During a short visit to the town of Rayy, in Iran, al-Harith b. Hammam al-Basri encounters crowd upon crowd of people “spreading with the spread of locusts, and running with the running of steeds,” eagerly talking among themselves about a preacher, who, they tell al-Harith, was even better than Ibn Samʿun. Even though al-Harith realizes that he will face a noisy, bustling throng, he goes to the assembly place where men of all ranks are gathered, “ruler and ruled,” “eminent and obscure,” and finds an “old man, bowed and with a breast-hunch,” wearing a turban in a conical form (qalansuwa) and a cloak (ṭaylasān), both external signs of the man’s position as a preacher (fig. 1). The man delivers a series of admonitions, exhorting the assembled company to abstain from greed and forbidden things, mend their ways, and live out their lives according to religious precepts. This continues until sunset approaches, when a petitioner comes forward and claims that he has been wronged by an official and that the governor—who is present at the assembly—has refused to hear his complaint. At the wronged man’s urging, the preacher admonishes the governor and then launches into criticism of his behavior in a discourse directed at the prince, who is also at the gathering. The basic premise of the preacher’s speech is that “the happiest of rulers is he whose people are happy in him.” The preacher publicly shames the governor and persuades him to repent and redress the wrongs inflicted on the petitioner. To make further amends, the governor not only thanks the preacher but also gives him presents and extends an invitation to his home.

After the preacher finishes his discourse, he revels in his success among the company and then exits the place. Al-Harith, the narrator of the story, follows the preacher and “show[s] him a sharp glance.” When the preacher notices al-Harith, he recites in verse:

I am he whom thou knowest, Harith,
The talker with kings, the wit, the intimate.
I charm as charm not the triple-twisted strings,
At times a brother of earnest, at times a jester.
Events have not changed me since I met thee,
Nor has vexing calamity peeled my branch;
Nor has any splitting edge cloven my tooth;
But my claw is fixed in every prey:
On each herd that roams my wolf is ravaging;
So that it is as though I were the heir of all mankind,
Their Shem, their Ham, and their Japhet.

It is through this poetry and the earlier discourse, an alternation between prose and poetry, that al-Harith recognizes the preacher’s true identity—Abu Zayd al-Saruji—and credits him with a genuine act of piety exceeding that of ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd. Abu Zayd then leaves, “trailing his sleeves.” The story ends when, to al-Harith’s regret, Abu Zayd disappears from Rayy.

This maqāma (assembly, session, or séance), named for the town of Rayy, is the twenty-first of fifty. It highlights key features of the other forty-nine assemblies. As in the majority of maqāmas (forty-nine out of fifty), al-Harith is the narrator and serves as a witness to Abu Zayd’s profound linguistic eloquence, broad knowledge of the history of literature and culture, and erudition in all areas of human inquiry, as well as their highly specialized vocabularies. Abu Zayd is the hero—though one might also propose “anti-hero,” depending on the reader’s moral makeup and personal proclivities. In
doing what he does; that through language he ensnares everyone he meets; he is unto a crowd of people what a wolf is to a sheepfold; and to emphasize his wide-reaching influence over humanity, Abu Zayd likens himself to Shem, Ham, and Japhet, the sons of Noah and heirs of mankind, all combined into one person. 

Although Abu Zayd uses his linguistic brilliance and guile to dupe people, no one is ever really hurt as a result but is instead deprived of money, valuables, other personal possessions, or the kindness expected in light of the hospitality they extended to a stranger. Those tricked by Abu Zayd survive with bruised egos, their human frailties exposed.

In maqāma 25, of Karaj (between Isfahan and Hamadan), al-Harith begins his narration by noting that
he had come to town to settle some business but that the winter weather was so severe there that he stayed indoors as much as possible. Work required that he leave his lodging one day and he came upon a crowd of people who had gathered around an old man nearly naked, save for a turban wrapped from a handkerchief and “breeched with a napkin” (i.e., a loincloth). (Later overpainting, perhaps a repair, has almost entirely concealed the naked man, who stands in the archway.) The inadequately dressed man addresses the crowd in verse (fig. 2):

O people, nothing can announce to you my poverty
More truly than this, my nakedness in the season of cold.
So from my outward misery, judge ye
The inward of my condition, and what is hidden of my state.
And beware a change in the truce of fortune:
For know that I was once illustrious in rank,
I had command of plenty, and of a blade that severed;

But his fortunes changed and he lost his social status. The man ends his poem with the final lines, “Who will cloak me either with embroidered garment or ragged coat/Seeking the face of God, and not my thanks?” and reverts to a discourse composed of rhymed prose (sajʿ). It is here that the nearly naked man makes an allusion to the “winter with its kāfs,” and states that in prior years he had always been able to prepare for “the cold weather.” Now, he remarks, “my arm is my pillow, my skin is my garment, the hollow of my hand is my dish.” A person in the crowd challenges the man’s pedigree, now that he has proved his erudition—evident from his speech—to which the old man retorts, “A curse on him who boasts of mouldering bones! There is no glory but in piety and choice scholarship,” a sentiment amplified by a verse on the same theme. The man then sat down,

Fig. 2. Abu Zayd, nearly naked, stands in a doorway and recites poetry to a crowd, maqāma 25, of Karaj. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fols. 74b–75a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
collapsing into a shivering mass. It is at this moment that al-Harith, struck by literary elegances resembling those of al-Asma’i, takes a very close look at the man and recognizes him as Abu Zayd, who, he concludes, is using nakedness as a “noose for the prey.”12 Perceiving al-Harith’s dawning recognition, Abu Zayd fears being exposed. On the spot he recites: “I swear by the shade of night and the moon, by the stars and the new moon-light, that none shall cloak me [laysa yasturunī] save one whose disposition is goodly, whose face is imbued with the dew of benevolence.”13 Here, Abu Zayd’s choice of the word for “cloak me” (yasturunī: from the verb satara) was an intentional ambiguity. He knew al-Harith would understand the figurative meaning—“conceal me”—of his imperative, while other members of the audience would understand it simply in the literal sense of giving him clothes.14 This appeal played to al-Harith’s vanity and he took pity on Abu Zayd, giving him his fur coat. The other men at the gathering were similarly moved to feel sorry for the skimply clad man and donated their furs and colored coats—so many that the man could hardly carry them away.

Al-Harith pursues Abu Zayd (fig. 3), who, in response to al-Harith’s instructions not to go naked again, rebukes him for speaking about things of which he has no knowledge. Wanting to leave, agitated and angry, Abu Zayd adds that al-Harith should know his nature (shinshinati) too well by now to hope for reform. Trying to cajole Abu Zayd, al-Harith offers that he could have exposed him to the crowd of onlookers but did not; if he had, Abu Zayd would not have received the donated clothing and “come off more coated than an onion.”15 And then comes the quid pro quo. When al-Harith asks Abu Zayd what he meant in his speech by the phrase “the kāfs of winter,” Abu Zayd reminds him of a poem by Ibn Sukkara (d. 995–96) in which seven things—all beginning with the Arabic letter kāf (“k”)—are spoken of as necessary to pass a winter in comfort: “A home, a purse, a stove, a cup of wine after the roast meat, and a pleasant wife, and clothing” (kinn wa kīs wa kānūn wa kāʾs til ba’d al-kabāb wa kuss nāʿim wa kisāʾ).16 Abu Zayd concludes: “Surely an answer that heals is better than a cloak that warms; so be content with what thou hast learnt and depart.”17 Al-Harith spends the winter missing his fur coat.

In maqāma 31, al-Harith travels from his home to the region of Syria (Sham) with the intention of trading. He pitches his tent at Ramla, where he encounters an encampment of pilgrims preparing to leave and continue their pilgrimage to Mecca. Al-Harith is moved to change his plans and joins them. When the caravan reaches Juhfa—the Syrian pilgrims’ station—the pilgrims alight from their camels and start to unpack their belongings; a partly clothed man emerges from the mountains and starts to address the pilgrims in rhymed prose and verse on the duties of religion (fig. 4 [a and b]). According to him, the ḥajj did not consist simply of traveling to Mecca and enduring various physical (“emaciating of bodies”) and emotional hardships (“separation from children”) on the long road, but was also about abstaining from sin, maintaining “purity of submissiveness,” and the “fervor of virtue.” Thus, he urged the pilgrims to comprehend the full significance of what they were doing and continued to offer moral guidance through another extended oration. Once again al-Harith recognizes the man’s true identity—he “sniffed the breeze of Abu Zayd”—and, happy to encounter him again, approached Abu Zayd, attaching himself “like the lām to the alif”—a metaphor of the written Arabic letters “L” and “A” spooning each other. But Abu Zayd rejects al-Harith, announcing that he had vowed not to associate with anyone, “neither ride together nor alternately with any one, neither make gain nor boast of pedigree, neither seek profit, nor companionship, nor else accommodate myself to him who dissembles.”18 As Abu Zayd was departing, he made one more speech to the pilgrims. In al-Harith’s words, Abu Zayd then “sheathed the blade of his tongue, and went on his way.” As the caravan journeyed on to Mecca, al-Harith continued to look everywhere for Abu Zayd but could never find him. Maqāma 31 is one of only a few of the fifty assemblies in which Abu Zayd behaves honestly—using eloquence for good purposes without any trace of a swindle.
Fig. 3. Abu Zayd confronted by al-Harith, maqāma 25, of Karaj. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 76a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
Fig. 4, a and b. Abu Zayd addresses a caravan of pilgrims, *maqāma* 31, of Ramla. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fols. 94b–95a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
AL-HARIRI’S MAQĀMĀT: APPROACHES TO ITS STUDY AND THE WORD-IMAGE DEBATE

As these introductory selections suggest, there is much humor in Abu Muhammad al-Qasim b. ’Ali b. Muhammad b. Uthman al-Hariri al-Basri’s Maqāmāt (Assemblies), a tour-de-force of medieval Arabic literature, and chief among its works of belles-lettres. Although it is a text about the power of language to persuade, mostly discourse delivered by Abu Zayd viva voce, it was also transmitted in written forms, and al-Hariri’s brilliance as an author could only be completely appreciated by actually seeing his text written in a manuscript. For its complete meaning and registers of literary operation to be properly understood, this was a text that required access to the physical book—seeing the writing and not merely hearing it recited. This aspect of the Maqāmāt is exemplified by such elements as palindromic sentences and poems or other texts written entirely with, or without, diacritical marks, such as in maqāma 26, “the spotted,” where alternate lines in one discourse are composed of dotted or undotted letters. Arabic is a fully phonetic language, with each one of its letters corresponding to a unique sound (the use of homonyms, a set of repeated shapes to build the written alphabet, was remedied by a system of dots of various numbers and configurations to designate individual phonemes). While the audition of a correct recitation of the Maqāmāt would reveal differences between dotted and undotted letters, it was only through seeing the written text that the ingenuity and play of al-Hariri’s constructions could be completely appreciated.

Apart from these ingenious devices—and al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt is replete with them—the special difficulty and lexical gamesmanship of the author dictated that manuscript copies were fully vowelized and letter pointed, carrying the whole panoply of conventional orthographic signs (such as intensifications [doublings of consonants] and markers for indefinite nouns). In this respect, it approaches manuscript copies of the Koran and makes it unlike the vast majority of medieval Arabic texts. Despite the many difficulties of its arcane and archaizing language (a lexicon of outmoded and learned meanings), countless copies of the Maqāmāt were produced—some 700 were authorized during al-Hariri’s life—twenty commentaries were made, the best known by al-Sharishi (d. 1222), and an impressive number of illustrated copies, eleven in all, are extant from the period between the early thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Of these examples, this essay is concerned with one: the manuscript copied and illustrated by Yahya b. Mahmud b. Yahya b. Abi al-Hasan b. Kuwarriha al-Wasiti, dated May 4, 1237. Notwithstanding its fame through frequent reproduction, this manuscript has been selected for three main reasons, each one related to its special status: the first is that al-Wasiti copied the text and painted the narrative images, strong evidence of his agency in conceptualizing an interpretation of al-Hariri’s text; the second concerns al-Wasiti’s capacity to innovate while at the same time working within the bounds of established practices of the art of the book and painting; the third—and perhaps most important—has to do with the incomplete, often misleading, presentation of the 1237 Maqāmāt manuscript through scholarly publications.

Although al-Hariri (d. 1122), poet and philologist, became synonymous with the genre, he notes in the preface to his Maqāmāt that it had been “devised” by Badiʿ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (d. 1008). Al-Hariri probably composed his Maqāmāt between 1101 and 1108. In the field of literary studies, much of the scholarship about the Maqāmāt has focused on the relationship between the texts composed by al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri, in addition to the origins and features of the genre. The concept of a gathering of anecdotes is believed to stem from such models as Abu ʿUthman ʿAmr b. Bahr b. Mahbub al-Jahiz’s Kitāb al-Bukhalāʾ (Book of Misers; before 869), a penetrating, humorous, and satirical work on the avarice of non-Arabs, with a whole chapter devoted to vagabonds; Abu Hanifa Ahmad b. Dawud al-Dinawari’s Al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl (Tales of Long-Lived Men; before 903), an entertaining history written from an Iranian perspective; and Abu ʿAli al-Muhassin al-Tanukhi’s Nishwār al-muhāḍara (Desultory Conversations; before 994), a massive record of events, anecdotes, and actions that the author deemed important enough to commit to writing. Al-Husri (d. 1022), a scholar living in North Africa, asserted that al-Hamadhani’s Maqāmāt imitated a collection of forty tales composed by Ibn Durayd (d. 934),
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Another Arab poet and philologist born in Basra. A. F. L. Beeston observes the staggering range of variables in the anecdote: it may be very short or long, and “in content it may deal with a humorous or pithy saying, a remarkable event, a piece of literary criticism, a riddle, or even (in the Arabic ambience) a grammatical observation or a well-expressed piece of religious homily.”

But he identifies three traits common to all: the anecdote is introduced against a background of contingent detail, which enlivens it; the author presents the anecdote as true or truthfully narrated; and each anecdote stands alone as an autonomous, independent component.

In the 800s, developments in Arabic literature took place of importance to the later Maqāmāt, especially al-Hariri’s work. These changes involved the combination of the oratorical style of the Friday sermon (khuṭba), “marked by strong parallelism and ‘balance’ but devoid of rhyme,” which were “married to ornamental features derived from verse, namely rhyming and tropes (the latter collectively referred to as bāḍī’), producing a new kind of saj’,... which rapidly achieved a tremendous dominance over prose writing.” By the mid-900s, the use of saj’ became commonplace in religious sermons and in secular epistles (risāla). Saj’ has been described as a rhythmical prose that uses “rhythmic units which are generally quite short..., terminated by a clausula,” with the units “grouped sequentially on a common rhyme.”

Al-Hamadhani’s contribution was to apply saj’ to a compilation of anecdotes of the sort made by al-Tanukhi, whose dominant theme was, in Beeston’s words, “the tatterdemalion who is nevertheless a miracle of cleverness and eloquence, and the final anagorisis in which he proves to be something other than he appears.” Unlike al-Tanukhi, al-Hamadhani presents the majority of his anecdotes on the authority of one man. Building on al-Hamadhani’s model, al-Hariri consistently introduces each anecdote on the authority of the narrator, al-Harith b. Hammam al-Basri, always paired with the same hero, Abu Zayd al-Saruji. This establishes a consistent structure of narrative presentation throughout al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt. Another development from al-Hamadhani’s model is al-Hariri’s systematic application of saj’ to his Maqāmāt, fashioning a text dominated by rhymed and rhythmical prose interspersed with poetry. He also demonstrates a capacity for poetic composition and invention that outstrips al-Hamadhani: of all the poems appearing in his Maqāmāt, al-Hariri borrows only a handful from other authors.

While historians of Arabic literature and language have studied al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt in a relatively continuous chain of scholarship and publication going back to the 1800s—with recent research on the text as a literary work to be discussed later—the same cannot be said for art historians. Illustrated copies of the Maqāmāt of al-Hariri were only occasionally exhibited and published over the course of the early 1900s, and enjoyed their greatest public exposure in 1962 in Richard Ettinghausen’s book titled Arab Painting, which focused on two illustrated manuscripts, the 1237 Maqāmāt made by al-Wasiti and the undated copy in St. Petersburg (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, S23), datable to circa 1225–35. Ettinghausen styled both as embodiments of the “apogee” of painting in Arabic manuscripts, made at a watershed, on the eve of the long “decline” that he traces from the second half of his book until the eighteenth century (the two Maqāmāt appear precisely in the middle of Arab Painting, a true fulcrum!). The most comprehensive effort to analyze the illustrated Maqāmāts as a group was offered by Oleg Grabar in 1984. Grabar focused on thirteen illustrated copies of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt, eleven of them made in the 1200s through 1300s, to prepare the groundwork for an examination of how the Arabic text was visualized and integrated with its images, adopting an approach forged through the study of manuscripts from Byzantium and medieval Europe.

But ultimately Grabar’s interest migrated to other questions he had considered in earlier studies: how the illustrated Maqāmāt participated in a widespread contemporaneous production of objects bearing figural imagery—described by Ettinghausen as an “efflorescence” or “flowering” of the arts—and how such objects, particularly ceramics, metalwork, and books, reflected the interests and impulses of a broad medieval clientele, “the mercantile, artisanal and scholarly bourgeoisie of the larger Arabic-speaking cities.” For Grabar, the Maqāmāt both reflected and embodied the personal and collective priorities of a literate, Arabic-speaking,
urban social formation that became active as patrons and consumers.\textsuperscript{38} In a subsequent monograph, Shirley Guthrie developed Grabar’s line of thought, seeing in the illustrations to al-Hariri’s \textit{Maqāmāt}—especially the 1237 copy fashioned by al-Wasiti—a “visual evidence amplifying and complementing literary and historical accounts of the medieval Near East,” hence approaching the paintings as a form of medieval social reportage.\textsuperscript{39} Guthrie was also responding to Ettinghausen’s notion of a “realism” in subject matter and pictorial style that originated in the art of the Fatimid dynasty of North Africa and Egypt between the late 900s and 1179 and which continued under the Seljuq and Ayyubid dynasties of Greater Iran, Syria, and Egypt up through the 1250s, when the Mongol conquests brought about a large-scale aesthetic and artistic realignment across these lands.\textsuperscript{40} When Grabar had the opportunity to revisit the 1237 \textit{Maqāmāt} through the publication of a facsimile edition in 2003, he did not develop new positions on the manuscript but reiterated his main formulations of 1984.\textsuperscript{41} In his 2013 book about the same \textit{Maqāmāt} manuscript, David James hews close to approaches to the study of the \textit{Maqāmāt} that he developed beginning in the mid-1960s and published in an article in 1974.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite frequent acknowledgements of the extraordinary artistic accomplishments evident in the 1237 \textit{Maqāmāt}, as well as in related manuscripts, and of the complex and ambitious pictorial cycles created to accompany al-Hariri’s text, art historians have not attended to the full range of ways in which the text—a large-scale aesthetic and artistic realignment across these lands.\textsuperscript{40} When Grabar had the opportunity to revisit the 1237 \textit{Maqāmāt} through the publication of a facsimile edition in 2003, he did not develop new positions on the manuscript but reiterated his main formulations of 1984.\textsuperscript{41} In his 2013 book about the same \textit{Maqāmāt} manuscript, David James hews close to approaches to the study of the \textit{Maqāmāt} that he developed beginning in the mid-1960s and published in an article in 1974.\textsuperscript{42}

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and literature, rather than on his gifted storytelling. By privileging what medieval commentators valued most about al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt*, modern literary historians prompted art historians to move away from the text and explain the preponderance of paintings through other causes.

At one level, the conundrum is easily dismissed, or abated, if one restores the visual properties of the written text. Al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt* is certainly a mode of verbal play, a form of game, which Abd al-Fattah Kilito has described as a “poetic calligraphy” and an “expression of the desire to explore the possibilities of language, to tantalize experience through the resources of an alphabet.”50 As noted above, al-Hariri deploys, among other feats of mastery, palindromic prose sentences and verses, and sentences written entirely with, or without, diacritical marks, both pointed and unpointed letters (fig. 5). On a sensorial register, these effects can be more readily seen than heard. When he copied al-Hariri’s text, moreover, al-Wasiti structured it to render monologue distinct from dialogue, to separate out poetry from prose, and to emphasize for his reader/viewer, among many other literary phenomena, a sequence of riddles (fig. 6). Here the assembled company are presented with ten versified riddles—each one introduced by the prose line “then… he said/saying/recited” (*thamma* ... *qāla*/ *inshā yaqūlu/* *anshāda*). The riddles themselves consist of two couplets each, but use different meters.51 Throughout the manuscript, prose text is written across the full width of the page—the ligatures connecting letters subtly stretched or contracted to make the words in a line comfortably fit the assigned width without bunching or over extension—to produce the impression of blocks of text contained within an invisible

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**Fig. 5.** Text page with palindromic sentences and verses, from *maqāma* 16. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 43a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)

**Fig. 6.** Text page with versified riddles, from *maqāma* 36, of Maltiyya. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 111a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
rectangular border (the effect is comparable to a justified text), framed by a margin on four sides. Poetry is arranged in one, two, three, or four columns, centered on the page when single and double, extending to the full width of the prose text when tripled or quadrupled. On the page, the voice of each speaker—al-Harith and Abu Zayd—is emphasized amid continuous text by the expansion of the letter lām making up the verb qāla (“he said”), for example. The formal patterning of text emphasizes and renders legible the various structures and modes of discourse. And on a larger level, each of the fifty maqāmas is introduced by a separate title in thuluth script, executed either in gold outlined in black ink or in red pigment, that follow a consistent pattern of naming the maqāmas by their number (1–50).52

In doing all of these things, al-Wasiti was simply following a set of scribal practices developed long before in the culture of the Arabic book and used throughout earlier dated copies of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt, whether illustrated or not.53 In light of all of these features, it is clear that the written Arabic text was a sufficiently adequate visual manifestation to obviate pictorial attempts at its translation, whether abstract or figural. One might imagine the improbable representation of the list comprising the seven “kāfs” of winter from maqāma 25, of Karaj—home, purse, stove, cup of wine, roast meat, wife, clothing—and not the figural depiction of Abu Zayd carrying a bag of looted furs and robes confronted by al-Harith (fig. 3). But such a conceptual form of visual rendering was not developed anywhere among the broad range of genres of Arabic literature that were joined by painted or drawn images. A vast number of images in different kinds of Arabic texts from the medieval period favor the mimetic representation of people or things and depictions of narrative, even when the latter are not called for by the text.54

There is one maqāma, among others, in which the written text plays a prominent role. In maqāma 7, of Barqaʿid, a town near Mosul, a blind man appears in a mosque with an old woman to guide him (fig. 7). As the preacher delivers his sermon from the pulpit, al-Harith watches the man—who has his eyes closed—and woman move through the mosque. The man takes “scraps of paper that had been written on with colours of dyes in the season of leisure” from a bag slung over his arm, and the woman delivers them to the laps of members of the congregation who appear to be charitable.55 One falls into al-Harith’s hands, and when he reads it he discovers alliterative and punning verses. Al-Harith immediately suspects that the blind man might be Abu Zayd. Now the woman works her way through the assembly to collect the papers and donations and then leaves. When she is united with Abu Zayd, she discovers that one scrap of paper is still missing. As the woman returns to the mosque to retrieve it, she meets al-Harith, who says that he will pay her one dirham if she reveals its author’s identity. She tells him only that the man is from Saruj and grabs the coin. Al-Harith, fearful that it is Abu Zayd and that he has actually gone blind, eventually meets up with the trickster. When al-Harith is alone with Abu Zayd, the hero opens his eyes to reveal perfect eyesight. In its use of the written text as a means of exchange, this maqāma further thematizes the written form of language and hence discourse as a visual medium.

A second dimension to the word-image conundrum—which has persisted as a red herring—relates to the modern critical reception of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt. Though early literary historians, the learned people who wrote commentaries on the text, clearly favored its verbal acrobatics and scholarly language—really an anachronism in its own time—recent approaches to the fifty maqāmas have restored the importance of narrative and also suggested a thematic coherence across the fifty assemblies.56 But of course this new appreciation of the text is one already suggested by those several medieval manuscripts that contain developed programs of paintings: the point to be emphasized here is that the Maqāmāt was illustrated not only because the stories were appealing and entertaining but because the stories also played an integral role in the larger themes of al-Hariri’s text, one of which is the play between truth and falsehood, between semblance and dissemblance.57

These problems between word and image can also be addressed by a shift in emphasis. What happens if we view the Maqāmāt text as staging a particular form of collaboration with images, a potential to be realized in some illustrated versions of it? Instead of emphasizing what is perceived as an irreconcilable difference between the capacities of word and image—and
lamenting the absence of unlikely visual manifestations of the text—can we think of proper content not only as information but also as theme? If we approach the text of al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt* as thematizing discourse, the pragmatics of communication between people, then the narrative components would be a highly appropriate choice for the illustrations precisely because of their discursive potential. If this is accepted, it is hardly surprising that the frame stories should have been al-Wasiti’s primary choice.

The next four sections of this study expand upon this hypothesis about illustrated copies of al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt* to explore some of the implications of the parallel life of word and image, in addition to gauging their cumulative effect in relation to each other (intertwined as they are on the page). Through analysis of the 1237 *Maqāmāt*, I examine the frame story and visualizations of discourse; the structure of the *maqāma* and the *Maqāmāt*; “Confession,” *maqāma* 50, of Basra; and, in the conclusion, the “pursuit of shadows.”

THE 1237 MAQĀMĀT COPIED AND ILLUSTRATED BY AL-WASITI

The 1237 *Maqāmāt* opens with an illuminated title—a broad rectangle flanked by two discs—executed in gold, black ink, white, and blue opaque pigments. The simple title, *al-maqāmāt al-haririyya*, is rendered in a white *thuluth* script set over an animated leafy scroll (fig. 8). It is followed by a double-page painting (fols. 1b–2a) of an audience divided over the two pages,
parting knowledge to students. These kinds of images establish through representation the basis of the authority of the text as a form of visual license, but also underscore a cultural concern with the transmission of knowledge and the biographical foundation of each discipline. Al-Hariri’s preface begins immediately on the next page, introduced by a caption in *thuluth* script, painted in gold and outlined in black, and each individual *maqāma*, also separately captioned, follows in sequence number one through fifty, the ninety-nine paintings interspersed among the remaining folios (see table 1).

The 1237 *Maqāmāt* is one of only a very few medieval illustrated Arabic manuscripts that gives the name of the illustrator, in this case the same person who copied the text. While the colophon provides these details, al-Wasiti’s extended name tracing four generations, and a detailed timing of the manuscript’s completion—“at the conclusion of the day, Saturday 7 Ramadan, [in] the year 634 [May 4, 1237]” (ākhir nahār yawn al-sabt sādis shahr Ramaḍān sanati arbaʿa wa thalāthīn wa sittamiʾa)—there is no mention of a place or patron (fig. 9). The location of production of the 1237 *Maqāmāt* is generally believed to have been Baghdad, a hypothesis based on stylistic comparisons to other dated and located manuscripts, as well as sheer probability. These brief details provide some sense of the scope of the work—the general sequence and internal organization of the manuscript—and underscore a key point, one noted by several scholars: because al-Wasiti was both scribe and illustrator, when he wrote out al-Hariri’s text he decided where to leave gaps for illustrations, how they would be sequenced, and how to position the illustrations on each page. The paintings are often closely keyed to specific lines of the text. As a totality, the paintings must be thought of as completely integrated with the written text.

The frame story and visualizations of discourse

Kilito reduced each of the fifty *maqāmas* to a scheme: the arrival of the narrator (*rāwī*) in a town; the encounter with the hero (*balīgh*), who is disguised; the discourse; reward; recognition; reproach; justification; and parting. This scheme is applicable to almost every *maqāma*—with some permutations/reversals in se-
Table 1. The 1237 *Maqāmāt* of al-Hariri (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maqāma number and name</th>
<th>Folios with paintings</th>
<th># of images</th>
<th>Double-page compositions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prefatory materials</td>
<td>1a</td>
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<td>Illuminated title</td>
<td>1b</td>
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<td>Enthronement and audience</td>
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<td>1. “of Sanʿa”</td>
<td>4b</td>
<td>5b</td>
<td>6b</td>
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<td>7a</td>
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<td>3. “of the coin” (of Qayla)</td>
<td>9b</td>
<td>10a</td>
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<td>4. “of Damietta”</td>
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<td>13b</td>
<td>14b</td>
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<td>5. “of Kufa”</td>
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<td>6. “of Maragha”</td>
<td>18b</td>
<td>19a</td>
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<td>7. “of Barqaʿid”</td>
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<td>22a</td>
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<td>8. “of Maʿarra”</td>
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<td>9. “of Alexandria”</td>
<td>26a</td>
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<td>10. “of Rahba”</td>
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<td>11. “of Sava”</td>
<td>30b</td>
<td>31a</td>
<td>33a</td>
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<td>12. “of Damascus”</td>
<td>35a</td>
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<td>13. “of Baghdad”</td>
<td>37b</td>
<td>38a</td>
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<td>14. “of Mecca”</td>
<td>40a</td>
<td>41a</td>
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<td>15. “the legal”</td>
<td>42a</td>
<td>43b</td>
<td>44a</td>
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<td>16. “of the Maghrib”</td>
<td>46b</td>
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<td>17. “the reversed”</td>
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<td>18. “of Sinjar”</td>
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<td>20. “of Mayyafarīqīn”</td>
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<td>21. “of Rayy”</td>
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<td>22. “of the Euphrates”</td>
<td>63b</td>
<td>64a</td>
<td>67b</td>
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<td>23. “the poetic”</td>
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<td>74b</td>
<td>75a</td>
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<td>25. “of Karaj”</td>
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<td>26. “the spotted”</td>
<td>84b</td>
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<td>27. “the Bedouin”</td>
<td>89b</td>
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<td>28. “of Samarqand”</td>
<td>91b</td>
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<td>29. “of Tyre”</td>
<td>94b</td>
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<td>100b</td>
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<td>31. “of Tayba”</td>
<td>103a</td>
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<td>32. “of Tīfīs”</td>
<td>105a</td>
<td>107a</td>
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<td>33. “of Zabīd”</td>
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<td>34. “of Shiraz”</td>
<td>114b</td>
<td>116b</td>
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<td>35. “of Maltiyya”</td>
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<td>36. “of Oman”</td>
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<td>119b</td>
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<td>39. “of Tabriz”</td>
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<td>40. “of Shiraz”</td>
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<td>41. “of the virginal”</td>
<td>143a</td>
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<td>42. “of the wintry”</td>
<td>146a</td>
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<td>43. “of Ramla”</td>
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<td>44. “of Aleppo”</td>
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<td>46. “of Zabīd”</td>
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<td>47. “of Basra”</td>
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Many of the individual paintings in the 1237 *Maqāmāt* depict discrete moments in time, developed from often extremely short descriptions in the text, while some double-page paintings—appearing on facing pages of a manuscript opening (“b” folio to “a” folio)—represent a single moment divided between two images, which are meant to be read as a continuous temporality (figs. 1, 2, and 4). On rare occasions, paintings appearing on either side of an opening are to be understood as discrete moments in time happening in different locations (fig. 22).⁶⁷ The ninety-nine paintings in the 1237 *Maqāmāt* are evenly distributed across the fifty maqāma, which can be broken down thusly: two have no paintings; fourteen have one painting; twenty-three have two paintings; ten have three paintings; one has four paintings; and one has five paintings (table 1).⁶⁸ Art historians have explained the distribution through the inherent narrative potential of each maqāma—for example, maqāma 39, of Oman, richly illustrated by five paintings—by the additional artistic impulse to envision and depict scenes scarcely mentioned in, or even required by, the text.

Maqāma 2, of Hulwan, is illustrated with three sequential images over six pages (or three folios). In the first, al-Harith meets Abu Zayd at Hulwan and they leave each other’s company, although moving in a direction opposite to the text (fig. 10). Al-Harith next travels to Basra, where a man “with a thick beard and a squalid aspect” (Abu Zayd) enters the town library (a “meeting place of residents and strangers”), sits in the back row, and proceeds to join the assembly in a learned discussion of poetry, demonstrating his excellent knowledge of poetry, its interpretation, and criticism (fig. 11).⁶⁹ In the third painting, Abu Zayd is portrayed standing up and leaving a group of seated men at the end of the maqāma, after al-Harith has recognized him (fig. 12). Before Abu Zayd does this, al-Harith asks what has caused his beard to go gray and make him unrecognizable. Abu Zayd responds with another verse in which he cautions al-Harith that no man can escape the deleterious effects of time and fortune: though life may go well one day, it is but a deceitful impression for it will turn bad the next.

Maqāma 10, named after Rahba, is illustrated with two paintings: a disagreement between an old man and

Fig. 9. Colophon. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 167b. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
meanwhile, grabs the arm of the beautiful slave, dressed in enviable finery. Desiring to save the slave from the old man’s clutches, the governor promises to pay a sum of one hundred dinār, except the purse cannot be raised immediately. Later it transpires that the slave is none other than Abu Zayd’s son and his accomplice. Abu Zayd promises to wait with him in the courtyard until the sum can be raised and is joined by al-Harith, the meeting depicted in the second of the two paintings illustrating maqāma 10 (fig. 14). Like the other paintings

Fig. 10. Al-Harith meets Abu Zayd, maqāma 2, of Hulwan. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 4b. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
incorporated into developed architectural spaces defining specific building types—mosques (fig. 7), libraries (fig. 11), and domestic spaces, among others.

Similar visual devices are used to portray outdoor activities. For example, the seafaring scene from maqāma 39 (fol. 119b), named after Oman, shows a boat floating on rippled water. Gardens or other outdoor venues can be shown by the economy of a single tree or a flowering, verdant ground line (maqāma 32, of Tayba, fol. 100b). In paintings of buildings, the environments

Fig. 11. Abu Zayd and al-Harith meet in a library at Basra, maqāma 2, of Hulwan. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 5b. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
of discourse are staged as cutaways composed of single or multi-storied spaces, as in the tavern of *maqāma* 12, of Damascus (the taverns were located in the town of ‘Ana, fol. 33a). Throughout these discrete temporali
ties—depicted as single paintings or as pairs of paintings appearing on facing pages of the open manuscript—a shorthand of repetitive visual forms is applied that together make up the morphology of al-Wasiti’s pictorial means. In each painting, a distinct emphasis is given to representing acts of communication. Scenes are very rarely populated by a single figure (fols. 51a, 101a, 121a, and 143a); more frequently they comprise two people, Abu Zayd and al-Harith (fols. 4b, 8b, 14b, 37b, 40a, 41a, 44a, 57a, 76a, 79a, 86a, 100b, 117b, 130a, 130b, 134a, 160b, 162b, and 166a), three people (fols. 3b, 10a, 11b, 13b, 27a, 67b, and 90a), or, with still greater frequency, groups, even throngs, of people assembled in different venues (fols. 5b, 6b, 7a, 9b, 12b, 16a, 18b, 19a, 21a, 22a, 25a, 26a, 29b, 30b, 31a, 33a, 35a, 38a, 42a, 43b, 46b, 47b, 48a, 50b, 52b, 53a, 55b, 56a, 58b, 59a, 61a, 63b, 64a, 69b, 74b, 75a, 77a, 84b, 89a, 91b, 92a, 94b, 95a, 103a, 105a, 107a, 110a, 114b, 118a, 119b, 120b, 122b, 125a, 126a, 131b, 133b, 138a, 139b, 140a, 146a, 148b, 152a, 154b, 155b, 156a, 158b, and 164b). These scenes universally emphasize verbal communication, but the most emphatic and dramatic exchanges are projected by those paintings composed of fewer figures. Though mute, the paintings conjure discourse of various
forms—monologue, dialogue, and communication among groups of people—and bustle with the activities of human exchange: the primary mode of sociability, human interaction, occurs in al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt through speech. In pictorial terms, discourse is conveyed through the pose of the figure, whether sitting or standing, the tilt of the head, and variations in a vocabulary of hand and arm gestures, including the outstretched open hand or hands, a raised and extended arm, a pointed finger. A finger held to the lips signals astonishment or cogitation. In nearly every painting, regardless of the number of figures involved, al-Wasiti portrays a speaker and his audience. The viewer’s apprehension of communication in process is further enhanced by the constant animation of bodies that adopt different positions in relation to each other and to the viewer. The visual code of discourse is made especially dramatic by al-Wasiti’s richly polychromed compositions, which form sharp contours and stark contrasts against the unpainted paper grounds that enclose them. The general absence of framing—except in those examples where architecture becomes a de facto frame inhabited by people and their actions—lends the paintings a still more immediate relationship to the text and the paper folios that they occupy.

**The structure of the Maqāma and the Maqāmāt**

Al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt begins with a preface and ends with a confession—which finds a contrite Abu Zayd in al-Hariri’s hometown of Basra—but nothing requires that the intervening forty-nine maqāmas be read in nu-
merical order: “there is no chronological implication in the sequence.” D. S. Richards’ analysis of manuscripts of al-Hamadhani’s Maqāmāt indicates that the order of the maqāmas differs in the earliest manuscripts of the text, a fact that causes him to question J. N. Mattock’s supposition that al-Hamadhani intended his Maqāmāt to be read in order, operating cumulatively as a “‘running gag,’ a joke that provokes...an increasingly exasperated, but at the same time amused, reaction from the audience.” As Mattock proposed, if the text were to have the effect of a running gag, it would require a linear reading to produce a “sustained and cumulative” effect. Evidence suggests that the same concern does not apply to the manuscript corpus of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt, however: throughout the century leading up to its illustration in the early 1200s, a fixed sequence of the fifty maqāmas was maintained assiduously in manuscript copies. Despite this evidence, of course, there is no guarantee or requirement that a reader would go through the assemblies in numerical sequence, and one might add that the autonomous maqāmas were sufficiently brief to be read singly.

The narrative breakdown between successive, individual maqāmas of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt—a feature that seems to reinscribe the independence of each maqāma as a unit—has also been a topic of discussion in the field of Arabic literary history. As Jareer Abu-Haidar observes, “we never see Abū Zayd on his travels. He seems to move from one city of the Islamic world to another in the interval or intermission, so to speak, between two Maqāmas, and the setting of the Maqāma is unimportant if one does not say altogether trivial.” Elsewhere, Abu-Haidar concludes that the Maqāmāt as a genre did not “present a framework story with which the separate tales could be more closely integrated to form a novel.” In other words, the Maqāmāt was an aggregate of parts whose coherence, if any, lay not in sequence but in theme: the individual maqāmas were interrelated more paradigmatically than syntagmatically.

These assessments of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt—if one does not accept Kilito’s and Zakharia’s arguments in favor of the sequential implications of the total text—come across as balanced and accurate, but it must be said that the illustrations function in another way. While the illustration of an individual maqāma obeys the anecdote’s autonomy, and each maqāma is pictorialized through images that show a chain of causes and their effects—with paratactical gaps left between the series of images making up each maqāma and between each successive maqāma—the cumulative effect of the illustrations has a different result. Just consider the rate of illustration. In the year of its production, the 1237 Maqāmāt had the highest rate of illustration, with ninety-nine paintings spread across 168 folios. A painting appears every 3.4 pages. The Maqāmāt dated 1256 (London, British Library, Or. 1200) is the next closest, with eighty-seven paintings appearing across 155 folios; hence a painting occurs every 3.5 pages on average.

The highest rate of illustration would have been achieved if the 1323 Maqāmāt (London, British Library, Or. Add. 7293) had been completed, but the ambition of its planner—more than three hundred spaces are left for paintings, a fraction of them completed—presumably outstripped the capacities, or patience, of those persons making it. The main point of these basic statistics is to demonstrate the high rate of illustration in the 1237 Maqāmāt. This feature allowed for several images to appear in an individual maqāma, and dispersed across the whole book they created a sense of coherence and cyclicity.

Some additional examples from maqāma 3, “of the coin,” and maqāma 16, of the Maghrib, underscore these observations. In the frame story of maqāma 3, an old man comes before an assembly and, feigning lameness, describes his former wealth and current poverty in eloquent verse. This is easily accomplished. The old man puts the two coins in his mouth and walks away. The poems of praise and dispraise are arranged to mirror each other across the two pages of text (fols. 7b-8a) intersected...
I have feigned to be lame, not from love of lameness, but that I may knock at the gate of relief. For my cord is thrown on my neck, and I go as one who ranges freely. Now if men blame me I say, “Excuse me: sure there is no guilt on the lame.”

Fig. 15. Al-Harith and an assembly of men listening to Abu Zayd who pretends to be lame, *maqâma* 3, of “the coin” (*al-dīnarīya*). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fol. 7a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)

between the pages bearing paintings (fols. 7a and 8b).

Again al-Harith realizes that the old man was Abu Zayd “and that his going lame was for a trick.” He goes after him, calling out: “Thou art recognized by thy eloquence, so straighten thy walk.” The second painting shows the closing sequence of the *maqâma*, where the narrator and hero meet (fig. 16). Abu Zayd initially does not recognize al-Harith, who again asks him about his present condition and reprimands him for playing the fool and simulating disability. But Abu Zayd prevails when he recites another verse before parting:
In Pursuit of Shado

Maqāma 16 contains three paintings. The frame story begins in “one of the mosques of the West,” where al-Harith joins four scholars (fig. 17). Their conversation turns to sentences that maintain their sense when they are reversed, and the men decide to test their ability in constructing them. Each man takes his turn, advancing from palindromic sentences composed of three words to ones of four, five, and then six. Just as al-Harith fails to construct one of seven words, an old man enters and immediately pronounces just such a sentence. He then dazzles the group of men by saying that he can also offer verse palindromes. This he does in short order, reciting two poems each one composed of five lines (five distichs, ten hemistichs). After this, al-Harith recognizes Abu Zayd and introduces him to the company. The group of men invite Abu Zayd to stay with them in conversation that night, “on the condition that they should mend his poverty,” but he claims that his children are hungry and that he must go home and feed them. Stipulating that he return after his children have been fed, the men release Abu Zayd, joined by a servant who holds the wallet of money. In the second painting, organized as a double-page, Abu Zayd pulls on the wallet (the collateral), snatching it away from the servant, and counsels and chastises the latter in verse (fig. 18): Abu Zayd had led the servant down long and “branching paths” until they reached a “ruined hut” that he claimed as “the nest of my chicks.” The scene on the facing page depicts a group of seated men. The solitary servant returns to al-Harith and company, instructed...
equally commonplace groups of figures ranging from three to four or five in number, or another set of still more populated and developed settings (the cemetery in maqāma 24, fol. 29b; the waterwheel in maqāma 11, fol. 69b; the pilgrim caravan in maqāma 31, fol. 94b)—also created a visual continuity across the manuscript by repetitive paradigms. The images might be seen as sequentially parallel to the text but they can also be experienced independently of it. And although the story episodes do not add up to an overarching, coordinated narrative totality, their frequent incidence and visual form give the impression through sheer accumulation by Abu Zayd to repeat the cautionary poem to them. The basic message is to take what is available, cut one’s losses, and not hold out in expectation of more in the future. The discovery of Abu Zayd’s deceit causes al-Harith and the scholars to fight among themselves for letting him go and also being fooled by him.

Visualizing multiple moments from the frame story of each maqāma established coherence across the manuscript as a whole, an impression amplified by a high rate of illustration. Recurring typologies of image-conceptualization—from frequent pairs of gesticulating figures standing on a simple ground line, equally commonplace groups of figures ranging from three to four or five in number, or another set of still more populated and developed settings (the cemetery in maqāma 24, fol. 29b; the waterwheel in maqāma 11, fol. 69b; the pilgrim caravan in maqāma 31, fol. 94b)—also created a visual continuity across the manuscript by repetitive paradigms. The images might be seen as sequentially parallel to the text but they can also be experienced independently of it. And although the story episodes do not add up to an overarching, coordinated narrative totality, their frequent incidence and visual form give the impression through sheer accumulation by Abu Zayd to repeat the cautionary poem to them. The basic message is to take what is available, cut one’s losses, and not hold out in expectation of more in the future. The discovery of Abu Zayd’s deceit causes al-Harith and the scholars to fight among themselves for letting him go and also being fooled by him.

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of a persistent and consistent theme. In that respect they are also paradigmatic and not syntagmatic, but the capacity of the paintings to constitute immediately legible abstractions of the text made structure perceptible in a manner that the text could not. This experience of al-Wasiti’s Maqāmāt can only be obtained by direct access to the manuscript, or through its facsimile. Though Grabar’s 1984 book included a microfiche of all the paintings and other authors, like James, described the image typologies in some detail, publications of the 1237 Maqāmāt always favored reproduction of the same highly developed compositions—like those of the cemetery, waterwheel, village, and scenes of childbirth—and not the highly repetitive scenes of Abu Zayd meeting al-Harith.

Confession: Maqāma 50, of Basra

After forty-nine assemblies showing verbal trickery in various guises, the final one, maqāma 50, transports the reader to Basra. Al-Harith resolves to go to the Friday mosque, where he sees a man dressed in rags sitting on a stone and encircled by a large crowd of people (fig. 19). After he had drawn near, al-Harith immediately recognized Abu Zayd because he wore “no disguise to conceal him.” Abu Zayd recites an extraordinary praise of the city of Basra and its inhabitants. He continues by saying that he will now “disclose truly my character” (fasa-āṣduquhu ṣifatī). Abu Zayd speaks of his many travels and adventures, his capacities to remove obstacles, change people’s moods and attitudes, and
how often I have beguiled the minds of men, and devised novelties and snatched opportunities, and made lions my prey, how many a high-flown I have left prone, how many a hidden one I have brought out by my spells, and made spring its sweet water by my wiles. But there has passed what has passed, while the bough was fresh and the temple raven-haired, and the raiment of youth yet new; whereas now the skin has withered, the straight grown crooked, the dark night waxed light, and naught remains but repentance, if it avail, and to patch up the rent that has widened.78

Abu Zayd then asks the audience to pray to God for him—without expecting financial reward—and recites a poem on his sins, errors, arrogance, greed, and deceit. The assembled crowd begins to pray for Abu Zayd, answering his request. As Abu Zayd leaves, heading toward the riverbank, he is pursued by al-Harith, who questions him there on the nature of his repentance, still doubting Abu Zayd’s sincerity. Abu Zayd then leaves.

Al-Harith continues in his quest to find Abu Zayd, yet again, and hears news from a group of travelers that they had seen Abu Zayd in Saruj, the town of the scoundrel’s birth, where he had “donned the wool cloth, and was leading the rows of the praying and had become a famous devotee.” Al-Harith asks them if they speak of the man “of the Assemblies,” in reference to the Maqāmāt itself. He journeys on to Saruj, where he sees
Abu Zayd in the mosque standing in “his prayer-niche, wearing a cloak stitched together with a tooth-pick, and a patched wrapper.” Abu Zayd, who had become a mendicant, continues with his readings from the Koran and performs his five prayers until the next day arrives. Al-Harith then joins Abu Zayd in his home (bayt), where they dine on bread and olive oil (fig. 20). Abu Zayd withdraws to his oratory (muṣalla) and continues his dialogue with God (munājā) until the next morning, when he rises and makes another speech in praise of God (tasbīḥ) that brings al-Harith to tears. They then hurry to the mosque again to pray with the congregation. Abu Zayd’s devotions cause him to wail and weep, prompting al-Harith to do the same. Narrator and hero then take leave of each other for what will be the last time.

CONCLUSION: IN PURSUIT OF SHADOWS

Perhaps more than any other, maqāma 18, named after Sinjar,—encapsulates in its imagery the central theme of the fifty assemblies. In the 1237 Maqāmāt made by al-Wasiti, this particular maqāma is illustrated with four paintings arranged in two double-page openings (figs. 21 and 22). Traveling from Damascus to Baghdad
Fig. 21, a and b. Abu Zayd at the wedding banquet, fleeing the scene as the glass bowl of sweetmeats is presented, *maqāma* 18, of Sinjar. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fols. 47b–48a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
In Pursuit of Shadows: Al-Hariri’s Maqamat
Fig. 22, a and b. Abu Zayd leaves the banquet joined by a servant who carries dishes of food; Abu Zayd departs on his camel, *maqāma* 18, of Sinjar. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, fols. 50b–51a. (Photo: © Bibliothèque nationale de France)
سنغة لدك فيك بها تجردة فاحصة على هذا الوزير لما هادفه أو ذا فورأ المعلوم
كانت لبنا نمّا للاحنصاء متنبأ بفضائله وسواه يباوره بنفسه.

كأنما كشفت لنا عنهم شوقاً وحنين كثيراً لما خبرناه أثناء أن إليه
استدعاؤه السابق في ذلك الدابة لنا لا للفراق أو الفاتنة المهربة والطويلة.
كلما وألغى لنا بألف اじゃز لكلد وأنصهناه فتحنا الجواب، فشكرنا ورفيع

للجاب ضر فتاءا ندأ بأوز وأوز آهوا ويهب لنا السماح ظاهرIndicator
أذنا فين وميّز علينا وما حَلَّ معنا فضرة السماح كل شجاعاً إذا الفاتنة

بلا عجب.
with a caravan, al-Harith and Abu Zayd stop at Sinjar, where a merchant is hosting a wedding feast. Following custom, everyone is invited. Toward the end of the meal, sweetmeats are presented to the guests in a glass bowl (jām). Al-Harith relates that the bowl “was as though it had been congealed of air, or condensed of sunbeam motes, or molded of the light of the open plain, or peeled from the white pearl: And it had been furnished with assortments of comfits, and affused with a pervading perfume, and there had been poured into it a draught from Tasnim [a fountain in paradise], and it disclosed a fair aspect, and the fragrance of a gentle breeze.”

He continues: “Now when our appetites were kindled at its presence, and our palates were eager for the trial of it; and it was imminent that the squadrons should be sent forth against its train…Abu Zayd sprang up like a madman, and sundered from it as far as the lizard is sundered from the fish.” The last line refers to an Arabic proverb about the opposing climates of lizards and fish, and the belief that the lizard only inhabits arid climates. Abu Zayd fled the circle of guests—al-Wasiti depicts him running for the door, casting a glance back at the green-colored bowl—and said that he would only return on condition that the glass be removed. The glass bowl is sent away, to the dismay of the guests.

When he is asked to explain his actions, Abu Zayd answers that “glass is a betrayer” (innā al-zujāj nammām) and that he had sworn an oath not to stay near anything that is transparent (fig. 22). He continues to tell a story that he had befriended a neighbor “whose tongue cajoled while his heart was a scorpion,” and that he once owned a slave girl (jārīya) possessing many virtues, but kept her hidden from sight. After drinking too much wine one time, Abu Zayd told the treacherous neighbor about her and his trust was betrayed. The neighbor informed the governor about her and the governor, in turn, wanted to present the slave girl as a gift to the prince. Abu Zayd was forced to “barter the black” of his eye “for the yellow of coin.” Then and there he made a vow not to be in the “presence of a betrayer,” and because glass has this quality, his oath applied to it. Speaking for the group, al-Harith states that they accepted Abu Zayd’s stance and the host of the wedding invited him to return and take up the most honored position. He was then presented with ten silver trays (which as objects made from opaque matter could keep secrets) laden with sweets and honey as a gift. A servant boy carried them to Abu Zayd’s tent, where Abu Zayd distributed the sweets among the men. After declaring that he must leave and attend to his children, he mounts his camel and departs (fig. 22). ”And when his strong camel coursed along and his sociableness quitted us, he left us as an assembly whose president is gone, or a night whose moon has set.” Abu Zayd’s ruse was brilliant: he had exchanged a possible present, glass, for one more valuable, a set of silver trays, which to their further advantage could be liquidated.

Despite the fact that Abu Zayd uses the occasion of the wedding feast to speak of a treacherous friend who vowed “not to rend veils of confidence” and revealed all secrets to sight, we are more than well aware of the symmetry between Abu Zayd and his contra-ideal presented through the figure of the glass bowl. Whether animate or inanimate, the physical properties of a person or an object should be such that a secret, or a true nature, is not disclosed. Opacity is favored over transparency. And of course, throughout the maqāma, Abu Zayd enacts his ideal by appearing in various guises that make him unrecognizable, even to al-Harith, who has met him on innumerable occasions. Abu Zayd assumes various identities through a transformation of clothing (once in the guise of his wife [fig. 23]), or even its near total absence, or by simulating bodily impairments such as blindness and lameness, or assuming other characteristics associated with advancing age—such as graying hair and beard. In one of the most humorous maqāmas, Abu Zayd of Mayyafarīqin, Abu Zayd claims to have lost his sexual virility in old age. Al-Harith and his company of friends do not know what to do, whether to refuse the man’s request for money or ask him to prove his impotence. The prose is filled with extraordinary figurative imagery: e.g., “Fie on him whose rock is not moist, whose gravel oozes not!” The maqāma ends dramatically when al-Harith asks Abu Zayd to show him his “shrouded corpse” and Abu Zayd obliges (fig. 24). In conclusion, although we are cognizant of Abu Zayd’s oceanic erudition and eloquence, we get no sense from his body or his speech of the inner Abu Zayd. Notwithstanding Abu Zayd’s many physical disguises as related by al-Hariri,
the artist al-Wasiti shows him as an identifiable person among the crowd. In a large number of paintings he can be pinpointed through his white beard, for example. It is impossible to establish any kind of biographical coherence for Abu Zayd across the fifty maqāmas. In some of them he claims to be married, in others he is a bachelor; in still others he professes to have a son, or children; in others he denies progeny. The effect of these constant switches is to destabilize the link between what a person says and how they appear and behave, to shake the cultural understanding that an individual’s appearance, actions, and speech can be equated with the person. In Abu Zayd we confront a figure of protean identities whose only consistent traits are eloquence and learning—and yet, even this firmer ground is shaken because his speech is used to trick and manipulate people into certain beliefs and actions. Despite his frequent admonitions and pious counsel, Abu Zayd’s behavior contradicts his advice, especially in his various forms of personal indulgence. Spoken and written language can be meaningful, but can also be used duplicitously.

And what of al-Harith b. Hammam? He is the most generic of narrators, a non-identity signaled by a name
that commentators compared to a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad: “every one of you is a Harith, and everyone of you is a Hammam.” In the proverb, Harith denotes the person who earns a living from trade, and Hammam the person who has anxieties and worries. Al-Harith is everyman and nobody at the same time. In this respect, Abu Zayd is his double. As Kilito observes, “Zayd is, with ‘Amr, the name privileged in examples of Arab grammarians: it is therefore a synonym of ‘someone like everyone.’”\(^\text{90}\) Al-Hariri chose these most generic of Arabic names—al-Harith b. Hammam and Abu Zayd—in response to his model Badiʿ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani, about whose chief protagonists—Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari and ‘Isa b. Hisham—he notes in the preface to his own \(\text{Maqāmāt}\) “each is an unknown about whom one knows nothing, an undefined person whom one cannot identify.”\(^\text{91}\) Kilito has also discussed the scarcity of proper names in al-Hariri’s work, and that when
they are given, most frequently to historical persons, the author’s objective was for names of specific people to signal abstract qualities, attributes associated with those individuals (examples mentioned previously include Ibn Sam‘un and al-Asma‘i).

In composing the preface for the Maqāmāt, al-Hariri anticipated criticism for his work and attempted to excuse it by making a comparison to the Kalila wa Dimna (Kalila and Dimna) of Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (“the fables that relate to brutes and lifeless objects”):

I can hardly escape from the simpleton who is ignorant, or the spiteful man who feigns ignorance; who will detrac

d from me on account of this composition, and will give out that it is among the things forbidden of the law. But yet, whove

er scans matters with the eye of intelligence, and makes good his insight into principles, will rank these Assemblies in the order of useful writings, and class them with the fables that relate to the brutes and lifeless objects. Now none was ever heard of whose hearing shrank from such tales, or who held as sinful those who related them at ordinary times. Moreover, since deeds depend on intentions, and in these lies the effectiveness of religious obligations, what fault is there in one who composes stories for instruction not for display, and whose purpose in them is the education and not the fablings?

Al-Hariri was correct to expect criticism. Because he did not identify his chief characters as based on historical persons, Ibn al-Khashshab al-Nahwi (d. 1172) proclaimed al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt a “lie, dressed with the traits of the real, something which resembles the truth while at the same time denying it.” He stated that al-Hariri’s work ran against fundamental principles of religious law. Al-Hariri’s supporters—Ibn al-Barri (d. 1187), who composed a refutation of Ibn al-Khashshab, and the later biographers Yaqut (d. 1229) and Ibn Khalikan (d. 1288)—were quick to resist these claims and to do so explained that maqāma 48 (named al-Haramiya) was founded in historical fact: they identified Abu Zayd with the person whom al-Hariri mentions meeting in the mosque of the Banu Haram in Basra. As Zakharia notes in her brilliant study of this reception history, al-Harith b. Hammam is not mentioned but the conflation between him and al-Hariri is obvious enough. These historical and autobiographical functions gave license to al-Hariri’s fictions. His preface addresses the perpetual anxiety over fiction in Islamic literature and letters, asserting that his Maqāmāt should be understood in the same class of text as the Kalila wa Dimna, hence bolstering the instructional value of his work, stressing the message and meaning of the maqāmas over the act of storytelling. This is a good example of having one’s cake and eating it too.

In essence, al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt is a pursuit of shadows: whatever Abu Zayd might cast, it is impossible to discern its purpose; is it semblance or dissemblance? At the very end, in maqāma 50, al-Harith expresses his doubt about Abu Zayd’s intention in the midst of their several meetings. Up until then, al-Harith, who has an affection and admiration for Abu Zayd (although he views his behavior disapprovingly on most occasions), spends much of his time lamenting the absence of Abu Zayd and searching for him in vain, only to fail to comprehend the rascal’s identity in his presence, until the weight of the discourse makes Abu Zayd’s identity dawn on al-Harith. Audition is followed by suspicion and only in the very end verified by vision: al-Hariri employs a number of subtle metaphors to convey the sensory apprehension of Abu Zayd, mostly by vision but sometimes by smell. Like other characters in the Maqāmāt, al-Harith is tricked by Abu Zayd, but most often he does not seem to care. Running parallel to this linguistic framework of successive, autonomous “assemblies” is a cycle of paintings that depict elements from the narrative, showing a series of causes by their effects. The paintings concretize the fact of human discourse by repeatedly emphasizing it, and depend on visual narrative to translate the complex registers of the text.

When studied in comparative terms, the illustration of the 1237 Maqāmāt—or, for that matter, the entire corpus of illustrated Maqāmāts made in the years before or just after—produced no particularly unique visual traits or practices of picture-making: their conventions are found across a number of contemporary illustrated Arabic texts, from works of science to belles-lettres. As noted above, al-Wasiti’s chief innovations within the production of the images themselves include the extensive use of the double-page composition and an expanded number of details and characters in his most developed paintings. Many years ago, Ettinghausen compared what he held to be a “realist” visual idiom current in portable objects and illustrated manuscripts to
the “realist” subjects of the contemporary shadow play (khayāl al-ẓill, lit. “shadow fantasy”). Without a complete formal analysis from Ettinghausen, we can only surmise the visual affinities between the Maqāmāt illustrations and the shadow puppets that he had in mind. One could mention the preponderance of profiles; the dramatic outlines of gesturing and animated figures; the stark contrast between figure and ground; the emphasis on crafting compositions into bold, contoured shapes set against the stark paper sheet; inner details painted amid the overall “shadow.” The flatness of form and position of figures on a single and shallow spatial plane are other conventions that might be linked to the shadow play. Many visual aspects of the Maqāmāt illustrations embody the theatricality of discourse. But of course the finished paintings do not resemble shadows. They are not the shadows, but the things themselves fully colored and brightly lit, unless one is to take the entire formal language of Arabic manuscript painting from the late 1100s through the 1200s as a complex commentary on the nature of representation itself.

The shadow play, other forms of popular entertainment, and their reception by contemporaries such as Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1040), Ibn Shuyad (d. 1035), and Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), as well as the evident connections between literary, structural, and thematic aspects of the plays and the Maqāmāt, have been explored in literary scholarship. The best-known examples of the shadow play are those composed by Muhammad b. Daniyal (d. 1311). The reception of the shadow play manifests its metaphorical function commenting on the illusory and transitory nature of earthly existence, where each shadow pointed to a truth (but was not the truth). Several medieval authors give voice to this concept in their writing, including some of the better-known writers, such as ‘Umar b. al-Farid (d. 1235) and ‘Umar Khayyam (d. 1223).

The several connections between the shadow play and the maqāmāt, and their plausible shared visual effects may have prompted associations between the two media for contemporary readers/viewers of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt and extended the notion of deceptive speech to painted images. In other words, any affinities between play and painting might have caused the transposition of cultural values and concepts about earthly semblance and ultimate reality. Moreover, given that a theory of images as we know it for the time had still not defined the ontology of painting—a distinction between what it is and what it represents—the paintings arguably held a position similar to al-Hariri’s text, flickering between transparency and opacity, between the basic polar opposites of history and fiction, which were consciously muddled by al-Hariri. (This generic uncertainty, and the ultimate purpose of al-Hariri’s work, was a prime factor in the critical reception of the Maqāmāt: how should it be placed, was it useful, and, if so, how?).

Recent renewed contextual approaches to the study of the Maqāmāt, such as those by James and George, are comparable in effect to earlier art historical approaches that quickly moved away from the text and considered factors extrinsic to it to offer an account. And all this before we developed an understanding of al-Wasiti’s version of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt. By holding our focus on the manuscript, let us first consider how it works as an object, what effects its paintings had on their reader/viewer, how the book as a whole object structures an experience for its user. Then, one of the most pressing questions in this inquiry concerns the presumed balance between modes of reading and seeing, and a tendency to always privilege audition and oral recitation over silent reading; somehow the role of seeing is marginalized by each model. The role performed by the illustrated book in these experiences is obviously different, not least of them the contrast between collective and solitary experience, but there can be no doubt that al-Wasiti devoted an abundance of skill, labor, and thought to the way his pictures functioned throughout al-Hariri’s text.

Al-Wasiti’s images emphasized discourse as a paradigmatic theme of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt, concretizing the reality of the assemblies by insistently showing their events and characters, but at the same time denying its viewers firm knowledge of anything. His “realism,” advanced through several paintings—those paintings most frequently praised and published by art historians—exceeded any previous or subsequent models that might have been available to him, but had the effect of laying a trap in a manner comparable to those set by al-Hariri. An abundance of depicted things—of things...
rendered visible—amounted to nothing, just as Abu Zayd’s linguistic eloquence finally amounted to nothing. Elsewhere, in al-Wasiti’s most common paintings—those depicting smaller-scaled, more intimate acts of discourse—a formal generic was a suitable analogue to the verbal play of al-Hariri’s text, to its endless, even if educational, deceptive fictions.


NOTES

Author’s note: I have held onto this essay for longer than I had intended. It seemed an especially suitable contribution to the thirtieth volume of *Muqarnas*, which is in part an appraisal of the history of the field of Islamic art and architecture as reflected through the journal, whose founding editor, Oleg Grabar, wrote so extensively about al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt*. Since 2002, I have been fortunate to present my thoughts on the *Maqāmāt* at different institutions. I thank Marcus Milwright, Sheikha Hussah Sabah Salem al-Sabah, Kishwar Rivzi, the graduate students of the Institute of Fine Arts, and Heather Ecker, for their invitations to lecture and the responses of audience members at the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia; Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, Kuwait; the Medieval Renaissance Forum, Yale University, New Haven; the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; and the Society of Fellows in the Humanities, Columbia University, New York. I am also deeply grateful to Annie Vernay-Nouri and Marie-Geneviève Guesdon of the Bibliothèque nationale de France for giving me generous access to Ms. Arabe 5847, and many other sources, in December 2009. This essay is dedicated to my mother, who let me leave her and family in Kelso for work in Paris in difficult times.


2. Abū al-Husayn b. Samʿun (d. 997), trained as a Hanbali but also sympathetic to Sufism, lived in Baghdad, where he was widely celebrated for his preaching and eloquent discourse. Extensive biographical commentary is provided in al-Hariri, *Assemblies*, trans. Chenery, 1:456–58.

3. Ibid., 1:224.

4. Ibid., 1:227.

5. Ibid., 1:228.


7. There has been some disagreement about how to translate the term, which is commonly translated as “assembly” or “sessions” in English and “séance” in French. The Arabic triliteral root *q*-w-*m* has the sense of “standing forth” or “rising up.” In assessing the origins of the genre, chiefly in the *Maqāmāt* of Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (d. 1008)—whom al-Hariri credits as his inspiration—A. F. L. Beeston offers a reason for al-Hamadhani’s choice of the term to title his work: “Anecdotes were customarily exchanged at ‘sessions,’ *majālis*. By eschewing this term in favour of *maqāmāt*, B. [Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani] may have intended to emphasize that his anecdotes, drafted in *ṣa‘ī*, were using the linguistic medium of the orator, *khāṭib*, whose traditional posture was standing*: A. F. L. Beeston, “The Genesis of the *Maqāmāt* Genre,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 2 (1971): 1–12, at 8–9.

8. In a commentary on this poem, Theodore Preston suggests that by mentioning Noah’s sons Abu Zayd “means that he had succeeded in enriching himself from all mankind, so that he had become as it were like those patriarchs the heir of all the world.” Preston, following medieval commentators on al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt*, follows their interpretation of *muthallath* as a reference to the “treble-toned string of a lute.” Al-Ḥarīrī, *Makamat or Rhetorical Anecdotes of al-Ḥariri of Basra*, trans. and annot. Theodore Preston (London: James Madden, 1850), 306–7.

9. Perhaps the boldest move made by Abu Zayd against his audience is in *maqāma* 29, named after Wasit, where the hero proposes to engineer a marriage between al-Harith, who is presently destitute, and one of the female occupants at the inn (*khān*). Abu Zayd promises to deliver an oration such as has never been heard before and in preparation for the wedding he makes sweetmeats. Al-Harith is more eager to hear the speech than to move ahead with the rite, and so Abu Zayd delivers his address and asks al-Harith to distribute the delicacies among the guests. No sooner had they been consumed than the people lost consciousness and fell to the ground. Abu Zayd had drugged the sweetmeats; he was then free to roam through the rooms of the inn and cherrypick the most valuable possessions.


11. Ibid., 1:255.


As Chenery notes in his commentary on al-Ḥariri’s *Maqāmāt*. See ibid., 1:251.

Ibid., 1:257; also see Chenery’s gloss of the phrase, ibid., 1:252–23.


For a detailed biography of al-Ḥariri, see D. S. Margoliouth and Ch. Pellat *EI2*, s.v. “Al-Ḥariri.”

Formal aspects of the written text of al-Hariri’s *Maqāmāt* are also described by Alain George, “Orality, Writing and the Image in the *Maqamat*: Arabic Illustrated Books in Context,” *Art History* 35, 1 (2012): 10–37, at 18–21. But these observations are directed toward a larger argument that proposes the use of illustrated *Maqāmāt* by storytellers before audiences where the aural aspect is complemented by a visual one.

The illustrated manuscripts of the *Maqāmāt* were studied by Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrations of the *Maqamat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Dated manuscripts span the years 1222 and 1337, with others dated through the comparative stylistic analysis of their paintings. The earliest known copy of al-Ḥariri’s text (Ms. Cairo Adab 105), dated 504 (1110–11), contains a large number of marginal annotations recording its use over time for readings that produced licensed copies of the text. Early in this history of use, the manuscript was described as an “archetype” (*aṣl*). For an analysis of the notations, the manuscript, and licensed processes of dissemination, see Pierre A. MacKay, “Certificates of Transmission on a Manuscript of the *Maqamat* of al-Ḥariri (MS. Cairo, Adab 105),” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 61, 4 (1971): 1–81. Some scholars have argued that the difficulty of the *Maqāmāts* of al-Hamadhani and al-Ḥariri made them especially useful as tools for teaching grammar and to preserve vocabulary and expression in their full richness. For example, see H. Nemah, “Andalusian *Maqāmāt*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5 (1974): 83–92, at 88. A Hebrew translation of al-Ḥariri’s *Maqāmāt* was made by Yehuda al-Ḥarizi between 1205 and 1216 in Spain. Based on the poor command of Hebrew demonstrated by Jews living in the East, which he experienced on a visit there, al-Ḥarizi was moved to write his own *Maqāmat* titled *Sefer tahkemoni*; he believed that its engaging stories would encourage readers to learn Hebrew and develop a strong knowledge of its grammar and expressions. See Rina Droy, “Al-Ḥarizi’s *Maqāmāt*: A Tricultural Literary Product?” in *The Medieval Translator* 4, ed. Roger Ellis and Ruth Evans (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 66–85, esp. 68–74.

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847: 168 fols., 37 x 28 cm, 101 illustrations, with approximately 15 lines of text, copied in a fine *naskh* script, on pages without illustrations.

38. Though some criticisms have been made questioning the suitability of the term “bourgeoisie” to describe the medieval Islamic setting, many of the hypotheses about objects, patronage classes, and the flow of themes and subject matters between societal elites and common folk have been adopted and developed by Boaz Shoshan, “High Culture and Popular Culture in Medieval Islam,” Studia Islamica 73 (1991): 67–107.


40. The earlier study by Ettinghausen was “Early Realism in Islamic Art,” in Studi orientalistic i onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida, 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente, 1956), 1250–73. Within a few years he described the paintings of the Maqāmāt as a “mirror of medieval Arab civilization” and opined that the “realism of these paintings reveals many features of medieval life otherwise unknown”: Ettinghausen, Arab Painting, 104.

41. Maqamat al­Hariri Illustrated by Y. al­Wasiti, introduction by Oleg Grabar (n. p.: Touch@rt, 2003).

42. David James, A Masterpiece of Arab Painting: The ‘Schefer’ Maqāmāt Manuscript in Context (London: East and West Publishing, 2013). The book appeared after this essay was already drafted and it has not been possible to offer a complete and detailed assessment of it here. The questions examined in James’ book, however, directly stem from the body of scholarship undertaken through the late 1980s, with important refinements made to them, particularly to our understanding of the interrelationship among the corpus of “Baghdād” manuscripts. The bibliography of the book—based on research James completed for a master’s degree at the University of Durham in 1965—shows an uneven awareness of scholarship in the fields of Islamic art and literature since the 1990s and art history in general. For the 1974 essay, see David James, “Space-Forms in the Work of the Baghdād Maqāmāt Illustrators, 1225–58,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 37, 2 (1974): 305–20.


45. James, “Space-Forms,” 306. These opinions are voiced again in Masterpiece of Arab Painting, 35–37.

46. Grabar, “Pictures or Commentaries,” 90.

47. Grabar, Illustrations of the Maqamat, 3–4.

48. The 1237 Maqāmāt contains no documentation linking it to a patron and the history of its ownership—its subsequent readers and owners—is unknown. The illuminated heading on fol. 1a bears two partly erased and cropped notes in Arabic and the seal of Charles Schefer (the Bibliothèque nationale acquired the manuscript from him in the late 1800s). The textblock is also remarkably clean, with scarcely any additions or emendations (the predominantly red zigzagging marginalia are glosses contemporary to al-Wasiti’s production). James, Masterpiece of Arab Painting, 13–15, provides a comprehensive biography for Schefer. The near total absence of notes of ownership and catalogue records—common in other Arabic manuscripts of the period, mostly unillustrated books—from the 1237 Maqāmāt is a feature shared by other copies of the same text. It is not possible to rule out their existence, however, given the loss of the original endpapers/ihlyeaves.


50. Questioning the idea that “visual patterning of the text had been paramount” to al-Wasiti, O’Kane points out that some of the palindromes in maqāma 16 are not separated out from the text but continuous with it (O’Kane, “Text and Paintings,” 51–52, and fig. 13) and produces a highlighted text to show this. But the palindromes embedded in continuous text are examples exchanged among al-Harith and his company. These are the prose sentences composed of three, four, five, and then six words. When al-Harith fails to produce a sentence of seven words, Abu Zayd jumps in and meets the challenge. Abu Zayd then composes two poems consisting of palindromic verses (the first in rajaz, the second in kāmil meter). These are arranged as single columns of text on fols. 43a–43b in the 1237 Maqāmāt. Each poem is composed of five lines (ten bayts in each), though al-Wasiti has skipped over the fourth line in the first poem. See the detailed commentary in F. Steingass, The Assemblies of
The red titles could be later additions, replacing damaged ones or filling in blanks that were left after the first phase of manuscript production under al-Wasiti. Examples occur on folios 27b, 38a, and 57a. Other portions of the text, including the commentary (tafsir) titles, are written in red. Occasionally the phrase “his speech” (qawlulu) is written in a thicker line of black ink or in red, to enhance its visibility on the page.

The same features appear in an unillustrated Maqamat dated October 1622 (middle ten days of Dhul-Qa’dā 557) in London, British Library, Or. 2790. Copied in naskh script, the text is fully vowelized and letter pointed, larger sizes of script are used for titles, the text is arranged as a rectangle on each page, and poetry is configured in different columnar arrangements. Titles for individual maqamas are given as numbers but also by name, and the fifty maqamas are divided into two parts (juz’), the first running from 1 to 28, the second 29 to 50. Other dated Maqamat, copied between the 1100s through the 1237 Maqamat, from the western and eastern Islamic lands, share the same features (though few are divided into two juz’). Sometimes the individual maqamas are introduced only by number and not also by name, and different kinds of ink might have been used for the titles (black, red, gold outlined in black), while in other manuscripts transitional phrases that structure discourse (allāhumma, wa ba’d, ashada, shi’r) are highlighted with a different color of ink than that used in the main text (e.g., Oxford, Bodleian Library, Pococke 172, dated Muharram 632 [Sept.–Oct. 1234]).

The most sophisticated discussion of this feature of Arabic illustrated manuscripts was offered by Oya Pancaroğlu, “Socializing Medicine: Illustrations of the Kitāb al-Dīcyāq,” Muqarnas 18 (2001): 155–72.

Responding to the common notions that al-Hariri is “a writer devoured by virtuosity” and an “embalmer of a dead writer” where the author reveals that changes in location will be made to the manuscript since it was written. See Eva R. Hoffman, “The Author Portrait in Thirteenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts: A New Islamic Context for a Late-Antique Tradition,” Muqarnas 10 (1993): 6–20; and Pancaroğlu, “Socializing Medicine.”

Despite intensive analysis of the 1237 Maqamat frontispiece, there are still some problems of interpretation, especially if we are to believe that it relates somehow to the original patron/recipient of the manuscript, for which there is no direct internal evidence. See O’Kane, “Text and Paintings,” 42.

Several changes have been made to the manuscript since its production, and some folios and illustrations are missing. For a description of these, see Grabar, Maqamat al-Hariri Illustrated by Y. al-Wasiti, 7–8; O’Kane, “Text and Paintings,” 43; and James, Masterpiece of Arab Painting, 18.

The innovations of al-Wasiti in conceptualizing the sequence—the nearly sixteen double-page paintings...
(there could have been more based on O’Kane’s proposed identification of missing folios), one full-page painting without text, and two paintings arranged in a manuscript opening with no text—are discussed at length by O’Kane, “Text and Paintings,” passim.

Only one other manuscript copied by al-Wasiti is presently known. I was able to study it in Paris in December 2009. It is a copy of Abu al-Qasim Mahmud b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhshari’s Rabi’ al-‘abrār wa faṣūṣ al-akhkhār fī al-muhādārat, a collection of anecdotes and maxims on various subjects: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 6742. It consists of 230 fols., 25.1 x 17 cm, and is copied in naskh with seventeen lines to the page. The two colophons appear on fols. 120b and 230b. The colophon on fol. 120b, marking the completion of the first juz’, is dated “at the end of [the month of] Safar the blessed in the year 649,” and the scribe writes his name as Yahya b. Mahmud b. Kuwwariha. The colophon on fol. 230b, marking the completion of the last book, is dated “at the end of [the month of] Safar the blessed in the year 649 (June 1251),” and the scribe writes his name as Yahya b. Mahmud b. Yahya b. Kuwwariha al-Wasiti.

65. Abd el-Fattah Kilito, “Le genre ‘Séance’: Une introduction,”

66. James, passim.

67. James describes this phenomenon in al-Wasiti’s 1237 Assemblies, trans. Chenery, 1:222–23. Concerning this point, Grabar states that al-Wasiti never realized a consistent iconographic type for Abu Zayd and concludes: “It is as though al-Wasiti kept hesitating between creating an image and interpreting a text”: Grabar, Maqamat al-Hariri Illustrated by Y. al-Wasiti, 14. Though there are some paintings in which Abu Zayd is less easily identifiable, what came across to Grabar as ultimate failure could also be understood as intended pictorial equivocation (and comparable to Abu Zayd as trickster).

68. Ibid., 1:211.

69. Al-Ḥarīrī, Makamat or Rhetorical Anecdotes, trans. Preston, 131–32.


74. Ibid., 8.

75. A statistical listing of the corpus of thirteen illustrated Maqāmāts may be found in Grabar, Illustrations of the Maqāmat, 8–17, with separate charts (appendices 1 and 2) recording the distribution of illustrations in each manuscript. The manuscript of the group with the lowest rate of illustration, 39 paintings to 187 fols., is dated 1222: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 6094.


77. Ibid., 1:198–99.


79. Ibid., 2:282.


81. Ibid., 1:208.

82. For further analysis of this image, and others in the poem, see al-Ḥariri, Assemblies, trans. Chenery, 1:430–31; and al-Ḥariri, Makamat or Rhetorical Anecdotes, trans. Preston, 131–32.


84. Ibid., 1:111.

85. Ibid., 1:121.

86. Al-Ḥariri, Assemblies, trans. Chenery, 1:218–22. For her subsequent development of the reception history of al-Hariri’s Maqāmāt, among several other themes related to the work, see Katia Zakharia, Abu Zayd...
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al-Sarūǧī, imposteur et mystique: Relire les Maqāmāt d’al-Ḥarīrī (Damascus: Institut français d’études arabes de Damas, 2000).


98. These passages were quoted and discussed in Ettinghausen, “Early Shadow Figures,” 11, and Badawi, “Medieval Arabic Drama,” 85, and repeated in George, “Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play,” 3 and 18, though he uses different translated sources and makes his own adaptations to them.

99. I would not go so far as George as to suggest that the practice of painting in illustrated Maqāmāts—and the wider range of contemporary illustrated Arabic manuscripts—had a causal relation to the shadow play. He believes that the illustrations of the Maqāmāt reflect a figural style and a mode of scene visualization rooted in the shadow theater and largely shaped by its requirements of performative expressivity and clarity, and continues “[i]n other books of this era, including other illustrated versions of Dioscorides, the imprint of the shadow play is also perceptible, though it is rarely as pronounced as in this copy of the work and in the Maqāmāt. The earliest dated Arabic manuscript to show the imprint of the new idiom is a Kitāb al-Diryāq... completed in 1199”: George, “Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play,” 13 and 27.

100. One of the main purposes of illustrated Maqāmāts, as proposed by George (“Orality, Writing and the Images,” esp. 21–22), was their use as adjuncts to oral recitation. To develop this point, he highlights the large size of some Maqāmāts, which would facilitate group activity (an enhanced visibility for painting and text), but then has to posit a “more private form of reading” for manuscripts of smaller stature; he does not then account for the many variables that could engender such a difference between illustrated books. Moreover, the strongest evidence for the use of the Maqāmāt in contexts of oral recitation is associated with its copying (i.e., dissemination), the making of licensed transmissions of the text (we know that physical copies were used, such as in the asl studied by MacKay, “Certificates of Transmission”). Notwithstanding an asymmetry of evidence, a verified context (the creation of books) versus a conjectured one (the activation of books by recitation), in the actual use of Maqāmāt manuscripts—George’s essay is replete with many useful historical references to practices of storytelling and develops some of the same points made in his earlier “Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play.” Even if we accept George’s point—that the illustrated Maqāmāts “were, in sum, probably meant to be used and appreciated in a convivial setting centred on the oral delivery of the text” (ibid., 22)—its effect is, again, to take us out of the book prematurely, letting us imagine how audiences projected their own values onto them.