-Andalus*.

[10] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 85.

[11] It is important to note that al-Shanfarā was a *ṣu'lūk*, a pre-Islamic vagabond poet who criticized the tribal order and preferred a life of isolation. His poem represents perhaps one of the earliest polemics in Arabic literature. For this reason, it is useful for understanding the prevailing social trends of pre-Islamic Arab societies, which gravitated toward the tribe.

[12] al-Shanfarā, *'Aqīmū banī 'ummī ṣudūra maṭīkum*.

the regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Additionally, the diverse linguistic environments that Islam (and the Arabic language) reached necessitated clarity in communication. The result of these factors was an Arabic literary renaissance that saw not only the rise of prose, but the relaxation of the conventions of poetry in terms of structure and subject matter. The secretaries (*kuttāb*) of Umayyad and Abbasid administrative centers disseminated knowledge of Arabic grammar and philology, leading to the rise of cities as important centers of learning and culture. As urbanization and sedentarism prevailed, the city gradually replaced the tribe as the fundamental unit of kinship and identity. This context saw the development of the city elegy (*rithā' al-mudun*), one of the earliest of which was the Elegy of Baghdād (*rithā' Baghdād*), written by Abū Ya'qūb 'Isḥāq al-Khuraymī. The poem recalls the glory of the city before its destruction during the war of succession (811-813) between the sons of Hārūn al-Rashīd after the death of their father:

Qālū wa lam yal'ab al-zamānu bi-Baghdād wa ta'thuru bi-hā 'awāthiruhā

'idh hiya mithla al-'urūs bāṭinuhā mashawwiqun li-al-fatā wa ẓāhiruhā

jannatu khuldin[13] wa dāru mughbiṭatihā qalīlun min al-nā'ibāti 'atharahā[14]

They say when time had not yet played with Baghdad, and her ill luck had not caused her to fall,

that she was like the bride, whose secret aroused the desire of the young man, like her appearance.

She was a garden of immortality, an abode of bliss, and few calamities affected her.

The narrator of the poem invokes the collective voice of Baghdād's citizenry with the third-person plural verb (*qālū*), indicating that he is not alone in his grief. Furthermore, this device allows the poet to remove himself momentarily and place emphasis on the destroyed city

[13] It is noteworthy that *jannatu khuldin*, the Garden of Immortality, was a real place in Abbasid Baghdād. The classical *qaṣīda* was concerned primarily with creating a sense of loss. The historicity of the encampments was less important than the grief. The city elegy, on the other hand, was very much concerned with reconstructing and immortalizing its subject, in addition to projecting a sense of loss.

[14] Abū Ya'qūb 'Isḥāq al-Khuraymī, *Yā bu'su Baghdād dāru mamlaka*

of Baghdad.[15] To repeat, then, the city supplanted the tribe as the most basic and important unit of society.

The nomad-versus-sedentary framework culminated in a literary battle between proponents of both lifestyles. In the contemporary jocular Arabic literature of the urban intellectual elites, the stock character of the ignorant Bedouin visiting the city was one of the most common vehicles for demonstrating the superiority of the urban, sedentary lifestyle over that of the wandering Bedouins.[16] In stories of this variety, the naïve Bedouin is easily conned out of his few possessions by the educated city-dweller. To return to Abū Nuwās, the renegade poet of the Abbasid era's work directly satirizes the conventions of the classical *qaṣīda*, which, with its pre-Islamic inception and strict form, came to represent the outdated conservatism and rigidity of the Bedouins. As a demonstration of this point, it will be useful to analyze the aforementioned verses of Abū Nuwās and Imru' al-Qays side by side:

Imru' al-Qays: Halt, my two companions, and let us weep over the memory of a loved one and an encampment at the sand dune's rim between al-Dakhūl and Ḥawmul,
And Tūḍiḥ and al-Miqrāt, whose traces were not destroyed by the weaving winds from the north and the south

Abū Nuwās: Let the encampments lie in ruins, by the south winds, in defeat…
And take from the Bedouins neither tradition nor lifestyle, for their ways are obsolete.

In the classical *qaṣīda*, Imru' al-Qays and his companions pause to mourn the destruction of their encampment. The *qaṣīda* concludes with a reconciliation of the past with the present, implying that there exists hope for restoration and redemption of the tribe. Strikingly, the verse by Abū Nuwās is quicker and far more direct, as he implores his audience in no uncertain terms to forget about the encampments and to refrain from learning from the Bedouins. Imru' al-Qays

[15] Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, 21.
[16] Moreh, "Town and Country in Modern Arabic Literature from Shawqī to al-Sayyāb," 136.

and Abū Nuwās use the same imperative verb (*bakā*),[17] though the latter's poem represents a negative command (*lā tabki*)[18] with respect to the encampments (*'aṭlāl*).[19] In one of his most famous poems, Abū Nuwās parodies the feminized, eroticized description (*waṣf*) of the landscape as a lost beloved found in the *qaṣīda*:

> Lā tabki Laylā wa lā taṭrab 'ilā Hindi wa 'ishrab 'alā al-wardi min ḥamrā'a ka-al-wardi
>
> Don't cry for Layla, don't rave about Hind, but drink among roses a rose-red wine.[20]

For Abū Nuwās, the *khamarīa* (wine) genre represented the superiority of urban living over the obsolete lifestyle of the Bedouins. The poetry of Abū Nuwās is replete with descriptions of wine, taverns, parties, feasts, and other images that highlighted the freedom and liberalism of the contemporary urban lifestyle in contrast to the conservatism of the Bedouins. In addition to their structural and lexicographical similarities, however, the poetry of both Abū Nuwās and Imru' al-Qays begins with an admonition. The juxtaposition of classical poetic structures (albeit in a derisive, satirical manner) with the distinctly modern Baghdādī imagery in Abū Nuwās' writings indicates that the poet wanted to acknowledge the Arabic language's literary past while also creating a new and uniquely Baghdādī literary culture. The Andalusī writer Ibn Ḥazm would take this a step further by "prosifying" the *nasīb* of the classical *qaṣīda* in an elegy for Cordoba.

> [M]y father, the vizier…moved from our aforementioned house on the East Side of Cordoba in the quarter of Az-Zāhira, to our old house in the West Side of Cordoba in Balāṭ Mughīṭ…and I moved of course with him…The girl [whom I conceived an inclination toward and fell madly in love with] did not move with us…After the coming of the Commander of the Faithful Hishām al-Mu'ayyad to the throne, the men of power of his government worried us a good deal by adverse and hostile actions…then the civil war was raging and affected all people…[afterwards, when] there was a funeral for one of our relatives…I saw the girl [whom I conceived an inclination toward and fell madly in love with] crying loudly…Her sight awakened in my memory the amorous rapture buried in my heart…[and] reminded me of bygone days, the old love, the years

[17] The verb means to cry, weep; to bemoan, lament, bewail, mourn.
[18] "Do not mourn."
[19] The term *'aṭlāl* (encampments, campsites) is a later scholarly designation to describe the conventional ruined homes of the classical *qaṣīda*. It should be noted, however, that Imru' al-Qays uses the synonymous term *manzil* (home, lodge, campsite, etc). By using the term *'aṭlāl* in his poem, then, Abū Nuwās not only attacks the countryside and its nomadic inhabitants, but also the literary convention of their poetry.
[20] Abū Nuwās, *Lā tabki Laylā wa lā taṭrab 'ilā Hindin*.

gone by, the happy times…and the traces (vestiges) effaced…and the fire of suffering was rekindled in my heart.[21]

In this prosaic *nasīb*, Ibn Ḥazm makes the familiar association between a space and a beloved. The loss of the beloved at the beginning of his *nasīb* corresponds with the destruction of the city of Cordoba. A significant addition to Ibn Ḥazm's magnum opus is the direct reference to historical events, in this case the instability and civil war in al-Andalus that lasted from 1009 to 1031 and resulted in the abolition of the Caliphate of Cordoba. The author builds on the theme of the lost homeland and records not only geography, as in a number of city elegies, but also history, including dates and proper names. As Abū Nuwās does for Baghdād, Ibn Ḥazm attempts to create a distinctly Andalusī literary identity while paying tribute to the Arabic literary tradition of the past. To reinforce this point, Ibn Ḥazm directly admonishes his audience to spare him the news of the Bedouins:

Da'nī min akhbāri al-a'rābi al-mutaqaddimīna fa-sabīluhum ghayru sabīlinā[22]

Spare me the news of the aging Bedouins, for their way is not our way.

The use of prose as a medium to transmit knowledge and demonstrate mastery of the Arabic language represents another important step away from not only pre-Islamic literary conventions, but also the contemporary poets of the Islamic world. Indeed, Ibn Ḥazm criticizes poets who use their medium merely as a tool for demonstrating their high linguistic achievement and privilege form over substance: "[Every one of those poets] composed his verses according to the power of his nature, except that he merely exercised mastery over language and was very

[21] Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma*; translated by A.R. Nykl, *The Dove's Neck-Ring or The Ring of the Dove* (Mansfield, Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2014), 160; from the Arabic manuscript by D.K. Pétrof (Leiden: University of Leiden, 2014), 104. For the sake of brevity, this paper will rely only on translation where there is no need to highlight the structural features of a text. The English translation will be abbreviated hereafter as Nykle, *The Ring of the Dove*.

[22] Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma*; from the Arabic manuscript cited above by D.K. Pétrof, 196.

voluble in his talk, and in the lengthiness of explanation, while he was not right in principle."[23] However, the author does not dismiss poetry, which he often cites and composes throughout his writing. Rather, Ibn Ḥazm attempts to delineate a uniquely—and, to his mind, superior—Andalusī literary heritage while acknowledging the (inferior) Arabic literary tradition of the past.[24] It is not a stretch to say that there existed in the medieval Islamic world a sort of proto-nationalism that manifested itself in the literary output of the region's major cities, underscored by the abundance of both prosaic and poetic city elegies and city polemics.

In this flourishing literary context, the *maqāma* (plural: *maqāmāt*) emerged and challenged the boundaries between poetry and prose. The progenitor of the *maqāma* was the tenth-century writer and scholar Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, whose writings belie his vast travels throughout the medieval Islamic world. In most cases, the *maqāma* is a simple narrative written in elaborate language that oscillates between poetry and rhyming prose (*saj*'). The *maqāma* derives influence from a wide spectrum of literary corpuses, from the high literature of the Bedouins, to that of the urban intellectuals, and even the popular street tales of '*Alf Layla wa Layla* (A Thousand and One Nights), for its homiletic purposes. The axial stock character of the *maqāma* is the vagabond scholar, whose education in the diverse cultural environments of the medieval Islamic world enable him to survive solely by means of trickery. His approach to life is well summarized in *al-Maqāma al-Mawṣilīa* (The Maqāma of Mosul):

> May God never put the likes of me at a distance; for where, O where, can you find the likes of me?
>
> God only knows how stupid people are; I have fleeced them with ease.

[23] Ibid; translated by Nykle, *The Ring of the Dove*, 145.
[24] Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, 63.

I have asked of them charity in bulk, but in return I have merely given them a measure of deceit and lies.[25]

By drawing from a wealth of Arabic literary sources and blurring the line between poetry and prose, al-Hamadhānī critiques the proto-nationalists of his day and their attempts to delineate unique literary cultures. According to Arabic literature scholar Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, the author of the first complete survey of the genre, philological interest is the backbone of the *maqāma*: no *maqāma* is completely devoid of philology.[26] The rogue scholar of the *maqāma* outwits his every opponent precisely because he has mastered the Arabic language in the multiplicity of disparate settings that comprise the Islamic world. In one of the most prominent examples, *al-Maqāma al-Shi'irīa* (The Maqāma of Poetry), the protagonist highlights a group of arrogant learned men's misinterpretations of various poems through his superior knowledge of Arabic grammar.

It is a testament to the richness of the *maqāma* that the genre remained one of the most popular forms of Arabic belletristic expression until the 20th century, surviving even the period of Arabic literary stagnation that began after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate (1258).[27] Nevertheless, it should not be a surprise given the genre's status as the pinnacle of Arabic linguistic mastery. For those seeking to preserve their literary heritage in the face of what they considered an onslaught of Persian, Mongul, and (Ottoman) Turkish culture, the *maqāma* would certainly represent one of the most useful tools.

In the 20th century, the conventions of the *maqāma* were subversively revived under similarly oppressive conditions in the Israeli Arab writer Emile Ḥabībī's novel, *al-Waqā'i' al-*

[25] Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhani, *al-Maqāma al-Mawṣilīa*; translated by Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 163. A section below will provide excerpts from the *maqāmāt* in transliteration in order to highlight the genre's structural features.
[26] Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, "Maqama A History of a Genre," *Diskurse der Arabistik*, Volume 5 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2003), 58.
[27] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 164-166.

Gharība fī 'Iḥtifā' Sa'īd 'Abī al-Naḥis al-Mutashā'il (The Strange Realities in the Secret life of Sa'īd the Luckless Pessoptimist).[28] In the novel, for example, the eponymous Sa'īd is forced from place to place by the Israeli authorities with little agency and is the *tricked*, rather than the *trickster*. At the same time, author Ḥabībī reserves his sharpest satire for the Arab nationalists of the 20th century, whom he accuses of overlooking the Arabs who remained within Israel after the war in 1948. The narrative of the Arab-Israeli is one of dichotomous worlds, neither of which the Israeli Arab belongs to.

The premise of this paper is that the *maqāma* functions as a critique of the localized sense of cultural superiority brought about by urbanization of the Islamic world. It will demonstrate this point through a comparative analysis of the medieval *maqāmāt* of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī and the modern use of the genre in Emile Ḥabībī's novel, *The Pessoptimist*. In order to highlight the influences of the *maqāma*, a summary of the development of the Arabic literary tradition will follow.

It is not the object of this paper to consign a single label to the *maqāma*. Much of modern scholarship has been preoccupied with solving the riddle that is the genre. To do so is to overlook the dynamics of the Arabic literary tradition and the wealth of sources that inform the development of the *maqāma*. Rather, it is the purpose of this paper to highlight an important element of the medieval *maqāma*—namely, the critique of city-based proto-nationalism—and its significant elaboration in the context of state-building in the 20th-century Middle East in the modern *maqāma*, where it serves as the backbone of the novel. As has been the case so far, this

[28] In their well-known translation, Salma K. Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick render the translation in English as *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003). For reasons that will be explained in detail below, I prefer a more direct translation that includes the "strange realities." I will use my preferred title within the text, but will maintain Jayyusi and LeGassick's in the footnotes for the sake of proper citations.

paper will retain the original Arabic sources that are available in transliteration where it is important to highlight structural elements of the text.

2. The Development of Arabic Literature to the *Maqāma*

2.1 Poetry and Communal Identity Before and After Islam

The conventions of the *maqāma* have their roots in Arabic literary traditions extending all the way back to the *qaṣīda* of the so-called Age of Ignorance (*al-Jāhilīa*) before Islam. For example, the wandering scholar of the *maqāma* evokes the *ṣu'lūk*, vagabond poets of the pre-Islamic era who derided the widely perceived necessity of the tribe and scoffed at traditional kinship bonds and solidarity.[29] In the Islamic era, the Qur'ān's explicit denial that it is poetry[30] was fundamental to the division and definitions of poetry and prose, the two mediums that the *maqāma* blends. This section will focus on the developments of Arabic literature before and after Islam, in order to highlight how they inform the conventions of the *maqāma*. Additionally, an overview of Arabic literary history will shed light on the urbanization of identity in the medieval Islamic world, one of the most important inceptions of the *maqāma*.

Due to this section's heavy reliance on certain Arabic poetic themes until the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, brief definitions of the following terms are in order: *madīḥ*, *fakhr*, and *hijā*'. While there exist others, these three poetic themes in particular reinforce each other toward the common goal of validating the tribal structure and, after Islam, the Umayyad court. The *madīḥ* is a eulogy or panegyric,[31] a fairly straightforward praise of the tribe's leaders. The *fakhr* is a boast extolling the manly characteristics of the tribesmen. In tandem with the feminized description of

[29] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 68.
[30] Shmuel Moreh, "Poetry in Prose in Modern Arabic Literature," *Studies in Modern Arabic Prose and Poetry*, 1. Originally published in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 4, Issue 4 (London: London University Press, 1968), pp. 330-360.
[31] These two translations are used interchangeably in Arabic literary scholarship.

the landscape in medieval Arabic literature, the *fakhr* highlights the tribal gender roles of the time period. The (masculine) tribesmen are often described as courageous warriors, protecting the (feminine) landscape. The protection of the land and the protection of the tribeswomen are one and the same, hence tribal honor is measured by the sexual propriety of women. As an extension of this point, the *hijā*', or lampoon, is an often-hypersexualized personal smear against the women of a rival tribe with the intent to shame not only the subject, but the men and the tribe as a whole. Taken together, these three themes celebrate the tribal hierarchy as a whole: a strong leader produces brave men equipped to protect the tribeswomen and the land. It is for this reason that "all poetry is a political act."[32]

According to a widely-quoted aphorism, poetry is the "record of the Arabs."[33] This designation befits the long tradition of Arabic poetry, which, before the coming of Islam, represented the only written material. As has been noted here and in the introduction, a staple of the classical *qaṣīda* is the poet's eulogizing and boasting (*fakhr*) on behalf of the tribe. The poet (*shā'ir*)[34] was often the only individual in the tribe literate in reading and writing, which propounded the notion that poetic talent was innate, rather than acquired. Thus, the poet was the official spokesman and representative of the tribe, the status of which he could elevate through eulogy (*madīḥ*) and the lampooning (*hijā*') of others. The pre-Islamic poet al-Nābigha, for example, addresses the leader of the al-Ḥīra tribe, as follows:

> Fa-'innaka shamsun wa al-mulūku kawākibun idha ṭala'at lam yabdu minhunna kawkabu
>
> For you are a sun and the kings are stars so radiant that when you rise the other stars disappear.[35]

[32] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 67.
[33] Ibid, 66.
[34] The Arabic term typically rendered as "poet" in English translation literally means "one who feels" or "one who perceives." This fact is central to understanding the semi-divine status attributed to the poets in pre-Islamic Arabia, and the threat that poets represented to the nascent religion of Islam.
[35] al-Nābigha, 'Atānī 'abayta al-la'na 'annaka lamatnī

It is important to point out that in this time period, poetry composed in the honor of tribal leaders transcended the specific individual addressed and reflected on the tribe as a whole. This particular verse from al-Nābigha's poem appears toward the end, after extolling the virtues of the tribe. The poetry of this time period conflates the well-being of the rulers and the maintenance of the tribal hierarchy with the well-being of the individuals in the tribe as a whole. By extension, this variety of panegyric poetry additionally served propagandistic purposes in the form of boasts (*fakhr*) dealing with the manly qualities of the tribesmen and their philosophy of life. In many ways, the prestige of the tribe rested on the poet's ability to articulate the benefits of the communal lifestyle that this kinship unit entailed. In the *Mu'allaqah* of Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā, for example, the poet writes:

> You have brought 'Abs and Dhubyān together again after lethal conflict and the stench of death;
> We will achieve peace, you both said; should property and charitable words be needed, so it shall be.
> Thereby you placed yourselves in the best position, far removed from obstinacy or crime,
> Two great men of high rank in Ma'ad, may you be guided aright! Whoever condones a treasure trove of glory will himself be glorified!
> I have grown weary of the cares of life; whoever lives eighty years will inevitably grow weary.[36]

This poem describes the peace settlement between the warring tribes of 'Abs and Dhubyān, a process in which two tribal leaders offered an exchange of 3,000 camels over a three-year period to end the violence.[37] At the end of the poem, Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā comes to terms with his own mortality, as the stability and communal bliss achieved by the two tribal elders has liberated him from his worldly concerns. It is the duty of the poet and spokesman of

[36] Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā, *Mu'allaqat Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā*; translated by Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 86. Due to the unavailability of the Arabic text, I am forced to cite the retroactively applied title.
[37] Ibid, 85-86.

the unified tribe to maintain this newly achieved stability through eulogy and boasting, in a sense reminding the tribeswomen and men what they have overcome and what they stand to lose in the absence of their leaders. By implication, then, the poet is central to the endurance of the tribal hierarchy.

In the first days of Islam, the tribal hierarchy presented a challenge to the would-be new order based on common faith. Additionally, the semi-divine status afforded to the poets of the pre-Islamic era posed a threat to the nascent religion of Islam in its earliest days, which is underscored in the Sūra of the Poets (*Sūrat al-Shu'arā'*):

> Wa al-shu'arā' yattabi'uhum al-ghāw**ūna** 'a-lam tara 'annahum fī kulli wādin yahīm**ūna** wa 'annahum yaqūl**ūna** mā lā yaf'al**ūna**
>
> And as for the poets, only the misguided follow them. Did you not see that they wander about aimlessly in every valley, and that they say what they do not do?[38]

While it was widely understood in the pre-Islamic era that the glorious histories of the tribes outlined in the classical *qaṣīda* were not meant to be taken literally,[39] the Qur'ān denounces the authors of these histories (the poets) as liars. An obvious purpose of this criticism is to contrast the fictionality of the poets' narratives with the truth of Islam, thereby emphasizing the latter. The importance of the accurate recording of history, then, which would be expanded significantly by later writers, began as early as the composition of the Qur'ān. Despite the condemnation of the poets of the pre-Islamic era, however, these Qur'ānic verses make a distinction between poetry and the poets by the conspicuous absence of any mention of the former. The Arabic word for poetry (*shi'ir*) does not appear anywhere in the chapter spanning

[38] al-Qur'ān, *Sūrat al-Shu'arā'*, 26:224-226. I have avoided the convention of adding a line break with each new verse in order to avoid the impression that the Qur'ān is poetry. Additionally, end rhymes have been typed in bold print in order to highlight

[39] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 85.

227 verses, including in the three excerpts cited above. Furthermore, the sūra concludes with an allowance for those poets who utilize their talents in the service of Islam:

> ’Illā alladhīna ’āmanū wa ‘amilū al-ṣāliḥāti wa dhakarū Allaha kathīrān wa ’intaṣrū min ba‘di mā ẓalamū wa sa-ya‘malu alladhīna ẓalamū ’ayya munqalabin yanqabilūna.
>
> …except for (those poets) who believe and do righteous deeds and recall God often and come to the aid of [the Muslims] who have been wronged. And those who have wronged will be brought back on their injustices.[40]

While the rhyming prose (*saj‘*) of the Qur’ān serves as a means of distinguishing the text from poetry, this invective against the poets has less to do with the medium itself and more to do with the tribes who were resistant to the spread of Islam. The early Muslims sought to supplant tribal identities with the unifying force of their new religion. Indeed, little changes in the style and substance of poetry between the early spread of Islam and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate, the relatively short-lived first empire of the Muslims (661-750). One of the official poets of the Umayyad caliphs was the Christian al-Akhṭal, the focus of whose poetry simply shifts from tribal leaders to the leaders of the newfound caliphate:

> Their ancestry is complete, and God Himself has selected them; the ancestry of any other clan is obscure and worthless.
>
> On the Day of the Ṣiffīn, with eyes lowered, reinforcement came to them when they sought a favor from their Lord.
>
> You are from a house that has no peer when nobility and number are reckoned.[41]

---

[40] al-Qur’ān, *Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’*, 26:227. I have opted for a very literal translation. In more modern idiomatic language, the final sentence presumably means: “The injustices of those (poets) who do wrong will eventually catch up with them.”

[41] Al-Akhṭal, *Madiḥ banī ’Ummīa*; translated by Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 87. I mention al-Akhṭal’s Christianity only because much has been made of it by later writers, perhaps to underscore the tolerance of Islam. In al-Akhṭal’s lifetime, however, Christians and Jews regularly occupied official seats in Umayyad courts. This is not unusual, as Muslims often sought answers to their own faith in the religious texts of Christianity and Judaism before becoming more inward-looking during the Abbasid Caliphate. This was largely due to the successful expansion of Islam, which required distinguishing it as superior to other religions for the purpose of legitimacy. Within the context of the Umayyad Caliphate, however, the selection of al-Akhṭal as the official poet should not be

The declaration that God has selected the Umayyad caliphs as the rulers of the emergent Islamic empire, endowing them with a divine right, represents an attempt to outdo the perceived legitimacy of the resistant tribal leaders by using their own literary conventions against them. Nevertheless, the transition from tribal to Islamic identity was far from a smooth process. The caliphs' efforts to impose a hegemonic Islamic identity to quell the tensions between the nomadic tribes of Arabia is most apparent in the continued use of the lampoon (*hijā*'), a personal smear targeting the members of another tribe. The lampoon indicates that the prestige of a tribe rested on the sexual propriety of its women, as poems of this variety are teeming with graphic episodes in which the poet describes the debauchery of the highborn women of a rivaling tribe. What follows is a *mild* example of the lampoon:

'A-lam tara 'anna Ji'thin wasṭa sa'din tusamma ba'da qiḍḍatihā al-ruḥābā

taḥazḥizu ḥīna jāwaza rukbatayhā wa hazza al-quzbarīu la-hā fa-ghābā

idhā sa'alat fatātu Banī Tamīmin talaqqama bābu 'iḍriṭihā al-turāba

Did you not see Ji'thin among the men of Sa'd, called "the wide open door" after (losing) her virginity,

trembling when he moved beyond her knees and shook a mighty rod that disappeared (inside her)?

When the young woman (Ji'thin) of the Banū Tamīm coughs, the door of her [perineum][42] is clogged with dust.[43]

The poetic excerpt cited above is from the flytings (*naqā'iḍ*) of al-Farazdaq and Jarīr, wherein the latter attacks the former's sister (Ji'thin) in order to shame his tribe as a whole. The two poets were contemporaries of al-Akhṭal, one of the court poets of the Umayyad Caliphate, who himself also participated in invective poetry of this variety on behalf of the caliphs. In

seen as one based on religion, but on poetic abilities. Allen notes that the emphasis on the religious backgrounds of high-ranking Umayyad officials began with Abbasid-era historians, who denounced the "secular proclivities" of the Umayyads.

[42] The translation of the bracketed term is offered by Geert Van Gelder, "Sexual Violence in Verse: The Case of Ji'thin, al-Farazdaq's Sister," *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'an to the Mongols*, ed. Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), eBook. Van Gelder's chapter includes a transcription of the entire Arabic text.

[43] Jarīr and al-Farazdaq, *Naqā'iḍ Jarīr wa al-Farazdaq*

concert with al-Akhṭal's pro-Umayyad panegyric, also cited above, the flytings provide an excellent overview of the political dynamics and tensions of the time. Jarīr, whose unfortunately named Banū Kulayb tribe (Sons of the Puppy) developed a rivalry with the Umayyads, was the primary literary and political opponent of al-Akhṭal. During the Second Fitna (Muslim Civil War),[44] al-Akhṭal's Banū Taghlīb tribe championed the Umayyads over their rival claimants to the leadership of the Islamic empire, Ḥusayn Ibn 'Alī and 'Abd Allah Ibn al-Zubayr.[45] It is likely for this reason that the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik designated al-Akhṭal the official poet of the Umayyad court.[46]

To reiterate, it is more accurate to say that the formative years of Islam adopted an anti-poet stance because of tribal tensions and rival claimants to positions of leadership, rather than a disdain for poetry itself. As Elinson points out, the Umayyads based their rule and legitimacy in part on the Bedouin tribal ethos of the pre-Islamic era.[47] Indeed, the very designation of an official poet in the Umayyad court is a continuation of the Bedouin convention of assigning a single poet to speak on behalf of the tribe as a whole. Tribal legitimacy during this time period was the responsibility of the poet. Under the Umayyad Caliphate, the legitimizing force of Islam was incorporated into the pre-Islamic Bedouin literary conventions; hence, al-Akhṭal declares that God has selected the Umayyad caliphs. Nevertheless, matters unspecified in the Qur'ān, such as the question of succession to Muhammad, necessitated additional means for the caliphs to validate their rule.

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[44] ~680-692

[45] For the sake of coherence, this paper will not be concerned with the history behind these political developments. It will only highlight key events that underscore the changes in literary identities. The complex, shifting web of tribes, confederacies, and alliances that defined the wars of medieval Arabia would certainly prove impossible to outline without significant deviation from the topic at hand.

[46] Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Arabic Classical Ode* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 107-109.

[47] Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, 56.

2.2 Islam, Legitimacy, and the Rise of Prose

It has been demonstrated that Arabic literature becomes increasingly concerned with historicity as early as—and, of course, *due to*—the composition of the Qur'ān. For the Umayyads, it was a challenge to legitimize their rule against a Bedouin "other" within the framework of Bedouin literary conventions. As a result of the similarities in poetry before and after Islam, a new methodology was required to validate the rulers of the Islamic empires. While the primary purpose of poetry is to evoke an emotional response,[48] the poets of the Islamic era, too, started to record geography in city elegies. For the writers of the medieval Islamic world, however, the purposefully ornate and emotional language of poetry precludes the accurate, objective recording of historical facts. This section will focus on the rise of prose in the early years of Islam and the reasons behind its renaissance during the Abbasid Caliphate. It is hoped that doing so will delineate the unique functions in Arabic poetry and prose, and why the blending of the two was opposed by a number of prominent writers.

The recording of the texts of the Qur'ān at the designation of the Caliph 'Uthmān (576 – 656) represents the beginning of a process within the Arabic literary tradition in which written material could be preserved and studied.[49] 'Uthmān's call for the codification of a standardized text of the Qur'ān marks an early attempt to mandate a clear set of beliefs and principles for the nascent Muslim community. The ambiguous matters in the text of the Qur'ān, such as the aforementioned issue of succession to Muhammad, precipitated in a movement to record the actions and sayings of the prophet of Islam. This genre of *ḥadīth* (plural: '*aḥādīth*) literature

[48] The Arabic trilateral root (*sha'ara*) from which the word for poetry (*shi'ir*) derives means "to feel." Thus, the poet (*shā'ir*) is literally "the one who feels." It is for this reason that many writers, such as Ibn Ḥazm, cited above, condemn the use of poetry as an exercise for demonstrating mastery of the Arabic language.
[49] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 136.

constitutes some of the earliest recorded prose in Arabic literature.[50] *Ḥadīth* literature falls under the style of *khabar* (report). One of the most important developments of *ḥadīth* literature is the use of the ’*isnād*,[51] or chain of transmission that authenticates the saying or action of the prophet of Islam.[52] The structure of the ’*isnād* is as follows:

X related, on the authority of Y, who heard it from Z[53]

In general, the further back a transmitter could trace the saying or action attributed to Muhammad, the more likely it was to be genuine, especially if it came from one of his companions. In many cases, the ’*isnād* is even longer than the reported *ḥadīth*, indicating that, even in its earliest days, historical accuracy was at the basis of the development of Arabic prose. In addition to *ḥadīth* literature, and perhaps as an extension of it, there developed a tradition of writing accounts of the life of Muhammad known as the *sīra nabawīya* (prophetic biography). This is not to suggest that classical Arabic prose was unornate and without emotion, as has been demonstrated in the prosaic city elegy, or that poetry did not reference geography and historical events. However, there are clear delineations between poetry and prose in classical Arabic literature at their very foundations. The purpose of the former is to rouse an emotional response, while the intention of the latter is to inform.[54]

The “official” division between poetry and prose begins with the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, under whose authority Arabic became the official language of the Umayyad Caliphate. As Allen writes in his introduction to Arabic belletristic prose:

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[50] Ibid, 137.

[51] The term ’*isnād* is an Arabic verb meaning “to support.” Within the Islamic tradition, it carries the loaded meaning “to trace back the ascription of a tradition, in ascending order, to its first authority so as to corroborate its credibility.”

[52] There developed, of course, a far more complex science for determining the validity, or lack thereof, of the *ḥadīth* literature. A treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this study.

[53] This is not to imply that *ḥadīth* literature cites only three authorities, but to provide insight into the general structure of the literature.

[54] Moreh, “Poetry in Prose in Modern Arabic Literature,” 1-2.

> By the end of the seventh century, the sheer dimension of the area contained within the Islamic dominions, comprising an increasingly elaborate mixture of races, religions, and languages, demanded that the central administration of the caliphate in Damascus develop and maintain a sizable chancery system…the growing complexity of the administrative apparatus and the requirement of ʻAbd al-Malik (*d.* 705) made it necessary not only to establish terms of reference within which the system of communication would function but also to develop texts and methods through which the desired norms of discourse and matters of taste could be inculcated into trainees.[55]

By the nature of the profession, the secretaries (*kuttāb*) of the administrative centers of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates were required to master a wide range of subjects (philology, poetry, grammar, history, geography, rhetoric, etc), eroding the poet's monopoly over speech.[56] Furthermore, the recording of historical events in prose meant that literary merit was no longer based solely on the composition of poetry. The writer was expected to master poetry and prose spanning a wide range of topics.

Under the Abbasid Caliphate, the role of the poet was further marginalized along with the court culture of the Umayyads by the rise of the Buwayhid Dynasty. According to James Monroe, the Umayyad Caliphate was vital to the development of an official poetry that served the rulers. The Abbasid courts, on the other hand, included a plethora of Persian elements, from rituals, to dress, and even the architecture of capital city of Baghdād.[57] It is no wonder that this context saw an increase in the number of prosaic city elegies. The Buwayhids, by dint of their Persian language and rule by military force, saw little use for the courtly culture of the caliphs and, by extension, the *qaṣīda*. As a result, Monroe writes, "it would appear that the *maqāmah* [sic] genre filled a much needed gap produced when the *qaṣīdah* [sic] was no longer viable,

[55] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 139.
[56] Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, 56.
[57] James Monroe, *al-Maqāma al-Luzūmīya by Abū-l-Ṭāḥir Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Tamīmī al-Sarqusṭī ibn al-Aṣtarkūwī*, editor and translator (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 10-11. See also James Monroe and Mark Pettirew, "The Decline of Courtly Patronage and the Appearance of New Genres in Arabic Literature: the Case of the *Zajal*, the *Maqāma*, and the Shadow Play," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Volume 34, Issue 1/2 (2003), 138-177.

because military-based courts no longer enjoyed the prestige formerly enjoyed by religious ones."[58]

3. The *Maqāma*

3.1 The Literary Context

To recap everything to this point, it has been demonstrated so far that there were little changes in the Arabic poetic tradition from the pre-Islamic era to the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate. Before the spread of Islam, the classical *qaṣīda* of the Bedouins functioned as a tool to validate the importance of the tribal system and hierarchy. This tradition was carried over into the Umayyad Caliphate, with the addition of an Islamic twist. The legitimacy of the ruling party no longer depended solely on the ability of the official poet to articulate said legitimacy, but also on the Islamic credentials of the leadership. The ambiguity or complete absence, depending on the Islamic school of thought, of the nature of succession in the Qur'ān paved the way for the rise of prose first in the form of *ḥadīth* literature (sayings and actions of Muhammad) and the *sīra nabawīya* (prophetic biography). While the classical *qaṣīda* retained importance in the Umayyad and early Abbasid courts, the advent of Islam culminated in the development of a prose tradition that favored history and instruction. While this general literary shift can be seen even in poetry in the form of the city elegy, prose was the primary medium for the transmission of history and instruction. Writers of Arabic literature sharpened this distinction between poetry and prose with invectives against the incorrect use of either. In doing so, they also attempted to define for themselves unique, city-based literary heritages.[59] Indeed, as

[58] Monroe, *al-Maqāma al-Luzūmīya by Abū-l-Ṭāḥir Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Tamīmī al-Sarqusṭī ibn al-Aṣtarkūwī*, 10-11

[59] As a significant addendum to this fact, it was a faction of the Umayyads that established the Caliphate of Cordoba in al-Andalus, or Islamic Spain. Given this political development, it is no wonder that the writers of Cordoba would attempt to create a distinct literary heritage superior to that of the Abbasids in the east.

sedentarism prevailed, writers of the medieval Islamic world were targeting primarily a local audience. The final blow to the classical *qaṣīda* of the Bedouins came with the military rule of the Buwayhid Dynasty (932 – 1062) over parts of modern Syria, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman. The Persian-speaking military dynasty saw little use for the *qaṣīda* as a legitimizing means.

The development of Arabic literature, then, reflects literary (and political) infighting between the various dynasties and caliphates (the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Cordoba caliphates, and the Buwayhids) vying for a rightful claim to leadership of the Islamic world. Within this general context, and within the dominions of the Buwayhid Dynasty specifically, the *maqāma* emerged and challenged the cultural elites of the day. The *maqāma* oscillates back and forth between rhyming prose (*saj*ʿ) and poetry, despite their clear-cut definitions in medieval Arabic literature. The creator of the *maqāma* was the 10th-century writer and scholar Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, who was born around 969 in, as the name suggests, the city of Hamadhān in what is now western Iran.[60] Al-Hamadhānī's own ambivalent attitude toward the literary conventions of his day can be seen in his poetic verses:

> Hamadhān is my town and I sing its praises
>
> but in fact it is a most infamous town:
>
> its children are as ugly as old men
>
> and its old men as void of reason as children.[61]

[60] Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, "Maqama A History of a Genre," 15.

[61] Ibid. As has been shown, city elegies were fashionable in al-Hamadhānī's time. City polemics were also a popular method of demonstrating the superiority of one city (and, thus, its literary heritage) over another. In some cases, a writer may attack his own city of birth after assimilation into another culture. E.g. A Persian writer of Arabic literature may attack his (Persian) city of birth in order to extoll the superiority of an Arab culture into which he has assimilated (and vice versa). Al-Hamadhānī is unique for attacking his own city while at the same time confessiong that he sings its praises.

According to Joel Kramer, Hamadhān was in fact a bustling cultural magnet which, in the 10th century, began to rival even the prestige of Baghdād.[62] The city also produced one of the leading philologists and grammarians of the era, ʾAḥmad ibn Fāris, indicating that it was certainly not void of learning and culture. Taking this, and al-Hamadhānī's other literary activities into account, it is likely that the author was satirizing the conventions of the increasingly popular city elegy, rather than expressing a disdain for his hometown.

Having traced the development of Arabic literature to al-Hamadhānī's time, what will follow is a breakdown of the constituent parts of the *maqāma* and an analysis thereof. It is hoped that doing so will reveal the genre's satire of contemporary Arabic literary conventions and, by extension, the critique of city loyalties that pervaded the era. To achieve these ends, this section will include a translation of *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfīya* (The Maqāma of the Blind) with commentary so that the text as a whole may be reconstructed for ease of reference and understanding. To repeat, the purpose of this argument is not to assign a single function to the *maqāma*, as much of modern scholarship has sought to do in error. Besides the critique of city-based proto-nationalism in the medieval period, the *maqāma* serves as a homily, a philological treatise, and simple entertainment, among a myriad of other purposes.

3.2 The Term *Maqāma*

The first priority is to define the term *maqāma*. The word derives from an Arabic trilateral root (verb: *qāma*), the most basic meaning of which is "to stand." In accordance with the Arabic grammatical construct denoting a place (*ʾism makān*), the literal translation of the term is a "place of standing." Jaako Hämeen-Anttila translates the term as "stand-up session," a counterpart to the Arabic word for "sit-down session" (*majlis*, literally "place of sitting"). The

[62] Joel L. Kramer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age*, 2nd Revised Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 53.

majlis is closely related to the concept of *adab*, a term that has evolved simply to denote "literature" in the modern era, but which is significantly trickier to define in the medieval period. The most basic verb form of the Arabic trilateral root (*aduba*) has several interrelated cultural meanings: "to be well-mannered, cultured, urbane," "to have refined tastes," "to entertain," and "to arrange a banquet." According to Allen, the original meaning implied inviting someone to a meal, which developed the notion of enriching the mind by honing the social norms of politeness: "The ideas of intellectual nourishment, manners, and education were thus present from the outset and remained important features of the concept as it developed and expanded within the general framework of the Islamic sciences."[63] While it would be redundant in this day and age, it is more accurate to refer to high literature of the medieval world as *adab* literature.

In the medieval context, the term *majlis* indicates an organized session in a coffeehouse or a similar environment wherein the learned men of the day would discuss religion, poetry, grammar, philology, and all manner of the Islamic sciences. While conceding that the term *maqāma* denotes a more haphazard environment, such as a busy street corner (the setting of many *maqāmāt*), Hämeen-Anttila concludes that the *maqāma* is otherwise the same as the *majlis*, with the former term serving only to underscore the spontaneous meeting of the protagonist and the hero.[64] Conversely, it is proposed herein that the *maqāma* is the direct opposite of the *majlis* and a parody thereof, a befitting label to deride the practices of the cultural elites whom al-Hamadhānī satirizes. The term underscores the constant movement of the generic staple of the rogue scholar. To reinforce this point, location is completely insignificant to the *maqāma*. With

[63] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 134.
[64] Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, "Maqama A History of a Genre," 63

the exception of the protagonist's brief mention of his arrival,[65] the settings of the *maqāma* are interchangeable. Expanding on this point, Elinson writes:

> It is noteworthy that within this movement, the place names within which the actions occur change from one narrative to the next, but rarely, if ever, is there mention or description of natural topographical features or man-made urban ones. To the *maqāma*'s narrator, unlike in the case of medieval travelers such as Ibn Faḍlān, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn Jubayr, or Benjamin of Tudela, there is little that he finds outstanding or even remotely noteworthy. The constant movement of the protagonists in the *maqāma*, in contrast to the almost complete lack of attention to where they are, is significant. In fact, it is quite remarkable that the protagonists seem to be completely at home, no matter where they find themselves.[66]

The *maqāma*'s lack of interest in the geographical setting of the story is a stark contrast to the contemporary traditions of Arabic literature, which represent a general shift toward the importance of place, whether in the city elegy, travel narrative (*raḥīl*), historical writing, etc. In this way, the narrator, protagonist, and hero of the *maqāma* resemble the *ṣu'lūk*, or renegade poets of the pre-Islamic era who disdained the commonly held perception of the tribe's necessity and withdrew into the wilderness. As the *ṣu'lūk* of the pre-Islamic era scorn the tribe, so too does the wandering scholar of the *maqāma* deride the widespread sentimentality toward the city by his near-total antipathy toward his urban surroundings.

3.2.1 Placing the *Maqāma* Within the *Adab* Tradition

Al-Hamadhānī's parody of the urban social norms of the medieval Islamic world represents a dramatic tonal shift from the literature discussed to this point, a symptom in any overview of the Arabic literary tradition's longstanding relationship with officialdom. However, there exists no shortage of jocular Arabic literature in the medieval Islamic world. It has been pointed out that one of the meanings of *adab* is "to entertain." Thus, it is necessary to distinguish humorous *adab* literature from the popular street tales of, for example, '*Alf Layla wa Layla* (A

[65] Each *maqāma* begins with the mention of an arrival somewhere in some variation of the following: "I arrived in [place], when [event] happened."
[66] Elinson, *Looking Back at al-Andalus*, 58.

Thousand and One Nights), as the latter was and is not considered part of the same tradition. It will be argued here that humor eventually developed as a staple of *adab* literature, due in no small part to the *maqāma*.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādi's (1002-1071)[67] philological treatise *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl* (astutely translated by Emily Selove in idiomatic English befitting our modern times as "The Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval Iraq)[68] provides an excellent example of medieval jocular Arabic literature that manages to fit within the *adab* tradition. Like all contemporary Arabic prose, the main purpose of the treatise is to provide information, in this case on the origins and definition of a single word in the Arabic language (*taṭfīl*).[69] At the same time, al-Baghdādi makes no secret of his intention to entertain his audience, quoting a *ḥadīth* by 'Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib[70] to provide his justification for doing so:

> 'Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him, said: "If your minds get tired, just as bodies do, seek out some entertaining information!"[71]

Al-Baghdādī's treatise proceeds to cite anecdotes about famous party-crashers in order to define the meaning of the term *taṭfīl* (party-crashing). In these anecdotes, the party-crashers, well aware of the social customs of the urban educated elites, exploit those norms to enter banquets and feasts to which they were not invited and acquire free meals. The party-crasher is only successful in tandem with his successful practice of *adab* customs. Al-Baghdādī references the following example:

> Al-Hasan ibn Abu Bakr told me, Abu al-Fadl 'Isa ibn Musa ibn Abu Muhammad ibn al-Mutawakkil 'Ali Allah told me, Ibn Khalaf ibn al-Marzuban told me, Ahmad ibn Mansur related

[67] Notice that al-Hamadhānī and al-Baghdādī were contemporaries who both lived under the Buwayhid Dynasty.
[68] al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitab al-Taṭfīl*; translated by Emily Selove, *The Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012).
[69] This type of scholastic exercise of writing an entire treatise elaborating on something so mundane became a common practice in the medieval period for demonstrating the extent of one's learning.
[70] 'Alī was the cousin of Muhammad.
[71] al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitab al-Taṭfīl*, 1; translated by Selove, *The Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval*, 2.

> to us, ‘Abd Allah ibn Sa‘id ibn al-Husayn al-Kindi told us, Isma‘il ibn Ibrahim al-Tamimi told us, Ishaq al-Makhzumi told us, on the authority of al-Maqburi:[72]
>
> Abu Hurayra[73] said: “I used to ask the companions of the Prophet about verses of the Qur’an that I already knew just so that they would feed me something. Whenever I asked Ja’far ibn Abu Talib about a verse, he would never answer me until he had taken me back to his home and had said to his wife, ‘Hey, Asma’! Get us something to eat!’ After she had fed us, he would answer me. Ja’far loved his neighbors, and was always sitting with them and sharing hadith with them.”[74]

This short story epitomizes the *adab* customs of the educated cultural elites in the medieval Islamic world, and the successful exploitation of those customs for a free meal. To repeat, the original concept of *adab* denoted the practice of inviting someone to a meal to be shared over mentally stimulating discussion of worthwhile matters, such as the Islamic sciences. This variety of conversation was confined to the context of the *majlis*, in this example the home of Ja‘far. Seeing this practice in action is crucial to understanding the *maqāma* as a parody of the *majlis*. In the anecdote, Abū Hurayra takes advantage of this social norm, as well as his interlocutor’s apparent eagerness to divulge his knowledge of *ḥadīth*, and is rewarded with a free meal. In other anecdotes, however, the tables turn on the would-be party-crasher when his host demonstrates a superior understanding of the etiquette of the time, as indicated in the following example:

> Someone went out to visit a sick man on the edge of Kufa, and Abu Hanifa and Abu Bakr al-Hudhali met him and he said, ‘We’re visiting So-and-So.’
>
> So they followed him to the sick man, visiting him, and Abu Hanifa said to Abu Bakr, ‘If we sit, he’ll bring some lunch.
>
> So when they went in, they began talking, and Abu Bakr recited, ‘We will surely test you with something of fear and of hunger,’ to the end of the verse.[75]
>
> The sick man got the hint, so he stretched out and recited, ‘It is not incumbent upon the weak or the ill’ to the end of that verse.[76]

---

[72] I have retained the *’isnād* in this anecdote to demonstrate that historical accuracy was still an important aspect of prose even in jocular Arabic literature, which will be vital to understanding the use of this literary convention in the *maqāma*. For the sake of brevity, additional anecdotes cited will not retain the *’isnād*.

[73] Abū Hurayra was another companion of Muhammad.

[74] al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitab al-Taṭfīl*, 97; translated by Selove, *The Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval*, 73-74.

[75] Qur’an 21:55: “And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast.”

[76] Qur’an 9:91: “Not unto the weak nor unto the sick nor unto those who can find naught to spend is any fault…if they are true to Allah and His messenger. Not unto the good is there any road (of blame). Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.”

'Get up,' said Abu Hanifa. 'You're not getting anything good out of him.'[77]

In this anecdote, Abū Bakr attempts to implore the sick man to provide him with food by citing *adab* etiquette, as outlined in the Qur'ān, only to be outsmarted by his host, who exhibits a greater understanding of the appropriate time, place, and circumstances for such etiquette. In al-Baghdādī's treatise, there is only one stratagem whereby the party-crasher achieves his ends each and every time: the use of humor. There are five anecdotes in which the party-crasher relies on humor for acceptance to a banquet, feast, or similar occasion. One of these anecdotes follows:

> A party-crasher came to a wedding and was denied entry. He happened to know that the bride's brother was absent, so he left and got a piece of paper. He folded it up like a letter, and he sealed it (although there was nothing inside), and he addressed it "From the brother to the bride." He went back.
>
> "I have a note from the bride's brother for her," he said.
>
> "He received permission to go in and present the letter.
>
> "We've never seen an address like this before," everybody said. "It has no name on it!"
>
> "What's even stranger than that," said the party-crasher, "is that there's nothing inside—not one letter! That's because he was in a big hurry when he wrote it."
>
> Everybody laughed. They knew it was a trick to get in, and they let him get away with it."[78]

The success of the stratagem of humor, it is posited here, should not be divorced from the successful exercise of other *adab* etiquette by the party-crashers of al-Baghdādī's anecdotes for achieving their goals. The term *adab* had arguably evolved by the 10th and 11th centuries to include humor, which became an art in its own right. While al-Baghdādī frames his work as an informative philological treatise and demonstrates mastery of the Arabic language, it is this combination *and* the use of humor that places *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl* among the corpus of *adab* literature. The stock character of the party-crasher abounds in medieval Arabic literature, and heavily influenced the renegade scholar of the *maqāma*.

3.3 The Criteria of the *Maqāma*

[77] al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Taṭfīl*, 100; translated by Selove, *The Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval Iraq*, 76.
[78] Ibid, 102.

In addition to the traveling scholar, who is designated the "hero" in scholarly writings on the genre, most *maqāmāt* feature two other primary characters. The first of these is the narrator, an elusive first-person voice who disappears at the end of the introduction. The literary function of the narrator is to introduce the protagonist, who, in the case of the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī, goes by the name 'Isā ibn Hishām. There are also a host of minor background characters, such as onlookers and passersby.[79] While there is a clear prevailing format in the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī, however, there are a few exceptions that need to be addressed. While most of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* are humorous, there are also a select few that are serious in tone. As described above, however, the incorporation of humor into the *adab* tradition is well documented in Arabic literature by the 10th and 11th centuries. Taking this into consideration, the tone of the *maqāmāt* will not be treated as a criterion for distinguishing their validity. This section will focus on structure and features of the genre.

In order to understand the exceptions in al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*, a look at the extant manuscripts in which they are preserved is in order. In some *maqāmāt*, for example, the narrator is completely absent. In others, a single character plays the role of the narrator, the protagonist, and the hero. When examining the works of al-Hamadhānī, it is imperative to point out that the *maqāma* was still in the stages of its early development. The three-character structure described above defines the majority of the preserved *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī. The 11th-century scholar and writer al-Ḥarīrī of Basra adopted this structure in his own *maqāmāt*, by his own admission, in imitation of al-Hamadhānī. [80] Thus, it is with al-Ḥarīrī and other post-Hamadhānī authors that the conventions of the *maqāma* truly become solidified and the boundaries of the genre are

[79] Ibid, 41-45.
[80] Ibid, 148.

delineated.[81] Nevertheless, it is useful to cite the precedents established by al-Hamadhānī, which later authors of the *maqāma* clearly considered the staples of the genre.

Of the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī, 52 have been preserved in manuscripts. While the figure of 51 has become widely accepted, this number represents the removal of *al-Maqāma al-Shāmīya* (The Maqāma of the Levant or the Maqāma of Damascus; the two were used interchangeably in the medieval period) in the 20th century by the religious scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh, who, by his own confession, wanted to avoid corrupting the youth and offending the taste of the time.[82] Al-Hamadhānī did not compile his own writings in his lifetime, which may explain why a few *maqāmāt* deviate from the common format. For al-Hamadhānī, collecting his own *maqāmāt* would certainly be unimportant, as the individual pieces do not form a grand narrative. In the medieval Islamic world, Arabic prose was episodic and focused on small textual units, as demonstrated above. This style is evident in the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī, which are independent from each other and, indeed, contradict each other in a number of cases. In some *maqāmāt*, for example, the protagonist and the hero are childhood peers, while in others they have never met.[83] The argument here is that the contradictory biographies of the characters in the *maqāma* are intentional, adapting to the context of each individual story. The characters themselves do not represent historical persons, nor are they supposed to. Rather, they are everyman scholars of the medieval Islamic world. Al-Hamadhānī explicitly acknowledges this fact in some of his *maqāmāt*, as will be demonstrated below.

[81] Despite the fact that the structure of the *maqāma* only becomes standardized after the death of al-Hamadhānī, it is important to note that the author himself was consciously attempting to create a new genre within the Arabic literary tradition. The *maqāma* is not a retroactive label applied to al-Hamadhānī’s work by later writers who sought to imitate his literary style. The author himself referred to his writings as *maqāmāt*.
[82] Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, “Maqama A History of a Genre,” 38.
[83] Ibid, 54.

Given the everyman status of the characters of the *maqāma*, it is not a narrative consistency that is used to delineate which of al-Hamadhānī's writings fall under the category of the genre, but a stylistic and structural one. In the manuscripts that preserve al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*, a number of them do not feature the conventional opening and conclusion, but are otherwise identical to the common format. In conjunction with the fact that al-Hamadhānī was not the collector of his own writings, then, it has been proposed that the outliers in these manuscripts represent *maqāmāt*-in-the-making.[84]

The second most common format within the collections of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* are homiletic pieces that take the form of sermons, which exhibit a similar structure. In the writings of this variety, a third-person objective narrator introduces a speaker ("Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī said…"), who proceeds to offer advice to live by ("God said to give to others, but what we give reduces us and not him. It is, therefore, okay to give to others, but only to the extent that it does not diminish you"). Due to the linguistic and homiletic similarities in these and narrative, episodic *maqāmāt*, the former likely represent writings of al-Hamadhānī that had yet to be transposed to (what would become) the traditional format.[85]

While it is important to reiterate that the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī are not as structurally rigid as those of later writers, due simply to the fact that there did not exist a frame of reference at the time, there is a strong case for identifying the features that delineate the genre. The use of poetry and rhyming prose have been mentioned. The common denominators of the narrator, protagonist, and hero are another staple. The final is the common pattern. Hämeen-Anttila offers the following general outline for the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī. The definitions and functions of

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid, 54-55.

each step in this pattern will be identified below in a translation of *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa* (The Maqāma of the Blind):

1. ’Isnād
2. General introduction
3. Link
4. Episode
5. Recognition scene
6. Envoi
7. Finale

3.4 A Translation of *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa* with Commentary

The satirical nature of the *maqāma* must be understood within the context of its medieval development, especially in the case of al-Hamadhānī’s writings, at which time the conventions of the genre had not yet solidified. For example, the *maqāma*’s critique of contemporary city-based sentimentality is not spelled out directly, but manifests itself in the writer’s complete inattention to his surroundings at a time when the city was the fundamental unit of identity, seen even in family names (al-Hamadhānī, al-Baghdādī, al-Baṣrī, etc). Modern Arabic literature exhibits a far greater tendency to spell out meanings directly for the reader, as will be shown in the subsequent section. Additionally, the prosaic traditions of the medieval Islamic world precluded the telling of fictional stories. The open fictionality of the *maqāma* is considered one of al-Hamadhānī’s greatest contributions to the Arabic literary tradition.[86] This fictionality begins with the use of a fake chain of transmission.

3.4.1 ’*Isnād*:

[86] Ibid, 40.

Ḥaddathanā ʻIsā ibn Hishām qāla…[87]

ʻIsā ibn Hishām reported to us, saying…

So begins nearly every one of the preserved *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī. As has been described above, the ʾ*isnād* has its origins in Arabic prose beginning with *ḥadīth* literature, which details the sayings and actions of Muhammad. The invention of the ʾ*isnād* highlights the importance of the accurate recording of historical facts that began with the spread of Islam. Accuracy is at the very root of the development of Arabic prose. One of the most conspicuous features of the *maqāma* is the elusive identity of the first-person narrator and their fictional interlocutor, the figure of ʻIsā ibn Hishām. Taking these factors into consideration, Monroe, citing its brevity, suggests that the ʾ*isnād* of the *maqāma* is a direct parody of the ʾ*isnād* of *ḥadīth* literature.[88] In the immediate literary context of the *maqāma*, however, it was already standard practice to use the ʾ*isnād* even in jocular Arabic belletristic prose, and a contemporary reader accustomed to this tradition certainly would not have understood its use in the *maqāma* as a satire of *ḥadīth* literature specifically. For this reason, Hämeen-Anttila proposes instead that the primary function of the ʾ*isnād* is to enable the author to use first-person narration without committing himself to the story, as fictitious stories are rare in medieval Arabic literature and usually consigned to the distant past.[89] The ingenuity of the *maqāma* is its use of fictional narrative in a modern setting.

While conceding the latter point—that the use of the ʾ*isnād* enabled the author to tell a fictional story—this explanation fails to identify the purpose of this device within the larger framework of the *maqāma*. Indeed, it divorces the framing device from the unit as a whole.

[87] Badīʻ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa*.
[88] James Monroe, "The Art of Badīʻ az-zamān al-Hamadhānī as Picaresque Narrative," *Papers of the Center for Arab and Middle East Studies*, Issue 2 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1983), 20-21.
[89] Hämeen-Anttila "Maqāma A History of a Genre," 47.

Hämeen-Anttila seems to overlook his own suggestion that the ’*isnād*, or lack thereof, is a fundamental criterion for distinguishing the preserved and complete *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī from the *maqāmāt*-in-the-making. If the ’*isnād* is not essential to the narrative itself, then surely those writings of al-Hamadhānī that differ only by the absence of the device must be considered complete *maqāmāt*.

For this reason, the puzzle that is the ’*isnād* may be solved by looking at the greater context of the composition of the *maqāma*. It has been shown that the rise of the city and the decline of the Abbasid court eroded the individual’s monopoly on speech. The narrators of city elegies, for example, frequently invoke the collective voice of the lost city’s citizenry. The ’*isnād* of the *maqāma* functions in one way as a reversal of this convention. The first-person plural narrator of the *maqāma* (‘Isā ibn Hishām related to **us**...) introduces the singular voice of the protagonist and completely fades into the background. In one way, then, the ’*isnād* allows the writer of the *maqāma* to speak in multiple voices—that of the individual and that of the collective. Furthermore, given al-Hamadhānī’s open defiance of the literary conventions of his day, it is not a stretch to suggest that he was attempting to revive some of the Bedouin ethos.[90] In either case—or both cases—al-Hamadhānī directly satirizes the urbanized Arabic literary conventions of the era.

3.4.2 General Introduction

Kuntu ’ajtāzu fī ba‘ḍi bilādi al-’Ahwāzi wa quṣārāya lafẓ**atun** sharūdun ’aṣ**īduhā** wa kalim**atun** balīgh**atun** ’astaz**īduhā**[91]

[90] It is worth noting that the *maqāma* utilizes significant amounts of then-obsolete Bedouin vocabulary. The genre was used later to teach lexicography, as it was one of the only extant sources preserving much of the vocabulary of the Bedouins.

[91] Once again, boldface is used here to highlight the rhyming prosaic language of the text.

[‘Isā ibn Hishām said] I was passing through ’Ahwāz[92] and my utmost desire was to reel in a wandering word and to add an eloquent utterance to my linguistic repertoire.

The purpose of the general introduction is to make the fictional character of ‘Isā ibn Hishām more tangible, connecting him to the story that he is about to narrate.[93] While there is little else to say about this step, there are a couple of elements worth pointing out directly. The first is the location of the city of ’Ahwāz in what is now southwestern Iran. This is the first and last time in the story that the specific setting is referenced, as the city is insignificant to the story, a constant in all of the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī. The second element is the interest in philology. ‘Isā ibn Hishām’s goal is increase his linguistic repertoire, indicating that he is—in this particular *maqāma*, at least—a man of learning. This characterization will be important during the recognition scene, when it is revealed that he has been duped by the wandering scholar.

3.4.3 Link

Fa-’addānī al-sayru ’ilā ruq‘**atin** fasīḥ**atin** min al-baladi wa ’idhā hunāka qawmun mujt**ami‘ūna** ‘alā rajulin yast**ami‘ūna** ’ilayhi[94]

Then the road led me to a wide space where, behold, there was a group congregating around a man, listening to him.

The link shifts the focus from the protagonist, ‘Isā ibn Hishām, to the episode, which is generally dominated by the hero.[95] It is important to note, as Hämeen-Anttila does in his survey of the genre, that the link resembles a similar structure in the classical *qaṣīda*, which performs

[92] Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa*. ’Ahwāz is a city in what is now southwestern Iran.
[93] Hämeen-Anttila, “Maqāma A History of a Genre,” 48.
[94] Badī‘ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa*.
[95] Ibid, 49.

the same function. This use of Bedouin literary conventions underscores another example of al-Hamadhānī's defiance against the literary norms of the time.[96]

3.4.4 Episode

Due to the sheer length of the episode, this subsection will rely only on translation, with the assumption that the rhyming prosaic language of the *maqāma* has been adequately demonstrated. Additionally, the episode—or *episodes* in the case of this *maqāma*—will be segmented in order to highlight the structural features and tropes. Each *maqāma* contains one to three episodes. Where there are more than one, as in the case of the *maqāma* cited, the transitions are marked by unrhymed prose.

> I found him to be a person short and portly like a beetle, blind, and wrapped up in a woollen [*sic*] blanket, whirling round like a top, wearing a burnous [*sic*] too long for him, and supporting himself with a staff to which were attached a number of tiny bells. With this he was beating the ground with a rythmical [*sic*] sound, while with plaintive air and pathetic voice proceeding from a straightened breast, he sang:--

This is the beginning of the first episode, in which the protagonist, 'Isā ibn Hishām first unknowingly encounters the trickster of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*, Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī, whose song represents the first transition from (rhymed) prose into poetry. As the *maqāma* is a genre that was designed for loud reading, it is likely that during such sessions the distinction between prose and poetry was less clear than it is on paper, which may, in fact, have been al-Hamadhānī's design as a direct challenge to the literary tradition of the time. Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī's beggary poem follows:

> ['O people my debt weighs down my back,
> And my wife demands her dowry,
> After abundance and plenty, I have become
> A dweller in a barren land and an ally of penury.
> O people, is there a generous man among ye,
> Who will aid me against the vicissitudes of time?

[96] This is certainly not to suggest that al-Hamadhānī was against the city and supported the Bedouins. Indeed, some of his writings revolve around the stock character of the ignorant Bedouin visiting the city, where he is duped out of his money. Al-Hamadhānī parodies both the Bedouins and the city-dwellers indiscriminately. This is one factor that, I contend, makes the *maqāma* the "third way."

O people, because of my poverty my patience is exhausted,
While now no flowing robes my state conceal,
Time with its destroying hand hath scattered
What I had of silver and gold;
In the evening I repair to a house the size of a span,
My lot is obscure and my pot is small.
If God but seal my affair with good,
He will send me ease after difficulty.
Is there among ye a worthy youth of noble origin,
Who will acquire through me a great reward?
Even though he value not thankfulness?']

As was typical of the time, poetry was used not only for narrative effect, but to demonstrate mastery of the Arabic language. Though there is no way to demonstrate it in English translation, the poem is written in monorhyme with a fixed meter. The words of Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī represent beggar poetry, a common trope in medieval Arabic *adab* literature. To return to this concept for a moment (in its medieval context), generosity is an important pillar of Islamic propriety. Thus, the eloquent beggar conning the wealthy urban elites, who are concerned with exuding Islamic propriety, is a recurring stock character in the Arabic literature of the time. A demonstration will follow the second link:

[Said 'Isā ibn Hishām]: By Heavens! my heart became tender towards him and my eyes were filled with tears for him. So I gave him a dinar I had with me.

Prendergast has taken the initiative to insert a discourse marker (written in brackets for clarity)[97] before the second link, as the distinction between rhymed and unrhymed prose (that conveys the appropriate meaning) cannot be made in English translation. To repeat, however, this segue into the second episode is written in unrhymed prose in the original Arabic text, as is typical of *maqāmāt* that feature more than one episode. The second episode is transcribed below:

And he delayed not but said:--

'What beauty is hers and how intensely yellow.
Light, stamped and round,
Water almost drops from her lustre, [*sic*]
A noble mind hath produced her,
Yea, a soul of a youth possessed by generosity,

[97] Prendergast himself does not include these brackets in his translation.

> Which makes him do what it will.
> O thou for whom this praise is meant,
> Exaggeration cannot describe the extent of thy worth.
> I therefore refer thee to God with whom is thy reward.
> May God have mercy upon him who will bind her to her pair
> And associate her with her sister.'[98]

Within the narrative this second poem by the trickster Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī serves as a device to convey his true identity to the benefactor 'Isā ibn Hishām, revealing to the latter that he has, in fact, been duped. In this instance, the trickster's immediate recognition of the dinar indicates that he was merely feigning blindness. The recognition scene that follows is the climax of the *maqāma*.

3.4.5 Recognition Scene

> The people then gave him what they were disposed to give. Then he left them. But I followed him, for I knew by the quickness with which he recognized the dinar that he was feigning blindness. As soon as we were alone I stretched forth my right hand, seized his left arm and said: 'By Heavens! thou shalt disclose to me thy secret, or else I will assuredly expose thee.' Then he opened his pair of almonds. I drew his veil from his face and behold--by Heavens! it was our Sheikh Abú'l-Fatḥ, al-Iskanderí. Said I: 'Art thou Abú'l-Fatḥ?'[99]

The recognition scene serves primarily to reveal the ingenuity of the trickster. Additionally, it highlights the special dynamic between him and the protagonist, both of whom are traveling scholars. As is the case in this *maqāma*, the audience never recognizes the trickster by name, though in some other *maqāmāt*, they realize that they have been duped early enough to lay hands on him[100] before he manages to slip away. The nameless victims of the trickster are as hollow as the urban location, and, in al-Hamadhānī's mind, are probably meant to function as fixtures of it. This is emphasized in the finale of the *maqāma*, in which the trickster provides some insight into his philosophy of life and behavior.

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[98] Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī, *al-Maqāma al-Makfūfa*; the entire text from the episode subsection is translated by W.J. Prendergast, "The Maqāma of the Blind," *The Maqāmāt of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī* (London: Luzac & Co, 1915), 74-75. I was unable to find translations for a handful of words, and it is possible that they come from Bedouin speak.

[99] Ibid, 75.

[100] Hämeen-Anttila, "Maqāma A History of a Genre," 50.

3.4.6 Envoi/Finale

He answered: 'Nay;

I am Abū Qalamūn, In every hue do I appear,
Choose a base calling, For base is thy age,
Repel time with folly, For verily time is a kicking camel.
Never be deceived by reason, Madness is the only reason.'

While the envoi and the finale are often independent of each other, they are sometimes intertwined, as is the case here. For this reason, they will be analyzed together. The trickster Abū al-Fatḥ al-'Iskānderī's reference to himself as "Abū Qalamūn" is the most striking detail that defines his outlook on life. The term "qalamūn" has Greek origins and refers to a fabric that appears in many different colors.[101] This lone, brief declaration by the trickster underscores a number of major themes in the *maqāma*. First, it highlights his ability to fit in regardless of where he travels in the lands that comprise the Islamic world, indicating that he is an everyman, rather than a fixed character. This fact about the trickster reinforces the insignificance of the location in the *maqāma*, at a time when much of Arabic literature and Islamic life centered on the city. Indeed, the trickster's worldview is even more concisely summarized in his declaration to the protagonist 'Isā ibn Hishām: "For base is thy age."

The selection of a word of Greek origins to define the trickster also demonstrates the magnitude of learning of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī. It is worth pointing out here that the name Badī' al-Zamān is a posthumous honorific bestowed upon the writer and scholar, meaning "the marvel of the age." Al-Hamadhānī's learning manifests itself in his *maqāmāt* in the form of his mastery of poetry and prose, and the innovative combination of the two. Furthermore, his stories draw on and reshape material spanning the diverse environments of the medieval Islamic world, from pre-Islamic Bedouin poetic techniques to the street tales of *Alf Layla wa Layla*. Although the *maqāma* leads by negative example, then, there is also a unifying element to the

[101] Prendergast, "The Maqāma of the Blind," 75.

genre. Every setting in the Islamic world is one and the same to the trickster of the *maqāma*. In this way, al-Hamadhānī critiques the city-centered proto-nationalism of the time period, which led to the fragmentation of the Islamic world. It is for this reason that I have labeled the *maqāma* as "the third way," and, I will argue, why the Palestinian writer Emile Ḥabībī utilized the conventions of the genre in the 20th century in the face of a similar cultural threat.

4. The Modern *Maqāma*

Having now established the literary precedents of the *maqāma*, and their functions within the genre, this essay will now turn to the modern adaptation of the format by the Israeli Arab writer Emile Ḥabībī in his novel, *al-Waqā'i' al-Gharība fī 'Iḥtifā' Sa'īd 'Abī al-Naḥis al-Mutashā'il*. In the novel, the eponymous character is an unwitting informant for the State of Israel. The story describes his trials and tribulations in the emergent Jewish state from the period of the British mandate to the aftermath of the Six-Day War in the first week of June, 1967. The format of the modern novel precludes discussion of some of the aspects of the medieval *maqāma*. The link in the medieval literature, for example, which delineates the various episodes of the narrative with unrhymed prose, is easily identifiable in the modern *maqāma* due to the introduction of chapter breaks. What will follow, then, is a far more traditional literary analysis of Ḥabībī's novel, showing where he has subverted the conventions of the novel's medieval counterpart, with the same effect of finding a third way—one that is neither distinctly "Arab" nor "Israeli."

It has been mentioned already that modern Arabic literature exhibits a greater tendency to spell out meaning directly for the reader. To be concise (and perhaps overly general), the rise of Arab nationalism in the dwindling days of the Ottoman Empire generated a lively literary debate over the nature of the would-be Arab state (or states, as it turned out). A generation of writers

educated in the west, and whose own nationalism followed their models, broke down the barriers between poetry and prose with the free verse movement.[102] The rise of many individual voices in modern Arabic literature in many ways reflects the failure of the modern elites to produce inclusive identities within the individual states. Ḥabībī's *maqāma*, it will be contended here, critiques and makes an attempt to fill that void in the context of the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict.[103]

While the *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī can largely be understood—indeed, *must* be understood[104]—in the literary and cultural context of the medieval Islamic world, the life of Emile Ḥabībī is integral to understanding several aspects of his manipulation of the *maqāma* in his magnum opus (which, it should be noted, has become the Palestinian national epic). The author was born in Ḥaifā in 1919[105] during the time of British mandatory rule in Palestine. By 1947, he emerged as one of the leaders of the Palestinian Communist Party (*al-ḥizb al-shīʿūwī al-filasṭīnī*) and, after the establishment of the State of Israel, was one of the founders of the joint Arab-Jewish Israeli Communist Party. Additionally, Ḥabībī was a writer and editor-in-chief for the party's Arabic newspaper *al-'Ittiḥād* (The Union).

[102] Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 65-132. For a full treatment of this topic, see also Shmuel Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry, 1800-1970: The Development of its Forms and Themes Under the Influence of Western Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1976). Moreh argues that many modern Arabic poetic forms come from Arab Christians' translations of English and French liturgy into Arabic. It should be noted, too, that religious minorities were among the earliest proponents of breaking the classical literary traditions.

[103] I contend that this loathsome term does not fit the historical reality of the conflict. With the exception of Jordan in the West Bank, the leaders of the nascent states of the Middle East and North Africa benefitted from maintaining the stateless status of the Palestinians, taking up their plight in order to distract the masses from domestic issues. The term also overlooks the dual identities of, for example, Jewish immigrants from the Arab world. See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Making of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[104] This is, of course, due in significant part simply to the lack of reliable information on the life of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī

[105] There appear to be a few discrepancies here. LeGassick contends in his introduction to the novel that the author was born 1919. The year 1922 has also been cited, but due to the lack of citations and information on those claimants' credentials, I will go with the former.

The role of the Israeli Communist Party in amplifying the voices of the state's Arab citizens is critical for understanding the role of the narrator and the '*isnād* in Emile Ḥabībī's novel. The Israeli Declaration of Independence defines the state as Jewish and democratic, and a state for all citizens irrespective of religion, race, or sex.[106] The platform of the Israeli Communist Party was that the state could not be both Jewish and democratic, for which the party called for a civil state with the same rights for all citizens. The Israeli Communist Party, then, embodied the third way, calling for a state based neither on the ethno-nationalism of Arabs or Jews. It is no surprise that, in 1972, the Israeli Supreme Court declared that the Federal Elections Commission could disqualify candidates from Knesset elections based on three criteria: for saying that the state was not Jewish; for saying that the state was not democratic, and for inciting racism. In an exchange between Sa'īd and a prison guard, when the former is on his way to prison for being mistaken for a Palestinian fighter, Ḥabībī satirizes this aspect of Israeli law:

> [Sa'īd] "…why do you demolish [the Arabs'] homes outside the prisons?"
> [Guard] "To exterminate the rats that build their nests in them. This way we save them from the plague."
> "God bless and save you! But could you explain that?"
> "This was the justification, pure and humanitarian, made by the Ministry of Health, and quoted by the minister of defense when he explained the reasons compelling us to demolish the houses in the Jiftlick villages in the lowlands. That was the response he gave to the accusations thrown in our faces in the Knesset by that Jewish Communist congressman, that stooge of Nasser, King Husain, the Emir of Kuwait, and Shaikh Qabus!"
> "And he was shut up?"
> "Actually, they really screwed him."
> "How, exactly?"
> "The speaker prevented him from continuing his speech. **Democracy is not mere chaos, my boy. Now the Communists, as you know, are chaos mongers. Their representative refused to obey the rules of democracy**, and the speaker had him forcibly ejected from the sitting. That screwed him, alright"

This excerpt from the novel also highlights a couple of significant literary and political aspects of the novel. First, Sa'īd is equated with the easily duped protagonist of the medieval

[106] Translation by Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel* (14th May, 1948). http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx

maqāma, quickly buying into the state's rationale for the destruction of the homes of Israeli Arabs, which is the second important aspect. In the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the state carried out a census, partly for the granting of land deeds. The Arab citizens who remained within the state's internationally recognized borders, but were simply not home during the census—due to escaping the war, being away on business, etc.—became in Israeli legalese "present absentees." They were made permanent residents, but not full citizens, for which they were not entitled to deeds to their land, which the state continued to steal until 1980 when these Arabs were finally made citizens.[107] In the '70s, the Israeli Communist Party organized an annual Land Day to protest the state's expropriation of Arab lands.

The *'isnād* in Ḥabībī's novel highlights the Israeli Communist Party's role as the sole voice of the state's Arab citizens both within and outside the borders of Israel. Unlike in the medieval *maqāma*, where the identity of the narrator is elusive, the discourse between Sa'īd and the narrator in Ḥabībī's novel sheds light on the latter's biography. Sa'īd, addressing the narrator of the novel in a letter, writes: "Your paper *al-Ittihad*, quoting *Maariv*, which in turn quoted *Haaretz*…"[108] Thus, it can be deduced from this dialogue that the narrator is a journalist for *al-'Ittiḥād*, the official Arabic newspaper of the Israeli Communist Party. Ḥabībī's novel begins with an *'isnād* by this journalist similar to that of the medieval *maqāma*: "Sa'īd, the ill-fated pessoptimist wrote to me, saying…" (*Kataba 'ilayya Sa'īd Abū al-Naḥis al-Mutashā'il qāla*…).[109]

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[107] See Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

[108] Jayussi and LeGassick, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, 93

[109] Jayussi and LeGassick translate this line as "In his letter to me, Saeed the ill-fated Pessoptimist pleaded…" While I have relied, and will continue to rely, on their translation, I choose to retain this line in transliteration to show that the original Arabic text is, in fact, nearly identical to the *'isnād* of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*: "Ḥaddathanā 'Isā ibn Hishām qāla…" ('Isā ibn Hishām reported to us, saying…). Jayyusi and LeGassick's translation fails to highlight the *maqāma*-esque structure of the novel.

The most striking difference between the ’*isnād* of al-Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt* and that of Ḥabībī’s novel is the singularity of the latter. While al-Hamdhānī’s ’*isnād* segues from a plural voice to a singular one, setting the individual protagonist against the backdrop of the collective medieval Islamic world, Ḥabībī’s novel is structured as a one-on-one dialogue between the eponymous character and a journalist for the Israeli Communist Party. By formatting his novel this way, Ḥabībī underscores the unique position of the Israeli Communist Party as a political bloc calling for the establishment of a civil state for all citizens of Israel. More significantly, however, the author adds the neglected Israeli Arab voice to the corpus of Arabic literature while also remaining distinct from it. Ḥabībī’s novel is replete with references to the glorious literary past of the Arabs, citing litterateurs from al-Mutanabbī to Maḥmūd Darwīsh. By alluding to Arabic literature from the medieval to the modern era in the form of the *maqāma*—which is by its very nature a combination of vast Arabic literary traditions—Ḥabībī acknowledges his literary heritage while at the same time critiquing the nationalism that has contributed to its suppression. Indeed, though the State of Israel is the author’s primary target, he expresses no support for the Arab nationalist leaders of his day:

> Who, after all, erected the tall buildings of this country, cut and paved its broad streets, dug the trenches, and fortified the shelters? Who planted, plucked, and ginned the cotton, then wove it into clothes for the lords of Raghdan and Basman, palaces in Amman, to wear so proudly? […] Yes, who erected the buildings, paved the roads, dug and planted the earth of Israel, other than the Arabs who remained there? Yet those Arabs who stayed, stoically, in the land occupied by our state received never so much as a mention in all the files of Ahmad Shukairy’s ringing speeches.[110]

In this passage, Ḥabībī directly accuses the Arab leaders of the 20th century from benefitting from the oppression of Arab citizens of the State of Israel. He references Aḥmad Shukairī, a leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization who drafted the Palestinian National Charter at the 1954 Arab Summit under the guidance of Egyptian President Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, the

[110] Jayussi and LeGassick, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, 80-81.

leading voice of Arab nationalism during his nearly two-decade presidency (1952 – 1970). Nāṣir played the pivotal role in realigning Arab nationalism to focus almost solely on the Palestinian issue, despite the fact that this manifested primarily in the form of bombastic rhetoric with little substance. Indeed, Nāṣir repeatedly imprisoned Palestinians in Gaza during its post-1948 occupation by Egypt for launching attacks against Israel and, like most of his neighbors in the region, kept Palestinians stateless in order to make sure the issue remained in the spotlight.

For Ḥabībī, then, and the rest of Israel's Arab citizens, neither Zionism nor Arab nationalism yielded any benefits. Rather, both resulted in the erasure of Israeli Arab voices. The lack of anywhere to turn for these people culminates in Ḥabībī's novel in the form of Sa'īd's literal entrapment on a spike toward the end of the novel:

> I found myself sitting on a flat surface, cold and round, not more than a yard across. A wind was blowing, strong and bitter [*sic*] cold, and my legs seemed to be dangling over the side of a fathomless pit. I wanted to rest my back but found that there was a pit behind me like the one in front, and that it surrounded me on all lsides. If I moved, I would be certain to fall. I realized that I was sitting on the top of a blunt stake.
>
> I shouted, "Help!" But only an echo responded, its every letter clear.[111]

The lack of a space for the Israeli Arab from either side, Zionism and Arab nationalism, is underscored in Ḥabībī's novel in the author's innovative narrativization of the *maqāma*. It has been shown that the medieval *maqāmāt* of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī are contained episodes that do not form a narrative whole. Conversely, the individual chapters in Ḥabībī's novel do form a complete narrative. At the same time, however, the novel is not linear, and it is unclear which episodes are meant to be read in light of others. The division of the novel represents the fragmentation of the land, which, for the titular protagonist, results in his complete inability to move in any direction.

[111] Ibid, 117.

It is because of the failure of the 20th-century state-building ideologies to dignify Arab citizens of Israel (and, of course, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, despite the change of oppressor) that Ḥabībī imagines a third way through his novel's protagonist in an episode entitled "The Ultimate Tale—of the Fish that Understand All Languages":

> One day a Jewish boy who had sat down unnoticed beside me surprised me with the question, "In what language are you speaking, Uncle?"
> "In Arabic."
> "With whom?"
> "With the fish."
> "Do the fish understand only Arabic?"
> "Yes, the old fish, the ones that were here when the Arabs were."
> "And the young fish, do they understand Hebrew?"
> "They understand Hebrew, Arabic, and all the languages. The seas are wide and flow together. They have no borders and room enough for all the fish."[112]

The narrativization of the *maqāma* in the novel also allows the eponymous character to represent Israeli Arab citizenry as a whole. It has been shown that in the medieval *maqāma*, the primary characters of each individual piece may not even be the same individuals from one *maqāma* to the next, despite the use of the same names and their common roles in the story. If each *maqāma* is read next to each other, the biographies of the characters contradict themselves. Likewise, the contradictory nature of the State of Israel—one that claims to be both Jewish and democratic—creates a contradiction in the Arab population thereof. They are citizens of a state that does not produce an inclusive identity for them. Nor do they share a common identity with the state's neighbors in the Arab world.[113] In the novel, Sa'īd is not only a well-developed character in his own right, but also a literal embodiment of the population as a whole, and the trials that they endure in their situation.

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[112] Ibid, 108.

[113] Lustick points out that Arab citizens of Israel have tended to be far more engaged with the politics of the state than they have even with the Palestinian issue. It is noteworthy, too, that several Arab villages in Israel vehemently opposed a land swap proposed in 2000 that would have attached their neighborhoods to the would-be Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza for fear of reprisal. The politics of the region have suspended this population in a kind of identity limbo.

In their well-known translation of the novel, Jayyusi and LeGassick render the title in English as "The Secret life of Saeed the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist."[114] It is argued here, however, that a literal translation of the title—"The Strange Realities in the Secret Life of Sa'īd the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist"—more accurately reflects the everyman status of the eponymous Sa'īd, who stands in for all Arab citizens of Israel, as he himself spells out in one of the novel's opening chapters:

> You said you never noticed me before. That's because you lack sensitivity, my good friend. How very often you have seen my name in the leading newspapers. Didn't you read of the hundreds imprisoned by Haifa police when that melon exploded in Hanatir Square, now Paris Square? Afterwards, every Arab they found in lower Haifa, pedestrian or on wheels, they put in jail. The papers published the names of everyone notable who was caught, but merely gave general reference to the rest.
>
> The rest—yes, that's me! The papers haven't ignored me. How can you claim not to have heard of me? I am truly remarkable. For no paper with wide coverage, having sources, resources, advertisements, celebrity writers, and a reputation can ignore me. Those like me are everywhere—towns, villages, bars, everywhere. I am "the rest." I am remarkable indeed![115]

The "strange realities" part of the title reinforces the paradoxical existence of the Arab population of the State of Israel, who belong to neither the "Israeli" nor the "Arab" side of the conflict, which overlooks and, indeed, *erases* any and all dual identities. From the very beginning of the novel, Ḥabībī highlights his intention to create a voice for Israeli Arab citizenry, an end which he achieves through his utilization of the conventions of the *maqāma*. Like his medieval forebear, al-Hamadhānī, Emile Ḥabībī urges a new way forward through the use of a unique literary genre.

5. Conclusion

Since the first recorded *qaṣīda*, Arabic literature has been central to identity formation of all those who have participated in its development, from the pre-Islamic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula to citizens of the modern nation-states in the Middle East and North Africa. In their

[114] Jayussi and LeGassick, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, 108.
[115] Ibid, 7.

attempts to delineate for themselves unique (and, to their mind, superior) identities, the participants in the development of the Arabic literary tradition have incidentally revealed more commonalities and differences among themselves.

To recap, the classical *qaṣīda* of the Bedouins was an important tool for the maintenance of the tribal hierarchy in the pre-Islamic era. The combination of the loss of the homeland due to the wars for water between the tribes with panegyrics for the tribal leader (along with many other poetic themes described, of course) sought to underscore the centrality of the tribe to the endurance of peace and stability. It is for this reason that the pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā eulogizes the united leaders of ʻAbs and Dhubyān after their settlement brought an end to the warfare between the two tribes. The *qaṣīda*, then, relied on stirring the emotions of the members of the tribe to defend its hierarchy.

Despite the abundance of invectives against resistant tribes, the official poetry of the early Islamic empire resembles that of the pre-Islamic Bedouins and, indeed, is based on the same literary ethos, as seen in al-Akhṭal's panegyric poetry extolling the divine right of the Umayyads to their position of leadership. By implication, the early spread of Islam among the tribes of Arabia, the Levant, the Fertile Crescent, and North Africa in the 7th and 8th centuries resulted in the need to articulate the legitimizing Islamic credentials of those in positions of power. The "other," however, has always been more of a literary creation than a reality.

The Islamization of Arabic literature gave way to the rise of prose in the form of the sayings and actions of the religion's prophet, culminating early on in the development of a strictly fact-based prosaic literary corpus. Nevertheless, literature flourished in this context, as the need to determine frames of reference within the Arabic language saw the literary output of entire treatises defining as little as a single word, citing every one of its recorded uses. Such

treatises paved the way for the canonization of humorous *adab* literature, a fact which is central to the ultimate point of this essay.

The literary genre of the *maqāma* was the first to manipulate both poetry and prose into an episodic narrative at a time when the customs of the day precluded such a combination. Indeed, the medieval genre is considered the antecedent to modern Arabic fiction. While the literary conventions of the day forbade the use of poetry and prose outside of their strict purposes, the very fact that al-Hamadhānī has since been deemed "the wonder of the age" highlights a cultural willingness to break with traditions. Many of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*, while demonstrating significant learning and mastery of the Arabic language, serve little purpose other than to entertain the audience by means of satire against the elites of the time.[116] Regardless, these writings have come to be codified in the Arabic literary tradition as the pinnacle of literary achievement. While this genre developed in the shadow of a cultural threat, spurred on by the very elites it satirizes, it also leaves the door open for alternative futures. Taking this into consideration, it is no surprise that the 20th-century Israeli Arab novelist Emile Ḥabībī would adapt the genre for similar purposes, in open defiance of the prevailing political narratives of the era.

Throughout the course of writing, I have attempted to make this topic accessible not only to the experts, but to a more general reading public. Additionally, I have tried to build a (very) small but important corpus of Arabic literature spanning its centuries-long existence, from the modern pre-Islamic times to the modern era, and, where possible, to let the literature take precedence over the politics of the region. The significance of the selection of literature herein—

[116] I have been told that there is no such thing as apolitical Arabic literature. While the cases for this have the potential to be strong, the development of the Arabic literary tradition indicates, at the very least, that writers make light of their situation, as any people does.

especially in this day and age—is that it represents engagement with and adaptability to the changing times, demonstrating the potential for new ways forward in the future (even if I cannot claim to have solutions for everything).

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