Medieval Hebrew Narrative and the Arabic Literary Tradition

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The Hebrew *maqāmāt* genre came into being under the influence of Arabic *maqāmāt* with authors such as Ibn Saqbel (12th century)\(^1\), Ibn Zabāra (ca. 1140–1190)\(^2\) al-Ḥarīzī (1165–1225)\(^3\) and many others. Yehuda al-Ḥarīzī, who composed Hebrew as well as Arabic *maqāmāt*, followed the classical Arabic scheme of al-Hamadhānī (968–1008) and al-Ḥarīrī (1054–1121)\(^4\). He not only translated into Hebrew many *maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī\(^5\), but also composed the 50 *maqāmāt* of his *Tahkemoni*\(^6\) which contain some elaborations of Arabic *maqāmāt*, such as a translation of al-Hamadhānī’s Baghdadhīyya, which he adapts to the narrator-protagonist model, whereas al-Hamadhānī has only a narrator-protagonist. In Hebrew literature, other stories and narrative pieces in rhymed prose are called *maqāmat* even though they do not contain the scheme of the Arabic classical *maqāma* of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī.


I will draw attention to four early Hebrew maqāma collections in the light of the effect and function of poetry within the rhymed prose text. The oldest surviving Hispano-Arabic narration in maqāma style seems to be Ne'um Asher ben Yehuda (The Recite of AbY) by Shelomo ibn Sahl, known also under the name of Shelomo ibn Saqbel. The narrator falls in love with a young girl who has seen him from the window and thrown to him an apple with a love message in the form of a poem. After having spent the night without sleeping because of his feelings towards the beautiful unknown lady, he returns to the place of the meeting and spends the whole day under the window. When night comes, he goes for a walk in the surroundings and ends up fainting. The women of the house pick him up and take him to the harem where he is the object of continuing pleasure with the help of masks and disguises. The last and most serious mockery consists of the fact that the women of the harem take the veil off whom they say is the most beautiful woman who wrote the love message. The women leave the lover and the beloved women alone in “her” room. He says: “You have enamoured me only with your glance. Take off your veil.” But when the veil is taken off, he sees a beard, and “she” laughs and says: “Stand up and do not be sad: I am your friend the Adulamite. Drink with me.” This person is an old friend of his.

Here we have a love story which has much in common with the picaresque maqāma in its most pure form of two protagonists, the rogue and the narrator: the two meet without recognising each other, and finally the rogue identifies himself and they rejoice in each other’s good company. The background to the action is Arabic, with its harem and disguises, and Schirmann is of the opinion that this maqāma is based on an undiscovered Arabic original. It seems to me very probable that there is a connection between the disguises and masks in this maqāma and the Arabic shadow plays. Similar motifs are also used by Yehuda al-Ḥarīzī in his Taḥkemoni. But the difference between this Hebrew maqāma and those of the average Arabic maqāma of the Ḥarīz/Hamadhānī type is that in the Hebrew one a love affair is the main subject, whereas the Arabic ones represent a male society with very few love affairs. The two important features of this maqāma are in my view the mask which is put on by the “beloved woman” and the homosexual ending.

Another early maqāma was written by Yehuda ben Yiṭḥaq Ibn Shabbetay (1168–1240), who lived in Toledo and Saragossa. His work is entitled Minḥat Sone ha-Nashim (Women’s Hater’s Gift). Also here a veil put on by a woman

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8 Schirmann, Shirah, I, 555.
plays a role. The veil has its equally treacherous function on the wedding night. At first sight the author seem to have composed a misogynic work, because it contains fierce attacks against women and marriage. But in the end he shows himself to be in favour of marriage. The author defines his book as a book that tells the story of a man whose soul was caught in the trap of a woman, and says that he wrote it for his best friends. In Ibn Shabbetay’s *Women’s Hater* we find a man called Tahkemoni (“Wise man”) who several times sees a dream vision with a divine apparition. This apparition orders him to tell the world that women are the source of all evil. On his deathbed, Tahkemoni recommends to Zerah (“Rising Sun”, “Sunrise”), his son, to avoid the company of women for the rest of his life. Zerah is willing to obey his father’s last wish. With three faithful friends he goes to a foreign but blessed country, where myrrh trees and oleanders always flourish. There, Zerah successfully propagates the idea that men should avoid women and marriage as they would the devil. The female population of the country is startled and a parliament of women is convened, which deliberates on how to end this situation. A clever old woman named Kozbi (“Trickster”) succeeds in finding a solution to the problematic situation. She manages to win the heart of Zerah for the most beautiful girl in the country, Ayala (“Young Gazelle, Fawn”). Zerah becomes caught in the net the old woman has made for him and Zerah proposes to Ayala. The wedding is described in a humorous manner. The bridegroom, drunken with love, does not pay attention to the ambiguous text of the wedding contract and is not aware that under the bride’s canopy is another woman, hidden behind veils. This is Rispa bat Aya (“Red-hot Coal daughter of Hawk”), an ugly and malicious woman.

Only the following morning does Zerah discover how terribly he has been cheated. His bride tells him with satanic laughter that from now on she will be the patron, and he will be the servant. Rispa guarantees her husband that she will make life as unbearable as possible for him. Zerah asks his friends for assistance. The author of the *maqāma* himself intervenes and says: “My Fate is the same as yours. I have only misfortune in my marriage.”

In order to help Zerah his friends get together and decide that he must divorce Rispa. But the many women of the parliament – the parliament of women is perhaps a Koranic motif from the Yūsuf story — insist that Rispa must remain Zerah’s wife. Then one of the women decides to seek the king’s counsel, and each party produces its arguments. But then, suddenly, the author intervenes again, and says in the king’s presence: “I swear to God, who has elevated your throne and who has spread your glory to the heavens, that Tahkemoni has never lived, Zerah never took Rispa bat Aya as his wife, and that all other characters never existed. They were created by the dream. The imaginative power of the poet created them.” The Pirandellesque invention of the author is reminiscent of other *maqāmāt* such as the introductory *maqāma* in al-Ḥarīzī’s *Tahkemoni.*

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13 See also M. Huss, “Lo haya welo nivra – ‘iyyun mashwe be-ma’amad ha-bidayon be-maqaama ha-‘ivrit we-ha-‘aravit” (“It never happened nor did it ever exist. Comparative study of the status
Other important features of these stories, for instance the name signatures which refer to the characters of the personae, are perhaps derived from Arabic theatre, which reflects a kind of alternative and carnivalesque society. There are treacherous scenes with masks in Arabic shadow plays which bring to mind those of the above *maqāmāt*\(^4\). Most of this theatre literature has become lost because of the low character of this genre. Therefore we have to look at later shadow plays in order to reconstruct earlier dramatic traditions. One of the relevant plays by the Egyptian author Ibn Dāniyāl (1248–1311) is called Ṭayf al-Khayāl (The Shadow Spirit). A master of ceremonies (*al-Rayyis*) introduces the show and calls upon Ṭayf al-Khayāl, a deformed hunchback. Ṭayf recites a long elegy on Satan, expressing his predilection for the forbidden pleasures, such as drinking and fornication. He is then overcome by longing for his friend Prince Wiṣāl and begs to be reunited with him. Then Wiṣāl appears, and reveals to his companion Ṭayf al-Khayāl his intention to give up this loose living and homosexuality, to repent and find himself a wife. He asks for the marriage broker Umm Rashīd. When she appears, she informs him that she has available just the right person for him, a young divorced woman of excellent beauty, who had an unfortunate experience when her husband ferociously deflowered her on their wedding night. She is also lesbian. Wiṣāl expresses agreement and the marriage clerk and witnesses are brought in. The clerk makes the customary speech in rhyming prose, from which we learn that the bride’s name is Dābbā bint Miftāḥ (“Lock, daughter of Key”), a name which also suggests ugliness, specifically referring to protruding teeth.

The marriage clerk establishes the amount of the bride’s dowry. Wiṣāl has to pay and accepts the terms of the marriage contract, but has some difficulty raising the necessary amount: he has frittered away his fortune on his dissipated lifestyle past spent. Wiṣāl reminds Ṭayf and the audience that he needs the money for a marriage to escape from prostitutes and homosexuals. He is given some money, then reappears in an impressive procession riding a noble steed, preceded by candles in fine array and followed by trumpets and drums. He politely dismounts and waits for the bride, who soon appears surrounded by several women waiting on her, her face veiled by a handkerchief embroidered with gold braid. However, as soon as he lifts her veil she utters a sound like the braying of a donkey: he is so shocked to see how monstrously ugly she is, that he faints. She, in turn, complains to Umm Rashīd that he has frightened her and her little boy. Wiṣāl recovers consciousness after

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being offended by the boy, and with his stick assaults him, the women and the bride, all of whom flee in terror.

We see here the theme of debauchery and treacherous marriage, which brings to mind the *Sone Nashim* also with similar wordplay: compare Dabba bint Miftäh ("Lock daughter of Key") with Riṣpa bat Aya ("Red-hot Coal daughter of Hawk"). As in the Arabic play, also rhymed prose is used.

The Hebrew works by Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar (1180–1240) contain writings in rhymed prose such as *Sefer ha-meshalim* (Book of Tales). The last six chapters of the last part of the mentioned book are tales of love and adventure, such as the story of the lad Yashefe and his two beloved women. In Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar's stories we come across the narrator known from *maqāmāt* of other authors. Like al-Harīzī, he start his stories with a formula indicating the narrator *Neʿum Lemuʿel ben Itiʿel* (The Recite of Lemuʿel ben Itiʿel). The love stories of the second section evoke an Arabic setting. In them are portrayed, for instance, a slave market, palaces of magic beauty surrounded by splendid gardens, an infatuated lover who behaves like a fool, etc. We should not forget that also Arabic folklore chivalry stories have women heroes, and in the love stories of *Arabian Nights* there are sometimes passive manly lovers who are love objects of women who take the initiative. Likewise Yashefe was the object of love of his two female lovers Yefifya and Yemima, who even fought each other in a duel. Schirmann underlined the extreme youth of the lovers—they were virtually children—and compares them with those of the French story *Aucassin et Nicolette*. In the *Meshalim* there are several cases of requited love, where the lady is as important and active as a man, even duelling in order to possess her beloved. The women sometimes win in insolence from the indolence and passiveness of the men, women having the principal role.

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16 A slave market also plays a role in the *Arabian Nights* story "ʿAlī Nūr al-Dīn and Maryam the Belt maker"; see N. Elisséef, *Thèmes et motifs des mille et une nuits: essai de classification*, Beyrouth, 1949, 202 (no. 149).


19 Much inertia of men is to be found in the *Arabian Night* Stories "ʿAziz and ʿAzīz" [Elisséef, op. cit.192; (no. 9Aa)] and ʿAlī Shār and Zumurrud [Elisséef, op. cit. 194; (no. 32)]; see also Gerhardt, op. cit., 121–165.

The *Sefer Sha'ashu'im* (Book of Delights)\(^2\) was written at the end of the 12th century by Joseph b. Meir ibn Zabara, whose cultural environment was clearly Muslim\(^3\). The book shows traces of Arabic, Greek and Indian culture, and has parallels in collections of medieval exempla literature. Ibn Zabara’s *Book of Delight* is one of the funniest story books of the *maqāma* genre. In it are many types of women. The plot of the book is as follows. Yosef the physician dreams of the appearance of a tall man who wakes him from his sleep and offers him a meal. After saying his prayers and then eating, Yosef asks the stranger his name; the stranger replies that he is Enan haNaṭash. This name is an anagram of the word *shatan*, (“devil”); in fact, it is almost “shatan” written backwards. His profession seems to be the same as Yosef’s – he is a physician – and his people and religion seem to be the same.

He asks Yosef to leave his country and to travel with him. They discuss medicine and the pros and cons of travelling, and even some animal fables are told, with the story of the leopard and the fox as a framework. Among the fables are several which warn against taking counsel with women and about their unfaithfulness, and one which is pro-women.

Then they begin their journey. Enan asks Yosef in a riddling manner “Will you bear me or shall I bear you?” referring to telling a story as a way of “bearing” someone when travelling. In this way the story about a clever young girl is introduced. The clever girl is a well-known theme in Indian, Arabic and European literature. This story finished, they arrive at a small village inn, where they pass the night. The food at the inn is poor and scanty. As physicians they discuss food and its nutritional value. The donkeys that carried them are hungry and pitiful. They sleep on the ground without pillows.

The next days they continue travelling, passing through towns where old men and other people tell them stories. They finally arrive at Enan’s walled domicile. In front of it is a beautiful garden with fruit trees and all kinds of spices. Enan shows his house to Yosef, who is starving and wants to eat, but Enan is in no hurry. Finally the table is laid and they discuss food and its nutritional value. When a lamb is brought in, Enan says that all the animal’s parts damage one’s health. But Yosef eats the whole thing. Enan tells two stories about the danger of eating, but Yosef does not care and continues to eat. After dinner they discuss anatomy, physiology and other disciplines. The following morning, Yosef and Enan get into a violent discussion when Yosef finds his donkey muzzled and with no food. The donkey is rebellious and has already eaten as much food as he can. Enan reveals to Yosef his real character, namely that he is Satan. First, Yosef is afraid but Enan reassures him. Enan shows Yosef his town full of sinners and madmen, all of

\(^2\) Yosef ben Me’ir ibn Zabara, *Sefer Sha’ashu’im*, edited by I. Davidson, New York 1914; repr. 1925.

whom are giants. Because he hates the manners of the inhabitants of Enan’s town, Yosef goes back to his hometown, Barcelona, to see his munificent patron, Rabbi Sheshet ben Benveniste, the ornament of the Jewish people.

The medical dispute and the debate about harmful food derive from the Christian physician Ibn Buṭlān (d. 1066)24. His Physicians’ Dinner Party25 is a very early example of the maqāma, between the famous maqāmāt of al-Hamadhānī (358/968–398/1008) and al-Harīrī (446/1054–516/1122). Ibn Buṭlān’s maqāma has an autobiographical touch, because in Cairo, the Fatimid capital, Ibn Buṭlān had met the renowned Ibn Rīḍwān. In a series of letters, Ibn Buṭlān and Ibn Rīḍwān accused each other of complete ignorance in medical and philosophical matters. Ibn Buṭlān mentions in his maqāma similar medical debates26. Much of the medical debate about harmful food between Ibn Zabārā’s Yosef and Enan is taken from Ibn Buṭlān’s work. Even small poems were lifted from it27.

In conclusion I should like to resume the following similarities between storytelling in the Hebrew maqāmāt and the narrative in Arabic works: (1) The use of veils and masks and travesty in the case of Hebrew maqāmāt has its parallels not only in the Arabic maqāmāt but also in the Arabic shadow plays which were part of a popular tradition which had existed already for long time, although many of the Arabic plays have been lost. In the shadow plays there is an emphasis on masks, treachery and debauchery, and also plays on style and words. In the Hebrew maqāma we find travesty, which is inherent to Arabic theatre. Female marriage-brokers appear in the Sone ha-Nashim as well as the Arabic shadow plays. (2) The appearance of women warriors, and heroes, who take the initiative in love in contrast to the passivity of men appear in the Arabic literature of the Arabian Nights as well as in the Hebrew maqāmāt. (3) The medical debate in Ibn Zabārā’s Sefer Sha’ashu’īm was taken from Ibn Buṭlān’s work, not to mention the stories and poems elsewhere in the Sefer Sha’ashu’īm which came from the Arabic world.

Unlike the case of the maqāmāt by al-Ḥarīrī – which were direct adaptations and translations from the classical Arabic maqāmāt by al-Ḥarīrī and al-Hamadhānī – the earlier Hebrew maqāmāt written in Christian territory at first sight deviate from the Arabic model. Whereas in the classical Arabic model – as adapted by al-Ḥarīrī – the emphasis was on the narrator-protagonist scheme, and the narration was

27 Cf. Ibn Buṭlān, Physician’s dinner party, p. 52; Ibn Zabārā, op. cit., 123; a poem on doctors who earn money by killing ill people; see A. Schippers, op. cit.
centred on the picaresque and friendship between man, in the earlier Hebrew *maqāmāt* also love stories in which women play a role and all kinds of other stories are introduced. With regard to these early Hebrew *maqāmāt*, Schirmann, Scheindlin and others thought that the deviation from the classical Arabic model was the result of Christian influence. Recent research, especially that on Ibn Saqbel, Ibn Zabāra and Yaʿaqov ben Elʿazar, has shown that there is much more Arabic influence than originally expected. More research of possible Arabic sources will undoubtedly bring to light other important discoveries concerning the link between the early Hebrew *maqāma* and Arabic narrative.