

Bakhtin's Spirit of Carnival in Hamadhānī's Maqāmāt

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The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was the first scholar who introduced the term “carnival” and conceptualized it into literary field. In his acclaimed work, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses in great detail the sixteenth century French writer Rabelais' works, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. In Rabelais' works, the two main characters *Gargantua* and his son *Pantagruel*, are characterized through exaggeration of their behavior and grotesque body images, among other things. For example, the giant *Gargantua* was born from his mother's left ear. “As soon as he was born, he cried out not as other babes use to do, miez, miez, miez, but with a high, sturdy, and big voice shouted about, Some drink, some drink, some drink, as inviting all the world to drink with him” (Rabelais 9). And because of his huge body, “his shoes were taken up four hundred and six ells of blue crimson velvet...his coat were taken up eighteen hundred ells of blue gillyflowers...his girdle was made of three hundred ells and a half of silken serge, half white and half blue...his purse was made of the cod of an elephant” (Rabelais 11). In the world of carnival, everything is possible and reasonable. Exaggeration and excessiveness were only a small part of the carnival.

Carnival, strictly speaking, refers to the period preceding Ash Wednesday in Roman Catholic custom. It may extend from one or two days to six or eight weeks, depending on local tradition. However, the term “carnival” Bakhtin used, refers to a more general category of festivities, characterized usually by various types of outdoor processions and shows. Bakhtin approaches the carnivalesque features in his research by analyzing not only the linguistic hyperbole, but also the relationship within the social functions between the official and the unofficial, high and low cultures, elegant and vulgar, the ambivalent and dualistic features of carnival. Furthermore, Bakhtin's work is a study of how the social and the literary

interact, and in addition, a study of the semantics of the body, the different meanings of the body's limbs, apertures, and functions in the world of carnival. In his study, carnival is also freedom, carnival is life itself. As he states: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 7). How then, does Bakhtin's "spirit of carnival" fit in the tenth century Arab writer Hamadhānī's work, called *maqāma*? To facilitate the discussion, we need to give some background information of Hamadhānī and the *maqāma* genre.

The *maqāma* is a literary genre which emerged some time at the end of the tenth century. Each *maqāma* is an independent story, an episode. The settings of the stories may vary, but the two main characters, 'Isā b. Hishām and Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī remain present throughout the whole collection. The early history regarding the origin of this genre has been widely discussed by many scholars of Arabic literature. They generally agree that Hamadhānī (d. 1008) was the author who brought this unique literary genre into being and thus was nicknamed "Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī" (Wonder of the Age from Hamadan).

The *maqāmāt* (plural of *maqāma*) of Hamadhānī are written in *saj'*, a type of rhymed and rhythmic prose. The text usually contained interpolated verses, sometimes in the middle, but usually at the end of each *maqāma*. A typical *maqāma* begins with the narrator 'Isā b. Hishām, relating stories about his adventures traveling from one Islamic city to another. He would sometimes travel with or run into Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī, a free-loader, a trickster from the underworld society, a man who is sometimes young, sometimes old, but almost always extraordinarily eloquent and articulate. 'Isā and Abū al-Fatḥ would often encounter danger, hunger or hardship in life during their journeys, but would ultimately escape their misfortunes by playing tricks on innocent people. Many scholars have compared the *maqāmāt* of Hamadhānī to a sixteenth century Spanish literary genre called the "picaresque

novel” because of the many similarities between the two. The most striking similarity is that the heroes in both genres take on a journey and experience all types of adventures in life.¹

What made Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* a phenomenon during his own time as well as distinguished them from the works of his predecessors and his contemporaries lies in the new and different paths taken by his *maqāmāt* in both their literary style and its subject matter. The *Maqāmāt* were entirely composed in *saj'*, which was used primarily by court scribes (*kātib*) and in official government correspondence. Furthermore, the subject matter of each *maqāma* dealt with an untouched field in which street rogues and tricksters were the protagonists. It was then that the undisclosed life of the underworld in the Medieval Arab society first appeared in Arabic literature. His writing was a unique phenomenon at that time given the fact that court literature was at its height, and poetry was the dominating and favored literary genre, and thus composition of poems that praised and glorified their patrons was a much easier and feasible way for authors to earn a living. One would not expect that writing prose that took members of the underworld as its subjects to be favored by any of the patrons.

Numerous scholarly works have been dedicated to the origin, literary style, and influence of the *maqāma* genre, but few discuss its comic features and folk humor, which I believe are among the most essential reasons for the popularity of this literary genre in its own time and today. There is no denying that both Arab and non-Arab readers find *maqāmāt* quite fun to read. Not only are they a fine piece of literary work, they also encompass a vast variety of the cultural heritage of the Arab world, and vividly reflect various classes of Medieval Islamic society. The entire work of Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* is permeated with the atmosphere of laughter, freedom, wits and wisdom. In his acclaimed book *Rabelais and His World*,

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the *maqāmāt* and the picaresque novel, see “Maqamat Literature and the Picaresque Novel” by Jareer Abu-Haidar in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, V, pp. 1-10

Mikhail Bakhtin calls the above mentioned festive features the “spirit of carnival.” I think Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt* are, in many ways, a work that celebrates the spirit of carnival.

What kind of place is the carnival world Bakhtin finds in Rabelais’s work, and how does it compare to that of Hamadhānī’s in his *maqāmāt*? Among the many carnivalesque features discussed in Bakhtin’s study, I will focus my discussions specifically on some of the most striking traits highlighted in Hamadhānī’s work.

1) Carnival celebrates freedom.

As Bakhtin directly puts it: “During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin 7). It is a world, as Umberto Eco discusses in his article “Frames of Comic Freedom,” in which “fish can fly and birds swim, in which foxes and rabbits chase hunters, bishops behave crazily, and fools are crowned. At this point we feel free, first for sadistic reasons (comic is diabolic, as Baudelaire reminded us) and second, because we are liberated from the fear imposed by the existence of the rule” (Eco 2). Freedom is an essential element in carnival because the boundaries between social classes dissolve, however briefly. All are not only free from the constraint of the social norm, but they can also be anyone or anything. *Gargantua* can be born from her mother’s ear and he can be a talking baby immediately after he was born.

In Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt*, freedom is first marked by the continuous journeys from one place to another. Traveling is an expression of freedom, because one is not confined to a fixed place, living a life with a routine schedule. The protagonists ‘Isā b. Hishām and Abū al-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī are always traveling. They could be one day in the downtown of Baghdad, savoring some gastronomical delight, and the next, struggling with heat, thirst and starvation in the depths of the desert. Hamadhānī’s journeys have no temporal and spatial limit. It is a total liberation from time and space. Therefore, if we take a look at the larger picture of the

setting of Hamadhānī's medieval society, we find that the street beggars and rogues might not be suffering from homeless lives without shelters, but rather they live a home-free existence in which nature is their sanctuary, and constellation their enlightenment. They are the masters of their own destiny. The carnival world is a make-believe world. It is a haven for people to escape from their unwanted worries and anxieties; it is a place that gives people the freedom to realize their fantasy and be whatever they want, however unrealistic it might seem.

Hamadhānī also allows the readers' imagination to run free, because the plot is achronological and aspatial, the characters are inconsistent in their disposition. Abū al-Fatḥ may appear in Balkh one day as a youth, and the next day begging on the streets of Baghdad, with "his little ones by his side and bore his babes on his hip" (Hamadhānī 31); or the ageless Abū al-Fatḥ could be a father to a grown son who is already at the age to receive lessons for commerce from his father (Hamadhānī 153). The relationship between 'Isā and Abū al-Fatḥ is at times even odder. While 'Isā claimed to know Abū al-Fatḥ when the latter was a child, on other occasions they are just strangers who run into each other. Their relationship seems strange or even absurd to some readers, yet the absurdity itself was the essence of the carnival. This totally unbridled freedom to dramatize the characters and the plot of the *maqāmāt* was an expression to celebrate the spirit of carnival.

2) Carnival violates rules; carnival reverses rules.

Violation of rules marks another important feature in the world of Carnival. Eco, as cited earlier, also discusses how the violation of rules leads to either tragic or comic moments (Eco 1-2). When the violation is carried out by someone with whom the audience sympathizes, a man of noble origin, for example, and the hero will or may probably receive a severe punishment, we feel for him and therefore to us it is an unfortunate tragedy. However,

if the violation is committed by someone with whom we do not sympathize, the audience may be neither concerned with the defense of the rule nor compelled by compassion toward the character. Thus, the whole event turns into a comedy because as Eco writes, “comic pleasure means enjoying the murder of the father, provided that others, less human than ourselves, commit the crime” (Eco 2). Carnival is *schadenfreude*, as Lenn Evan Goodman quite appropriately puts it (Goodman 32). We enjoy the moment as the misfortune of another unfolds.

Since the rules have been reversed or violated in the carnival world, there is a new order. What kind of new order is it? It is an upside-down and inside-out world. Bakhtin remarked that “It [carnival] marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal...This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (Bakhtin 10). That is to say, the new order is a world with no boundaries between people; there are no classes in the carnival world.

Let us look at how Hamadhānī violates the rules. Many of us are familiar with the great literary heritage of the Arabic literature of the *Jāhilīya* period (pre-Islamic period), especially the touching scene in the desert where the hero laments the tents and traces of the beloved; or the hardship in the desert where the hero travels through the scorching midday sun and the freezing midnight moon and constellations, his only company the hyenas and lions. Michael Sells’ translation “Arabian Ode in ‘L’” offers us a perfect example to illustrate such literary tradition.

Get up the chests of your camels
and leave, sons
of my mother. I lean to a tribe
other than you.

...

When my sole pads
meet the gravel flint
it flied up sparking,
shattered.
I push hunger on
until it dies,
drive attention from it,
forget.
I'd sooner swallow the dust,
a dry mouthful,
than take some man's
condescending favors." (Sells 24-26)
...

With this poem in mind, it would be quite a sharp contrast if we compare the hero in Shanfara's Arabian Ode in "L" with the hero in Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*. While Shanfara's line "I'd sooner swallow the dust, a dry mouthful, than take some man's condescending favors" still rings in the readers' ears, Hamadhānī's hero displays a totally different picture—he would steal from, trick or cheat others to avoid hunger. He would never "push hunger on until it dies," let alone swallow a mouthful of dust. The whole concept of *karīm*, which is the core of Arab tradition from the *Jahilīya* era till now in the Arab society, embraces being noble, generous, kind, gracious, and so on. However, the hero that Hamadhānī rendered to the readers is none of the above; he violates all traditional tenets of Arab heroism.

Abū al-Fatḥ is the hero in Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*. He is a street rogue. He knows very well the laws of survival. He would not mind getting treated by tricking. As the entire *maqāmāt* unfold in front of us, we always wonder, on the one hand, what other tricks he would do, and how socially accepted he would be; and on the other, about his wit and eloquence, his sharp tongue and quick mind enable him to get by as a free-loader. This is Hamadhānī's strategy for killing two birds with one stone—while the actions are the "false teaching" that he wishes to point out to the readers, the words are Hamadhānī's demonstration of his erudition and his vast knowledge of lexicon.

After reading a few of the *maqāmāt*, we become familiar with ways that Hamadhānī tells his stories. He constantly reverses the nature of his characters and their acts—contradicting any tendency towards consistency. But then, what is in a name? Who are Abū al-Fatḥ and ‘Isā? The reader can never know with certainty. ‘Isā, the narrator, is the good businessman, a two dimensional character, largely lacking actions. Then we see Abū al-Fatḥ, the bad guy, the all action man, who dominates the interesting parts of the stories. These are more or less the rules that readers expect after becoming accustomed to Hamadhānī’s text. While readers are anxious to see what Abū al-Fatḥ will do next time, the rule has been changed and it is ‘Isā’s turn. In the “*Maqāma* of Baghdad,” ‘Isā, driven by his craving for Azaz dates, goes into downtown Baghdad. He sees a naïve rustic urging his ass to town with his money tied to his waist. ‘Isa approaches him and tricks the poor man into paying for a meal of roasted meat, wafer-cake and sweets by deliberately mistakenly calling him Abū Zaid as if they were old acquaintances. The way Hamadhānī described the food would make everyone drool, let alone ‘Isā’s easy prey, the countryman Abū Zaid. The rustic mistakenly believes that he is invited by an old friend, not knowing that he has already fallen into the trap of his own greed. This village man does not even know what happens when he is struck by the meat-seller for not paying what he thought was a treat from an old acquaintance. Of course, ‘Isā, the trickster this time, gets away with it at the end because Hamadhānī’s *maqāma* is no fairy tale in which prince and princess live happily ever after, and the bad guys always get punished. It is a carnival world. Rules have been reversed.

3) Carnival is a banquet.

Banquet is an indispensable scene for carnival. Carnival cannot exist without banquets. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin dedicated an entire chapter to banquet imagery. As he states, “Banquet images play an important role in Rabelais’ novel. There is scarcely a

single page in his book where food and drink do not figure, if only as metaphors and epithets” (Bakhtin 279). He adds that “Man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage.” (Bakhtin 281) Banquet represents life (wedding, therefore procreation) and death (funeral, yet death is not death, it is renewal, rebirth), it also encompasses abundance and triumph. Banquet brings about the atmosphere of festivities and comic scenes. In Rabelais’ *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, food related scenes, such as the drunken bouts and the war of flying sausages, are always a good source of laughter. Eating and drinking, along with the grotesque bodily images, such as the upper orifice (wide open mouth), the lower orifice (anus) and scatology, are one of the most important manifestations of the spirit of carnival in Rabelais work.

The most interesting banquet scene in Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt* is from the “*Maqāma* of the Madīrah.” Abū al-Fatḥ in this *maqāma*, is, for the first time, not the prankster, but the victim. The story begins with Abū al-Fatḥ refusing to eat the madīrah (a type of meat stew) at a merchant’s place for some unknown reason. We learn later, as the story unfolds, that Abū al-Fatḥ had been the victim of an attack and incarcerated for two years in a previous experience that involved the eating (or non-eating) of the dish madīrah. The setting of this earlier event was Baghdad, where Abū al-Fatḥ had been invited to attend a madīrah party at a merchant’s house. Before they reached the house, the host began by introducing Abū al-Fatḥ members of his household. First, the merchant praised his wife’s beauty, virtues, and cleverness. Abū al-Fatḥ grew bored with the litany of the praises, as they arrived at the house. The merchant went on to boast that his house was located in the best quarter of Baghdad. Then he talked about the door, the window, the staircase, and how he unethically obtained the house and some of his household items from his neighbors. Abū al-Fatḥ only had the madīrah in mind and showed no interest in the house. But the merchant went on giving

speeches about his kitchen and cooking utensils, the wheat, salt, the flour, the leaven, the vinegar, the vegetable, and finally, the *madīrah*. Instead of serving the food right away, the merchant continued telling Abū al-Fatḥ how the meat was obtained from the most reliable butcher and how it was cooked by the most skillful hands. Abu al-Fath was desperate to escape his boredom, however briefly, asked to “discharge a need.” The merchant seized the opportunity to lecture him about the wonder of his privy and even suggested that they could eat in it. Abū al-Fatḥ stormed out of the house, and the merchant ran after him and, to catch his attention, shouted, “Abū al-Fatḥ, al-*madīrah*.” Kids on the streets thought “*madīrah*” was his title and shouted “al-*Madīrah*” at him as well. He became angry and threw a stone at the crowd. Unfortunately, the stone landed on a man’s head and Abū al-Fatḥ was beaten up and placed in jail for two years. So he vowed not to eat *madīrah* as long as he lived.

The “*Maqāma* of the *Madīrah*” is one of the most frequently singled out *maqāma* among Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt*. According to Malti-Douglas in her article “*Maqāmāt* and Adab: ‘al- *Maqāma* al-*Madiriyya*’ of al-Hamadhānī,” this is because it “possesses literary appeal,” and “much of the appeal of this *maqāma* [*Madīrah*] is derived from the creative use of preexisting literary roles, techniques, and situations” (Malti-Douglas 247). In her analysis “the dominant literary effect of this *maqāma* is, of course, humor.” And this humor “derives from the shift of roles which constitutes a reversal of expectations” (Malti-Douglas 255). If we further analyze this banquet of *madīrah* again, we find that the usual victimizer, Abū al-Fatḥ, is, this time, the victim who is bested by the merchant, the real trickster in this *maqāma*. Hamadhānī does not fail to explain that the seemingly generous, innocent and over zealous merchant is, as a matter of fact, a big trickster, who does not hesitate to bray endlessly to his guests about how he obtained the house by tricking his neighbor, Abū Suleyman’s son, who did not know how to manage his father’s property after his death; and talked in details on how he took advantage of a woman, who showed up at his door at night (how desperate she was)

to sell her beautiful pearl necklace “with a surface as clear as water, and fineness like unto the mirage,” just to get a little money to feed her family. It is apparently an even more hilarious story for us to notice that Hamadhānī reversed the rule by reversing the victim/trickster roles and this time, Abū al-Fatḥ gets the taste of his own medicine.

4) Carnival is dualistic.

“All the images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death...blessing and curse...praise and abuse, youth and old age, top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom” (Bakhtin 126). In addition to duality of images, Bakhtin also talked about the importance of the duality of tone in the medieval society—the praise-abuse, which is when the carnival language appears in the form of a travesty. In their elucidation of Bakhtin’s work, Clark and Holquist explain that “such travesty is not merely a destructive satire and not exclusively an attack on spiritual things. A narrowly focused satire, intended to injure a specific target, is not part of the culture of laughter. A travesty is carnivalesque precisely in its duality and ambiguity: it parodies the spirit in order to praise the body” (Clark and Holquist 305). This dual tone of speech found its way into the medieval dual-bodied image. As the image disintegrated, “an interesting phenomenon in the history of literature and spectacle took place: the formation of images in pairs, which represent top and bottom, front and back, life and death. The classic example of such pairs is Don Quixote and Sancho. The dialogue of these pairs is of considerable interest, since it marks the as yet incomplete disintegration of the dual tone” (Bakhtin 433-434). In Hamadhānī’s *maqāmāt*, we find a perfect image of duality—‘Isā and Abū al-Fatḥ.

Except in a few of the *maqāmāt*, ‘Isa and Abū al-Fatḥ are both present in the text. Like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, they both journey long and far, but unlike them, ‘Isa and Abū al-Fatḥ live in their own “instability” of time and space. Their interaction is

especially interesting since the reader cannot predict where, when and how they will meet next time. They are in the carnival world of anarchy. After reading several of the *maqāmāt*, readers learn that whatever the disguises are, with few exceptions the unknown eloquent man will always be Abū al-Fatḥ after he has lifted his veil. The pair will see each other eventually in all different types of situations. The funny part is, of course, that Abū al-Fatḥ is sometimes a youth, sometimes older, and a few times appeared to be a father of one or two; they sometimes seem to know each other from previous encounters, yet sometimes, they are just strangers. For example, in the “*Maqāma* of Poesie,” they had a previous relation because “he had left us young and now returned full grown” (Hamadhānī 30). In the “*Maqāma* of the Lion,” after ‘Isā and his friends travel five nights and arrive at Hims, they see “a man with a wallet and a small walking-stick in his hand, standing in front of his son and little daughter.” ‘Isā remarks: “This man is surely [Abū al-Fatḥ] al-Iskanderi of whom I have heard, and regarding whom I have been asking; and behold it was he” (Hamadhānī 45-46)! Well, this time ‘Isā does not seem to have been acquainted with him before. Their relationship might seem somehow absurd to the reader, however, it is the absurdity that enhances the drama of the spirit of carnival in the text.

5) Carnival is ambivalent.

Carnival is ambivalent because it attracts and it expels; it is grotesque and yet it is delightful. Apart from being dualistic (which is the disintegration of images), it is androgynous. It is the integration of things from two extremes in one entity; *yin* and *yang*, black and white, seriousness and laughter, stupidity and wisdom, official and unofficial, tragedy and comedy, because carnival has blurred the boundary between them. It would be a great tragedy if someone lost a family member or his homeland was threatened by the flood. But in the world of carnival, death is not death, it is renewal. Tragedy is not a tragedy; it is

potentially the source of a comedy. In the “*Maqāma* of Mosul,” Hamadhānī turned the tragedy of a family which lost a beloved member and a village endangered by a torrent into a big farce.

In this *maqāma*, Abū al-Fatḥ and ‘Isā’s caravan is captured and their belongings are taken while returning home from Mosul. Since their problem results from the work of tricksters, they, in turn, try to trick their way out of the dilemma. Abū al-Fatḥ spots a family that has just lost their master. The house is “filled with men, whose hearts grief had cauterized, and whose shirts terror had rent, and with women who had unloosed their hair, and were beating their breasts, cutting their necklaces and slapping their cheeks” (Hamadhānī 85). This highly dramatized scene, with the reader’s earlier experience reading Hamadhānī’s other *maqāmāt*, bespeaks the coming of a farce. Abū al-Fatḥ decides to seize the opportunity that their moment of mourning offers, and takes advantage of the poor family. He proceeds to check the lifeless body and claims that he can bring back the deceased because his warm armpit reveals that he is not really dead. The family and the neighbors are delighted to learn the news. Abū al-Fatḥ and ‘Isā are showered with gifts till their purse was filled with silver and gold and their saddle bags cheese and dates. But the man is indeed dead. The prank is soon found a hoax the next day. Abū al-Fatḥ receives a shower of blows from the family. He and ‘Isā run away till they spotted their next victim at a village near the edge of a valley that is threatened by the torrent. Abū al-Fatḥ convinces the villagers that he can make the flood recede as long as they sacrifice a red heifer and provide him with a young virgin to marry. So the villagers immolate a heifer and bring him the virgin. He tells the villagers that they must pray with him and carefully complete two long genuflections. While they are praying, Abū al-Fatḥ and ‘Isā flee, this time without the pain of reprisal. Both anecdotes in this single *maqāma* involve Abū al-Fatḥ’s pranks in already tragic situations; however, we do not feel the sadness, and cannot help but find this *maqāma* funny because he did not make

things worse (or he could not; the master was already dead and the flood would be there until nature relents) and secondly, he did receive a punishment after the first prank. A shower of blows falling on him enlivens the readers. (*Schadenfreude!*)

The more prominent feature of the ambivalence in Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt* is the seriousness and laughter. Apparently, both Bakhtin and Hamadhānī believed that the two opposite voices can work together as a whole to present an even more interesting discourse.

Bakhtin stated,

In world literature, there are certain works in which the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other, and are indeed whole aspects, not separate serious and comic images as in the usual modern drama...the ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature. (Bakhtin 122)

In Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*, there are numerous examples of seriousness and laughter complementing each other in a way that it creates such dramatic elements which greatly raise the readability of this work.

Most scholars agree that Hamadhānī's text, with all its mocking, frivolity, and unconventional approaches, was composed with a serious purpose. Goodman thinks, "If there was a serious purpose in his mockery—and I do not doubt for a moment that there was—that purpose cannot be found in the handbooks of *kalām*² or *hadīth*³ current among his contemporaries and successors but must be found, as in all satiric writing in the smiles between the lines" (Goodman 27). Hamadhānī smartly chose to avoid the *khutbah*⁴ type of preaching to send out his messages. He adopted parody and satire, and through which and through the mouth of the narrator 'Isā, he informed readers the misbehavior of the hero, or

² Islamic theology

³ The collection of the words of the Prophet Muhammad

⁴ Religious sermons

more correctly, the anti-hero, Abu al-Fath. The laughter in Hamadhānī's text is everywhere, but where does he conceal the seriousness? We can find the answers in many of the verses inserted in the text.

This age (*zaman*) is ill-starred,
And, as thou seest, oppressive;
In it stupidity is estimable
And intelligence a defect and a reproach,
And wealth is a nocturnal visitant but
It hovers only over the ignoble. (Hamadhānī 83)

Or,

As is my state with fate, such is my state with pedigree.
My genealogy is in the hands of Time (*zaman*), if it is hard upon it, it will change.
In the evening a Nabatean am I, in the morning an Arab. (Hamadhānī 81)

It sounds as if Abū al-Fath is lamenting the vicissitudes of life and the fleeing of time, the unfairness of fate and the misfortune it has imposed upon him. He cannot be more serious than this. Goodman asserts that Abū al-Fath's pretenses are a kind of revenge against time (*zaman*) for the tricks it has played on him.

His [Abū al-Fath's] changes of role, premise and language pass him through all the classes of men and all the locales familiar and exotic to Hamadhānī's world, as a satiric imp who becomes in turn the type of every earnest, over serious or outrageous figure, from the imam in the mosque and preacher in the rostrum, to the vagabond beggar, highwayman, ghazi, doomsayer, catchpenny beggar and extravagant con-man. All of his changes bespeak the instability of time, which here means fate and fortune, social circumstance, mores and conventions. (Hamadhānī 29)

Therefore, however cynical Hamadhānī may sound, his view toward life is serious. He is saying that life is ruthless, survive at your own peril.

Apart from the above mentioned elements of the carnival, the grotesque images that feature so prominently in Rabelais's *Gargantua* seem to be lacking in Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*. In Rabelais' work, most of the grotesque images take the form of an unabashed display of the body parts and bodily functions, such as urination, defecation, copulation and even labor and birth. (*Gargantua* drowned 260,418 people in his urine.) Unlike *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*,

the grotesque images of Hamadhānī's work focus much less on body parts or functions, but rather on personal hygiene and disgusting situations. We find two examples may illustrate the bodily farce in Hamadhānī's text. The first, in the "*Maqāma* of Armenia," 'Isā and Abū al-Faṭḥ are robbed, again, hungry, dirty, smelly and destitute of food and drink. Abū al-Faṭḥ approaches a man and asks for some salt, then goes to the next man asking to use the top of the oven. He then scatters the salt on the oven with the salt falling from beneath his skirt. People there are all stunned and disgusted with the scene, thinking there might be vermin in his clothes. They curse him and prepare to toss away the bread. But Abū al-Faṭḥ takes it. Now they need something to go with the bread. Abū al-Faṭḥ goes to another man asking permission to taste his milk. Abū al-Faṭḥ puts his finger in the milk and after that admits he does not have money. However, he offers to give the milkman a shave to trade for his milk. Abū al-Faṭḥ makes him believe he is a barber, whose fingers are among the filthiest of all professions. That man curses him and lets Abū al-Faṭḥ have the milk. 'Isā and Abū al-Faṭḥ journey on and grow hungry again. They go to a house to ask for food, a young man shows up and generously gives them a large bowl of milk. They drink it up at one gulp. They then ask for some bread but are refused. They ask the young man why he is generous with the milk but stingy with the bread. He explains, "Because a mouse fell in the milk!" Upon hearing that, they throw up until their stomachs are dry. What a grotesque scene! This story is especially entertaining because their roles change throughout the story. First, they are victims (being robbed), then they are tricksters for two counts (bread and milk), then they are victimized again (mouse in the milk.) This time, 'Isā comes to the realization that "this is the reward of what we did yesterday" (Hamadhānī 144), which, is in sharp contrast to Abū al-Faṭḥ's cynical attitude.

In another example, the "*Maqāma* of Hulwan," we encounter an interesting scene that contains some grotesque images. In the "*Maqāma* of Hulwan," 'Isā is on his way home after

he finishes his pilgrimage. He finds his hair long and body dirty, so he asks his slave to find him a bath and a barber. After a long time, the slave finds the bath and leads him to it. Soon a barber comes in with a lump of clay in his hand and besmears 'Isā's forehead with the clay and leaves. Then a second barber comes in, starting rubbing and kneading him. While the second begins to wash 'Isa's hair the first comes in grabbed the second, and they exchange blows. Both claim to be the owner of the head disregarding the real owner 'Isā's protest. They summon the keeper of the bath to be the arbitrator. The bath keeper comments that they should not fight over such a valueless thing—'Isā's head! 'Isā rises from his place and runs out of the bathhouse with a load of clay on his head. 'Isā would not have expected that after he has done his religious duty of the pilgrimage, he would have received such treatment in the world of carnival where people do not reason according to common social practices. And most of all, the comment from the arbitrator is such a twist that we cannot help but find it amusing.

Hamadhānī's use of language in his *maqāmāt* is worth mentioning. Hamadhānī's text is written in *saj'*, a type of highly ornate rhymed prose. It is apparent that Hamadhānī made a conscious decision to write *maqāmāt* in *saj'* because it seems quite unnatural to write about subjects such as those in the *maqāmāt*, in the language that associates with epistles, which were originally the official correspondence among scribes. Furthermore, the *saj'* also alludes to much of the literary style of the *Qur'ān*. Readers would usually expect the content of the text written in *saj'* be serious in nature. This is another example of Hamadhānī's violation of rules. He led the expectation of the readers to one direction, and then shows them the views of another. What he gains from this is, again, the achievement of an ambivalence, the fine (*saj'*) in the linguistic style and the vulgar (underworld argot) semantically, using the most refined language to depict the low life of the tricksters. Moreover, the language itself is associated with the *Qur'ān*, and the form of transmission of the anecdotes of the narrator at

the beginning of each *maqāma* clearly suggests that it is possibly a deliberate allusion to the *Hadith*. Thus, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that Hamadhānī intentionally puts the *maqāmāt* in a religiously tinted frame to begin with, and then proceeds to embark on his social commentary. It is indeed, in my view, a very successful tactic.

Conclusion

Hamadhānī is a great artist in his choice of language, literary style, and subjects for his exceptional work of the *maqāmāt*. His approach to this genre is so pioneering and inventive that it inspired many writers during his own time as well as in the modern age to produce the same or similar type of literary works, called *maqāmāt* or given some other titles. We can list all the *maqāma* writers from the tenth century until now, throughout the entire Middle East, but Hamadhānī will always be the first and foremost that we mention when it comes to *maqāmāt*. As Goodman states, “One cannot rival originality with emulation” (Goodman 28). Most scholars agree that the *maqāma*’s literary appeal comes from its folk humor, its richness in reflecting various classes of society, and its unparalleled method of playing with reverse psychology. Thanks to Bakhtin’s groundbreaking work theorizing the carnival in literary works, we gain insight into the true essence of folk humor and festivities, through which we see the richness and many hidden manifestations of Hamadhānī’s work.

Kinser, in his book *Rabelais’ Carnival* says that “Rabelais is a popular author not because he wrote for a certain class of people but because he wrote for a certain aspect of mind—an aspect given its due by nearly everyone some of the time” (Kinser 33). The same can be appropriately said about Hamadhānī.

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