

NINO DOLIDZE

IVANE JAVAKHISHVILI TBILISI STATE UNIVERSITY
nino.dolidze@tsu.ge

CLASSICAL ARABIC *MAQĀMĀT* AS THE MANUAL OF MODERN ENGLISH

Abstract

The paper deals with the most recent English translation of the classical Arabic *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122), highlighting its significance for modern readers. In the Middle Ages, the cycle of al-Hariri's *Maqāmāt* was translated into several Eastern languages from Arabic. The original version first appeared in Europe in the 13th century. In the 17th century, it was translated into Latin, and later into French, English, German, and other languages. However, due to its complex style and challenging vocabulary, *Maqāmāt* was regarded as an untranslatable text.

In 2020, the last translated version of this masterpiece, *Impostures*, was issued by the NYU Press. According to the translator, Associate Professor at the University of California, LA, Michael Cooperson, the reason for creating a new translation was the unpopularity of existing ones. He thinks that lexical translation of the classical *Maqāmāt* can never become widespread in Anglophonic culture.

The complicated style was an ethical norm in the Middle Ages. The authors wished to demonstrate that nothing was impossible for the language of God. Cooperson tried to imitate the “verbal performance” of the original text. Using the idioms of the classical authors (as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Gilbert, Woolf, etc.) and globally spoken English (as Spanglish, Kiwi, Cockney, etc.), he presented an interpretation of al-Hariri's linguistic tricks. Such transformations made *Impostures* a very unique version, as it might be assessed as not only “Englishing” but also “Transculturation”. But the main reason for Cooperson's success is the linguistic aspect of his work.

In the era of artificial intelligence, when algorithms are so important and literary language is becoming poorer, *Impostures*, with its rich lexis and creativity, is perceived as the manual of modern Global English. If the Arab author used to underline possibilities of the international language of his epoch, Cooperson shows the possibilities of the contemporary *lingua franca*.

Keywords: Classical *Maqāma*, Global English, Transculturation, imitation, *lingua franca*.

In 2020, NYU Press published an English translation of the classical Arabic *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī (1054-1122). The translation was made within the scope of the project “Library of Arabic Literature”, funded by New York University (Abu Dhabi). Its goal is the presentation of the cultural heritage of Arabs to the wider society.¹ Outstanding monument of literature of the 13th century, *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī, was translated by Michael Cooperson, an Associate Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. In this article, we shall discuss the following questions: What was the reason for the new translation of *Maqāmāt* that has been translated many times before? What was the strategy chosen by the translator for the completion of this quite difficult task? How was his work perceived by the US reader community?

Maqāmāt is the genre of medieval Arabic prose that has no analogues in European literature. This artistic form, which emerged in the 10th century, still continues its existence (in Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, etc.) and is perceived as an integral part of the original Arabic literary tradition.

Maqāma is a short novelette about an itinerant con man. As a rule, it is written as rhymed prose, though the text includes some verses as well. In the Middle Ages, it was not accepted to write one or two

¹ Within the scope of the mentioned project, from 2012, the Arabic works of the 7th to 18th centuries will be published, together with their English translations. Some of these monuments deserved international attention for the first time.

stories. The whole cycles of stories (tens of *maqāmāt*) were created with a common storyline – the wandering of a well-educated con man to earn a livelihood.² Al-Ḥarīrī's work, consisting of fifty stories, was the most famous among the works of this genre. In that period, people used to read the specimens of prose publicly, at the mosques and coffee shops. Irrespective of complicated language, these texts became the most popular reading after the Quran, from Spain to India, inclusive (Wacks 2003, 180).

The original of *Maqāmāt* Al-Ḥarīrī first appeared in Europe together with the spoils from the crusades. Moroccan researcher, Abdelfattah Killito, admitted, “Young European society with the treasures taken from the East, took the *Maqāmāt* as well, as a great value, a deposit of gold” (Killito 1993, 165). In the 17th century, several *maqāmāt* were translated into Latin, which was further followed by French, German, and English translations. Though when *Maqāmāt* achieved Europe, they were regarded as untranslatable. French orientalist Silvester de Sacy admitted in the foreword to the French translation of *Maqāmāt* al-Ḥarīrī that here the main thing was the form, rather than the content, and this form cannot be translated (de Sacy 1822, 14).

Regardless of particular difficulty of the language, alteration of the rhymed prose and poetry and hierarchy of styles, depending on the object of description (speaker, preacher, main character, storyteller, anecdote teller, etc., apply different styles and vocabularies), e.g., in 28th *maqāma* all phrases are with no dots at all, in the 6th one, the words with all letters with dots are followed with the ones with letters without any dots; in *maqāmāt* 8, 35, 43 and 44, the stories, written whether as rhymed prose or poetry, consist of such equivocal words that their contents can be understood in two ways; in 16th *maqāma*, there are the palindromes (where the phrases can be read in the same way, whether backwards or forwards), in the 17th one, the entire text of main character can be read both, backwards and forwards (and in both cases, it is quite eloquent); 32nd one contains the puzzles, composed of the play of words, etc. And against such a background, the storyline is quite simple. And for this reason, all who attempted to make a lexical translation of *Maqāmāt* actually failed. For example, the first among English translators, Chappelow (whose translation was published in 1767), focused on the contents regarding the admonitions scattered throughout *Maqāmāt* as beneficial – he translated all possible versions of each word, making reading and comprehension very difficult. Chenery (his translation was published in 1867), based on the advice of de Sacy, from the outset approached *Maqāmāt* al-Ḥarīrī as the text intended for the study of the Arabic language. Later, his translation was finalized by Steingass (published in 1898). This work was not intended for a wider audience. Word-by-word lexical translations by Chappelow, Chenery, and Steingass could not spread beyond the scientific community. They could not become known in the Anglophone culture. Among translators to English, Theodor Preston made attempts to create an imitation, though he has omitted three-fourths of the original text (his translation was published in 1850).

There is the view that imitation (where the translator changes the words of the original text) will become more and more widespread in the contemporary market of literature (Kroll 2018, 561), though this issue should be discussed separately. In Cooperson's opinion, if we desire to make *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī popular in the contemporary epoch, a metaphor or paraphrase would be useless. Such translation could be useful only as material for students studying the Classical Arabic language in classes. A common reader cannot read the lexical translation of *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī; he/she cannot understand it, and hence, he/she will still know nothing about this unique monument. Therefore, he applied imitation. Medieval monuments are frequently translated separately for the scientific community (with numerous comments and scrupulous explanations) and separately for the wider audience. Cooperson's target audience is a common reader, though in his translation, *maqāmāt* are accompanied not only with the lexical explanations but even with a list of references.

In any case, the specific nature of the medieval prose should necessarily be taken into consideration. In the typical medieval pieces of literature, great significance is added to the form, artistic language, grandiloquent vocabulary, and style. The author's individual view is neglected, and he speaks from the generally accepted position that mostly results from the dominating religious views. Expressing one's views is regarded as nearly unacceptable. The main thing is the didactic nature. As a rule, the content of classical prosaic texts is simple, the storyline is primitive, and the development of action is uniform. The fable is not expanded with the descriptions of the sights and appearance of the characters, or the development of their nature. Time and space are perceived inadequately – characters of the piece of

² For more about *Maqāmāt*, see: Dolidze 2010.

literature come a long way in a very short time, etc.³ Therefore, the monotonous nature of the medieval monuments, repeating the same many times, the absence of the effects of unexpectedness, etc., should not be regarded as a shortcoming. Conditionality, objectless circumlocution, plain rhetoric should not irritate... (Aleksidze 2012, 154). As the author of the foreword of the new translation of *Maqāmāt* by Al-Ḥarīrī, medievalist Kilito reasonably noted that in the Middle Ages, the main thing was the genre/form, rather than the author/individual. Therefore, only lexical translation can never make *Maqāmāt* by al-Ḥarīrī a part of Anglophonic literature. The most significant is to bring the spirit of verbal performance, rather than word-by-word translation. Cooperson's work is an imitation, not an accurate translation (Al-Hariri 2020, IX).

The so-called cycle of stories by al-Ḥarīrī contains even more than needed, so-called “verbal performance” – play of words, pearls of eloquence, and wise advice. Certainly, according to the ethical norms of that period, the form, word is brought forward, to demonstrate the whole brilliance of Arabic, as a divine language. As though al-Ḥarīrī aimed to include rarely used lexical elements. It is known that the writer even lived with the Bedouins for some time to improve his knowledge of standard Arabic. Primarily, al-Ḥarīrī was a philologist, regarding that in Basra and Baghdad of the 12th century, the language of the Quran was already spoiled and distorted, while the Bedouins, as a traditional society, had maintained an authentic and pure Arabic language. From them, the scientist educated in Basra wrote down the rare words and expressions to use them further and write his work. It seems that, similar to the other authors of that period, al-Ḥarīrī desired to prove that the divine language was almighty. Today, even Arabs cannot read his *Maqāmāt* without special comments.

How could one create an adequate English version of the specimen of such “linguistic acrobatics”, while in this case, the target language is inflexible even for the rhymed prose (nothing to say about untranslatable palindromes)?! The verse, certainly, should be translated as a verse, for the other linguistic tricks or different (so-called high and low) styles, relevant equivalents should be found in the target language. Cooperson decided to use the Global English language. He transfers play of words into fifty different registers. A hint to how one or another *maqāma* should be read is provided in the changed titles of the stories. While the titles of *Maqāmāt* al-Ḥarīrī mostly contain geographical designations (e.g., *Damascene Maqāma*, *Alexandrian Maqāma*, etc.), showing the place of action in given *maqāma*, in the translation, the title “helps” the reader to adequately perceive the English version. E.g., 27th *maqāma*, describing the fact of horse theft, is titled as *The Wild East*, and here one would find the slang of the American West (American Cowboy Slang). In Cooperson's opinion, changing the *maqāmāt* titles is acceptable, as in al-Ḥarīrī's work, they are not of great significance with respect to context. Geographical designations are conditional; they emphasize the main character's permanent travel and search process (Al-Hariri 2020, 17).

The modern translator changed the titles of not only certain *maqāmāt* /stories but of the entire work as well, and titled *Maqāmāt* (المقامات) as *Impostures*. Apparently, Cooperson thinks that the changed titles would be easier to understand for the readers. And indeed, the book title makes clear that the main theme of this classical specimen of the Middle Ages is deception and cheating of others, while in the title *Maqāmāt*, this cannot be seen without special explanation. Cooperson agrees with French scientist, Zakharīa that the term *maqāma*, directly in relation with the literary genre, does not correspond to any of its vocabulary meaning existing before (“place of standing”, “place of gathering”, “gathered people”, “speakers at the gathering”, “speech at the gathering”, etc.). Therefore, he did not regard that he would necessarily maintain the title.

Even if the connection between “standing” and a particular kind of speech was at some point clear, it was evidently lost over time – just as, for example, no one today is quite sure what the word “tragedy” originally meant. In practice, *maqamah* is simply the genre, or any simple example of it, known by that name, – explains the translator (Al-Hariri 2020, XXXII).

In addition to the titles, Cooperson has changed many words and sentences in his translation, though he has maintained the contents and the main essence. In the translation of the specimens of poetry scattered in *Maqāmāt* al-Ḥarīrī, models of different English poets were used, while in the translation of

³ For more information about *Maqāmāt* as a typical medieval monument, please see: Dolidze 2012.

rhymed prose. Cooperson relied, on one hand, on the language of English-language writers and, on the other, spoken English/slang (suitable to the style of the original text). Here, there are basically three types of idioms: 1) the ones related to the specific writers (e.g., Chaucer in the 10th *maqāma*), 2) global (e.g., Singapore (3), Scottish (14), Indian (15), Spanish⁴ (16), New Zealand⁵ (28), Afro-American (21), Nigerian⁶ English language) and 3) slang (e.g., business negotiation⁷, US college (37), London⁸ (23, 44), thieves' cant (42), legal documents' language (32), etc.). Some *maqāmāt* combine several styles, such as, e.g., New York Afro-American⁹ slang and tramp language, etc. Speech of the character, in the contemporary epoch, can be bilingual; no one uses Standard English in everyday communication, in which they write. Hence, in the dialogues of the characters, Cooperson uses the spoken language.

It is notable that in the translation of the verse models and idioms, the choice of the specific English-language authors was not random. For example, while language of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Gilbert, Frederic Douglas, Mark Twain and Virginia Wolf was acceptable for the translator, John Milton's language turned out to be useless for him, as Milton is author of the epic works while in the *Maqāmāt*, as he explains, there is nothing epic (Al-Hariri 2020, XXV). Thus, Cooperson has translated each of the fifty *maqāmāt* in a different style. *Impostures* is a collection of literary pieces that use variations of Global English and interpretations based on specific slang and unusual comparisons.¹⁰

The first *maqāma*, where the action takes place in the capital of Yemen, begins as follows:

لَمَّا غربت غارب الاغتراب وأنأتني المتربة عن الاتراب، طوحت لى طوانح الزمن إلى صنعاء اليمن
(Al-Ḥarīrī 1980, 18).

Cooperson translated this phrase as follows:

“I hadn't got any money, so I made up my mind to leave my loved once behind and sling a leg over the back of beyond, and see what luck I'd have. I had some adventures, which throwed me this way and that and th' other, but after a long time I land in Sana, which is the Kingdom of Sheba¹¹” (Al-Hariri 2020, 13).

Here, the expression ‘sling a leg over the back of beyond’ was taken from Mark Twain. The translation regarded that ‘back of beyond’ suits to play of words *gāriba-l-igtirāb* in the original text. In Arabic, *gāriba* and *igtirāb* have the same stem and they sound almost identically, while their contents are absolutely different. The former means “withers” while the other means “being far from the native land”.

Title of the first *Maqāma* (instead of *San'anian Maqāma*, it is titled *Ever the Twain Shall Meet*), emphasizing that it is “Englished” according to Mark Twain. It is explained that in this *maqāma*, the voice of the narrator, al-Harisi, is based on Huckleberry Finn, and his first meeting with the main character, Abu Zayd, as the well-educated and eloquent protagonist, creates an association with Huck's first meeting with two noble characters – the King and Duce (Al-Hariri 2020, 13). Such short introductions (placed at the title, as an explanation) accompany almost all *maqāmāt*.

In the Englishing of the classical *maqāmāt*, Cooperson as though attempted to demonstrate the abilities of the contemporary English language to the maximal possible extent, just as al-Ḥarīrī attempted to demonstrate the power of the Standard Arabic language. Though, while the advantage of the medieval author was the use of rhymed prose, poetry, rare vocabulary, picturesque language, abundance of comparisons and metaphors, he apparently lacked slang. Standard Arabic, as the pure and canonical language, did not allow interpretation in this respect. In an environment limited by the literary law, the play of words should have been based on the capabilities of the Quranic language. From the outset, all dialects were rejected, though, regarding the scale of spreading of the Arabic language in that period,

⁴ Spanglish.

⁵ Kiwi.

⁶ Naijá.

⁷ Management speaks.

⁸ Cockney.

⁹ Middle Harlem Jive 1940.

¹⁰ For more information about “Tbilisi *Maqāmāt*”, please see: Dolidze 2023.

¹¹ *Sheba*, used in English translation, is a historical name of Yemen. The Kingdom of Sheba was mentioned in the Old Testament and the Quran.

supposedly, the spoken language was quite diverse. Cooperson had no such limitations. In his translation, he relied on the diversity of the Standard English and the globally used (not only in the US) spoken language. Thus, the translator opposed the capabilities of the English language, unprecedentedly widespread all over the world, to the complex style of the al-Ḥarīrī's work.

In the foreword of the most recent translation of *Maqāmāt*, Cooperson admitted,

In using these varieties to translate Arabic, I am taking the enthusiasts at their word that their forms of expression are worth sharing. Using the non-standard variety of English is not the same as mocking its users, speaking for them... Rather, it is matter of treating all varieties as equally worthy of being called upon to represent the staggering diversity and inventiveness of English... I relied primarily on speech and writing by verbally excessive speakers and authors... (Al-Hariri 2020, XIIV).

As a result, we obtained a specimen of a very interesting modern translation, to which we can apply not only the term Englishing, but also Transculturation – transformation form, where existing cultural elements are replaced with the new ones. Translator here explains,

But an imitator assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion, while my English *Impostures* though cast in variety of idioms, strives always to maintain the sense (Al-Hariri 2020, XIV).

Notably, the readers of the modern English translation of al-Ḥarīrī primarily noticed the “celebration of language”. At one glance, in the modern epoch, the *maqāmāt* cycle should become popular due to its adventurist nature – amusing adventure of the smart character of the picaresque stories should deserve more attention (as eloquence, wise expressions and admonition, so appreciated in the past, are somewhat obsolete now), but in reality, this has not occurred, the form charmed the readers more than the contents and they appreciated “verbal performance” translated into English language. Cooperson's work deserved numerous awards.

In 2020, one of the most prestigious Arabic prizes, the Sheikh Zayd Award (جائزة الشيخ زايد للكتاب), was granted for the fifteenth time in different categories. The fund, established by the Prince of the UAE, named Michael Cooperson's work as the winner of the translation of the year. The official website of the award states,

A bold, mature and innovative approach to translation enabled Michael Cooperson to understand *Maqāmāt* al-Ḥarīrī more intimately than anyone else, and to appreciate it as a treasure of Arab heritage. Cooperson succeeded in evading the trap of literal translation that can be injurious or altogether destructive to the very heart it is meant to communicate (Sheikh Zayed Book Award 2021).

Impostures became the winner of the award from the Association of American Publishers. On 31 January 2021, at the 45th annual awarding, a jury of 23 members identified 125 finalists in 45 categories. Cooperson's translation was among them as the best prosaic work (AAP 2021); the book was in the shortlist of ALTA – the American Literary Translations Association (ALTA 2021). *Impostures* was named as the first, among 10 top translations of 2020 by American *Open Letters Review*, the overview of which states,

The author's 12th-century Arabic masterpiece, the *Maqāmāt*, is a feast of stories, told in a bewildering variety of voice and registers, and in this, the best translated work of 2020, Michael Cooperson somehow uncannily manages to go all that rhetorical virtuosity one better. The result is simply astonishing, and almost embarrassingly entertaining (Donoghue 2020).

The Wall Street Journal has also reacted to Cooperson's translation and emphasized the fact that such imitation requires the greatest mastery of the translator (Sacks 2020).

What Cooperson hits upon in an effort to capture the original wordplay is to translate the 50 tales in a different voice or style. This is no easy task... Al-Hariri stands as a giant of Arabic literature. After reading Cooperson's translation of *Impostures*, the translator is worthy of similar praise, – admits the review in US electronic newspaper *The Free Lance-Star* (Gallagher 2020).

“If al-Ḥarīrī’s Arabic is inescapably the language of pure monotheism, then Cooperson’s English has either many gods or none at all...” stated Bruce Fudge, Arabic language Professor at the University of Geneva. “Anyone interested in language in general or English and its literatures will enjoy *Impostures*” (Fudge 2020).

Eric Ormsby, the scholar of Islamic studies, regards the language as the main character in *Maqāmāt*. But how is it Englished?! Cooperson indeed managed to create some kind of linguistic guidebook, and this is a significant gain for contemporary American society (Ormsby 2021).

Electronic magazine *The Point* published the paper by Justin Smith, a sociologist working in Canada, where the author focuses on the condition of the contemporary English language,

It has come to seem to me recently that this present moment must be to language something like what the Industrial Revolution was to textiles. A writer who works on the old system of production can spend days crafting a sentence, putting what feels like a worthy idea into language, only to find, once finished, that the internet has already produced countless sentences that are more or less just like it, even if these lack the same artisanal origin story that we imagine gives writing its soul (Smith 2019).

In this situation, such translation, distinguished by a creative spirit, as *Impostures*, is perceived as a special phenomenon. Most reviews demonstrate that American readers, involved in the fight against artificial intelligence, see it as a kind of solution.

Impostures is significant as a linguistic work, – admitted Mathew Chovanec, Arabic scholar of one of the institutes in Virginia. – Beyond being an important translation of a criminally neglected work of world literature, and an impressive literary work in its own right, *Impostures* is also akin to a guidebook on linguistic deceit. It gives us all kinds of trips and tricks for confronting the futuristic threat of artificial intelligence with dependable medieval technology (Chovanec 2020).

Cooperson decided to translate *Maqāmāt*, which were translated more than once, not because the translation generally can become obsolete. His goal was the popularization of al-Ḥarīrī’s masterpiece. To achieve this goal, he chose the way of imitation. As a result, the translation was greatly appreciated by both the wider society and specialists. And a high rating naturally contributed to the popularization of classical Arabic text. Though interestingly, most readers perceived this translation made with rich Standard English and diverse spoken language as a kind of guidebook on how the contemporary English language can be prevented from impoverishment. While the author of the 13th century glorified the language of one of the greatest medieval empires and hence, the international language of that period, Cooperson attempted to demonstrate the wide capabilities of *lingua franca*, spontaneously promoted in the conditions of globalization, distinguished by its diversity. The reviews underline that in the epoch of artificial intelligence, in the environment, where, for certain reasons, English, as a language in general and as a writing language is on the way of impoverishment, *Impostures*, with its rich vocabulary and creativity became some kind of linguistic guidebook for the American readers, al-Ḥarīrī could hardly imagine this.

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