

Vindicating a Profession or a Personal Career? Al-Qalqashandī's *Maqāmah* in Context

Al-Qalqashandī's *maqāmah* in praise of his patron Badr al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī and the epistolary art was written as a manual on secretaryship.¹ The *maqāmah* is a summation of the art that predated the voluminous compendium *Ṣubḥ* and draws attention to its author as an epistolographer of great literary caliber.² While introducing his *Ṣubḥ* with a specific mention of this *maqāmah*,³ al-Qalqashandī is unequivocal in glorifying this piece, terming it an art of "allusion and suggestion," attuned to "brevity" that renders it beyond the reach of the common reader and the less erudite in the art of literary composition. He specifically intimates that it was due to the precision and conciseness of this *maqāmah* that many missed its focused argument, and hence a certain person of sound judgment and indisputable advice, perhaps his patron, "directs me to follow it up with a thorough compilation covering essentials and rules."⁴ The *maqāmah*, therefore, complements the compilation of the *Ṣubḥ* as it drew attention to al-Qalqashandī and his mastery of literary composition. It was the achievement and proof of his proficiency in the art, and the marker of his merits as prose writer.

This introductory note in *Ṣubḥ* is of great significance, not only because it sets the date of composition for the *maqāmah*, in 791/1389, "when I settled at the chancery . . .,"⁵ but also because it was written with a focused purpose to bring the *maqāmah* genre once and for all within the orbit of literary composition in which the author aimed to demonstrate his mastery. His *maqāmah*, then, may be read as an autobiographical piece as the self-made epistolographer is keen on drawing a

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¹On this *maqāmah*, see C. E. Bosworth, "A *Maqāma* on Secretaryship: Al-Qalqashandī's Al-Kawākib al-Durrīyah fi'l-Manāqib Al-Badriyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 27 (1964): 291–98, reprinted in the author's *Medieval Arabic Culture and Administration* (London, 1982), 292–98.

²See *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā fi Ṣinā'at al-Inshā'*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1988), 1:34–35.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 34.

⁵Ibid. Bosworth notes that the author "entered the *dīwān* in 791/1389, the date when he composed his *maqāma* in praise of *inshā'* and of his master Badr al-Dīn." See *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 293.



sustained parallel between the *'isāmī* (the self-made person or survivalist) and *'izāmī* ("of honorable ancestry").⁶ But the comparison, between nepotism and merited chancery emplacements and appointments, is carried out within a *maqāmah* convention, which is also intentionally underlined to highlight the speaker's position as *al-Nāthir ibn al-Nazzām*, "the prose writer son of the versifier,"⁷ according to a systematic prioritization of genres.

In the following pages, I will argue for the significance of al-Qalqashandī's *maqāmah* in relation to both epistolography and *maqāmāt* conventions and professional and cultural engagements.

In his *maqāmah*, al-Qalqashandī's protagonist-narrator establishes his identity as a prose writer with poetic grounding, whose credentials and talent secure him a chancery position despite rampant nepotism and mediocre competitors. While striving for recognition through his panegyrics, his growth as a learned prose writer entitles him to debate forebears in an "anxiety of influence" pattern. This recognition is justified by the voluminous *Ṣubḥ*, completed in 814/1412, and his earlier *maqāmah* of 791/1389, which secured him a textual lineage among learned prose writers and epistolographers. Although his *maqāmah, Al-Kawākib al-Durrīyah fī al-Manāqib al-Badrīyah*, was the prototype for the larger compendium, its place in the last volume among other *maqāmāt* may have been assigned by design to hold the *Ṣubḥ* together. The *maqāmah* acts like an autobiographical postscript, which concludes a voluminous work in order to draw attention to the author after a long and laborious journey among impersonal accounts, epistles, biographies, and achievements of others. Although Bosworth thinks that the author sounds boastful⁸ in saying that *maqāmah* "includes an exposition of all the material points which the *kātib al-inshā'* needs to know and all the well-trodden paths which he must follow,"⁹ al-Qalqashandī offers more than one reason to justify this position, as will be shown.

Al-Qāḍī Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Qalqashandī (756–821/1355–1420) served as *kātib darj*, "scribe of the scroll,"¹⁰ in the chancery or *dīwān al-inshā'* during the reign of the first Circassian sultan, al-Zāhir Barqūq (784–90/1382–88). At that time, al-Qāḍī Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh and his brother al-Qāḍī 'Alā' al-Dīn, from Banū Faḍl Allāh

⁶See *Ṣubḥ*, 14:145.

⁷Ibid., 127.

⁸Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 295.

⁹*Ṣubḥ*, 14:147.

¹⁰The "scribes of the scroll or the roll" refers to the pieces of paper or parchment joined together to become a *darj* or scroll for writing. See J. H. Escovitz, "Vocational Patterns of the Scribes of the Mamluk Chancery," *Arabica* 23 (1976): 55. Also, *Ṣubḥ*, 1:138.



al-‘Umarī, were in charge of the *dīwān*. Al-Qalqashandī’s *maqāmah*, *Al-Kawākib al-Durrīyah*, dates his formal entry into the chancery in 791/1389. Badr al-Dīn was in charge of the *dīwān al-inshā’* on three occasions: 784/1382, 786–92/1385–90, and 796–801/1394–99.¹¹ It was during his patron’s life that al-Qalqashandī also compiled his voluminous *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’*, though it was finalized in 814/1412.

Al-Qalqashandī was very proud of the *Kawākib*, as he noted in a number of places.¹² It has an autobiographical aspect, which is quite valuable in view of socio-political mobility. On the other hand, it is structured in a specific way to cater to the *maqāmah* convention while engaging issues of topical interest. It is perhaps worthwhile to discuss its form and textual engagements, so as to assess the author’s claims to both thoroughness and precision. It is structured as follows: (1) the concept and meaning of *maqāmah*; (2) history of composition; (3) the prologue; (4) the *hātif*, or voice; (5) the dialogue between the speaker and his companion; (6) the discussion of prioritization between scribes in the finance department and the literary division in the *dīwān*; (7) elaboration on the priority of literary composition and epistolography at large; (8) the qualifications of the epistolographer; (9) the *dīwān* and its present secretary; (10) panegyrics; (11) self-glorification.

It is worth mentioning that the author devotes a paragraph to explain the meaning of the genre. The explanation is significantly drawn in spatial and cultural terms to relate the *maqāmah* as assembly to the *dīwān* as place for literary and educational activity. *Maqāmāt*, he notes, “is the plural for *maqāmah*, which etymologically denotes the name for an assembly or a group of people. A narrative unit is called as such, if it occurs in one assembly where a group gathers to listen to it. This is different from *muqāmah*, which means sojourn or settlement.”¹³ This explanation leads to the history of the genre with a laudatory mention of al-Hamadhānī, followed by al-Ḥarīrī, whose *maqāmāt* “were so well-received and met with so much luck, that they relegated to oblivion those of al-Badī’ [al-Hamadhānī] as if they were obsolete.”¹⁴ The subsequent argument on al-Ḥarīrī relates to prioritization of genres and will be discussed in order. But the *Kawākib* is intentionally and vigorously launched as a *maqāmah*, and it deserves to be considered as such, especially for its attention to language and rhetorical embellishments. Other reasons are as follows:

¹¹Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 292.

¹²*Ṣubḥ*, 14:124–27.

¹³*Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 125.



1. The protagonist is a *maqāmah* figure, who is keen on using his skill, talent, and knowledge against uncongenial circumstances of nepotism, political opportunism, and competitiveness. Even after being appointed as *kātib darj*, it took him time to adjust and receive due recognition.¹⁵
2. There is a narrator and a narratee (a double) or a *hātif* ("voice") whose role complements the narrator's own. On the other hand, there is an addressee, too, in this case the Qādī Badr al-Dīn, who is meant to hear and enjoy the eloquence of his scribe. This narrative grows in a *maqāmah* fashion with great emphasis on dialogue. Speech is the means and the reward here, as in every other *maqāmah*.
3. The narrator, as protagonist, uses the encounter with the narratee mainly to offer justifications for his endeavor to be at the chancery. The narratee, the voice, is a *deus ex machina*,¹⁶ for he shares with the narrator an agenda and a register to describe the Mamluk chancery and its glory and requirements. But the narratee is more than a double, however, as he grows in textual space as a competing protagonist, the one who mediates for the narrator, arranges his entry, and provides him with enough intelligence and information to enable him to secure a position.
4. The narrator-protagonist, *al-Nāthir ibn al-Nazzām*, "the prose writer son of the versifier," is designated so by design, not only to echo al-Ḥarīrī's al-Ḥārith ibn al-Hammām, but also to offer another genetic trajectory whereby the article "al" adds influence and prestige to the name, the prose writer, in comparison to the versifier who suffers in this prioritization. The act is closely related to the ongoing controversy regarding the significance of each genre, as we shall see.

In another sense, the structure of al-Qalqashandī's *Maqāmah* is also similar to the *Bildungsroman* as a novel of education, especially as its history of composition culminates a life of apprenticeship and challenge, viewed and assessed retrospectively. The aspiring young protagonist, with divided aims and great anxieties, must pass through some test and prove efficiency. In a moment of hesitation and great perplexity, he must choose between the search for knowledge for its own sake and the profession that enables him to make a living, and he

¹⁵Ibid., 145.

¹⁶Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 296, n. 16.



intimates in a manner fashionable in confessional autobiographies: "I was so distressed and stunned as to act aimlessly. Perplexity kept me suspended between the two courses. If I pursue knowledge for its material benefits, then I commit a reprehensible act, and if I commit myself to study regardless of livelihood, then I should perish in destitution and die of hunger."¹⁷ Yet, his education in a hierarchical society should be geared towards a post which pays well while preserving his integrity as a writer. Devoid of family connections and in need of money, there must be a patron, or godfather, to offer support and guidance. The hero must search and make connections before coming upon the ideal patron. Also, the internal conflict should conclude in a way that suits the hero's aspirations in order to offer us a narrative of some edification and educational value.

Yet the *Kawākib* is not wholly fictional, as we gather from the introductory note in the first volume,¹⁸ for it is al-Qalqashandī's life story, presented to the patron and the reader, to be read and enjoyed. The author is so proud of his career that he wrote it down together with shows of allegiance that act as rites of passage to the chancery proper. Glorifying the vocation and highlighting his own career against mediocrity and conflictual attitudes, he feels empowered enough to submit his *maqāmah* to the public. Although the author's transition stage of perplexity and hesitation in this *Bildungsroman* has a "romanticized autobiographical element" that Bosworth notes,¹⁹ the account in general fits into narratives of education that communicate a moral and educational message to the reader. Such details may prove helpful in reading the *Kawākib* as autobiographical in the first place.

Knowing full well the role of power relations, especially among close-knit relatives with *simāt irthīyah* ("hereditary attributes"),²⁰ al-Qalqashandī recognizes the need to demonstrate efficiency and competence in performance, along with self-possession and restraint, in order to gain his patron's support:

And as I became assured that I am established in his *dīwān*, and listed as one of his pages, I refrained from further search for gain; and neither need nor affluence became of consequence to me, for to catch sight of him suffices to substitute for food and drink, and I am assured that a look from him could promote me to the clouds. . . .²¹

With an eye on his patron, al-Qalqashandī divides his narrative between the narrator and the narratee, engaging the latter in a dialogue concerning the patron. This

¹⁷*Ṣubḥ*, 14:128.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1:34–35.

¹⁹Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 295.

²⁰*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141.

²¹*Ibid.*, 145.



division of labor enables the author to collect and cite information about the ruling caste, while providing him with enough space to justify allegiance and map out a career. The narratee's answers amount to a full account of chancery dealings and responsibilities, as the patron assumes his importance in chancery context. But drawn to the patron's character, the speaker is overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring presence of Qādī Badr al-Dīn, which is hereditary, for the patron descends from the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644), the great "grandfather."²² These "hereditary attributes," along with his patron's munificence, emphasize nepotism as positively rewarding, as it ensures cultural continuity and professional expertise. Indeed, Badr al-Dīn is of "great lineage, and unsurpassed family," inheriting the position with merit, "though it is his by lineage."²³ The emphasis on nepotism and merit makes up the last part of the *maqāmah*. It corresponds to the panegyric of the ode, to be sure,²⁴ but it is also a culmination of a long narrative journey of discontent, training, and search. Working out his way in poetry and prose, the author attempts to show his resourcefulness in launching this panegyric while glorifying himself to be worthy of the patron's station. In the panegyric section and its rite of passage, there is more autobiography than a cursory reading may indicate, for every glorification of the patron and patronage is imbued with self-glorification.²⁵

The panegyric as a rite of passage comes in response to the narratee's explanations of chancery dealings. In his discourse on Banū Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, the narrator, as al-Qalqashandī's alter ego, thus avoids clear-cut discussions of nepotism. But there is an underlying belief that familial connections and nepotism kept chancery posts within the family, in a *de facto* manner, which is summed up in the phrase "*bi-al-aṣālah*," or familial succession.²⁶ Filiatory ties are a defensive strategy, however, a preemptive procedure to evade penetration, rivalry, and competition. But, on the positive side, this nepotism ensured some continuity in chancellery correspondence, which, paradoxically, led to its subsequent imitateness, verbosity, and artificiality. The Banū Wahb, Banū 'Abd al-Zāhir (especially Muḥyī al-Dīn, 620–92/1223–92) and Banū Faḍl Allāh (especially Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, d. 749/1349) were among the most prominent dynastic epistolographers. But al-Qalqashandī also refers to chanceries as schools for apprenticeship, for to have epistolographers like Badr al-Dīn manifests "God's favors."²⁷

²²Ibid., 143.

²³Ibid., 141.

²⁴See Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 297.

²⁵On the rite of passage, see Suzanne P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, 1993), 5–8.

²⁶*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141.

²⁷Ibid., 142.



It is at this point that al-Qalqashandī's narrator asserts homage and allegiance to his patron and to the family at large. The panegyric ensues as an answer to the narrator's rhetorical question whether there is "a necklace" or a string to hold this prestigious office together.²⁸ His companion is ready with an elaborate answer to glorify the patron and his family. He goes so far as placing the patron ahead of all chancery writers, including the ones he is known for emulating in his literary composition, such as al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Bīsānī ("the honorable magistrate," 529–96/1135–1200).²⁹ In response, the narrator "recited in public with sincerity" a verse from the Quran: "Say it is because of God's favor [*faḍl Allāh*] and His mercy, let them rejoice for this, for he is better than whomever they choose." Set against al-Qalqashandī's discursive corpus, this piety sounds too contrived to be taken seriously. It is calculated, however, to impress Badr al-Dīn himself, and to draw his attention to al-Qalqashandī's readiness of mind, his wit, insight, and mastery of Quranic verse. Thus, al-Qalqashandī helps to consolidate the position of the learned who enlisted religious discourse to give legitimacy and authority to their present occupations.³⁰

The *maqāmah* sections on the patron are carefully placed within a chancery context to show the merits of both the patron and the scribe. In terms of discussion and analysis of the chancery occupation, al-Qalqashandī subtly penetrates into the fabric of the familiar to represent it anew, drawing attention to his resourcefulness. In a number of places, for example, al-Qalqashandī proves epistolary competence in coming upon the exact Quranic verse, which fits the very name of Badr al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh. Both the recurrence of Faḍl Allāh (God's favors) in the specific Quranic verse and its prosification in discourse are meant to demonstrate eloquence and mastery of epistolography usually associated with al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil and his Fatimid master Ibn al-Khallāl. While embedded within meticulous prosifications that are bound to impress Badr al-Dīn, the overall design of the panegyric is to establish a career, which may be secured by the less merited by mere allegiance or nepotism. Indeed, al-Qāḍī al-Ṣayrafī, who wrote in praise of Badr al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh, said of him "he was biased towards some and they gained; and he was against others who made no headway."³¹

²⁸Ibid., 141.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰On the dynasties and their role in the Mamluk period, see Donald P. Little, "Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk Epochs," in *Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 1:412–44. On the role of the elite, Jonathan P. Berkey, "Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East," *Past and Present* 146 (February 1995); and Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981), esp. 17–18.

³¹See the editor's note, *Ṣubḥ*, 14:126, n. 1.



Especially when considered in this context, al-Qalqashandī's panegyric makes use of a poetic tradition in a changing milieu of great mobility and precariousness. His tools should be as good as a great poet's to complete his rites of passage. The rites of passage to the chancery include many things, to be sure, as the *maqāmah* itself explains, beginning with training in the art and the acquisition of knowledge. But the aspirant must prove that his talent exceeds average requirements. Along with wit and mastery of prosification, he must be a poet too. Thus, upon being appointed, he plays on his patron's name and its meaning again, implying throughout that both name, designation, and meaning fit each other in natural, irrevocable order.³² After the ceremonial "honor of kissing his [the patron's] hand," the narrator specifies that he "devoted" his utmost praise and benedictions to him.³³ A survivalist, a self-made professional scribe, he must demonstrate talent in the absence of lineage. "I was self-made in this profession (*'iṣāmīyan*) not born to it (*'iḏāmīyan*)," he says.³⁴ Thus his first encounter with the *dīwān* professionals was not easy or smooth, for "I took my seat as a stranger, with a desolate demeanor."³⁵ Yet, he nevertheless strove hard to hold onto the position, for "I clung to it by every means, and I ignited its fire from the least spark," so as to be welcomed accordingly with "charity and fairness."³⁶

But patronage is still required in the first place to establish oneself and tackle the work at hand, if the marginalized intellectual is to show competence and talent in a chancery of professionals and functionaries. Hence, the narrator's question to his companion: "Has he [Badr al-Dīn] followers, retinue, from among the scribes whom one should ask for aid and moral support in speech and action, so as to be marked as a scribe and among Badr al-Dīn's pages?"³⁷ The question is rhetorical, for "Badr al-Dīn's brother is the head of the *dast*." The chancery is a close-knit foundation then, and nepotism runs deeply into its making, performance, and achievement. The chancery is divided between the "*kuttāb al-dast*, [who] are of a higher station, and the *kuttāb al-darj*, [who] are the more suitable for writing and eloquence."³⁸ The prioritization here is political and bureaucratic, which, in the narrator's oblique reading, carries no intellectual or cultural weight.

We are told the "second division" is the right place for the narrator despite its subordination to the first. The prose writer, *al-Nāthir*, who narrates and interrogates

³² *Ṣubḥ*, 14:144.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁸ *Ibid.*



the whole scene, needs not only to justify a choice, but also to place it in context. Now, he is allied with *kuttāb* of literary writing—as his account of them demonstrates,³⁹ a post that had a prestigious, though hazardous, history. Moreover, it has contemporary luster whenever related to the learned as different from functionaries, a point which he discusses in detail when analyzing and describing the typology of chancery writers.⁴⁰

To lead the reader into the profession of the *kātib* within the Mamluk chancery of state, al-Qalqashandī surveys writers and scribes⁴¹ who are meant to substantiate the panegyric, but this also highlights the speaker's affiliation with such prestigious names. Badr al-Dīn is the *kātib sirr*, the confidential secretary in charge of the *dīwān*, including the *kuttāb al-darj*. There is reason to compare him to predecessors dating back to the Umayyads (40–132/661–750), for the latter used to have a *kātib* as secretary of state, instead of the vizier, a designation which the Abbasids (132–333/750–945) favored. In the Fatimid period in Egypt (358–566/969–1171), this was the *kātib al-dast* (secretary of the bench). In the Mamluk period, there was the *dīwān al-inshā'*, with its two divisions: the *dast* (bench) and *darj* (scroll). It was only in the times of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn (678–91/1279–92) that the magistrate Faṭḥ al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir was appointed as confidential secretary, *kātib al-sirr*, or "recorder of the sultan's secrets," a word which people corrupted into *kātim* or "keeper" of secrets.⁴² The office of vizier was then abolished by al-Nāṣir ibn Qalāwūn (r. 693–741/1294–1340), who divided the office in 710/1310 among four officers, including the "recorder of the secrets."

In respect to the specific mention of the post he desires, the narrator says: "The second division is the more suitable to my status, and the closer to my inclinations."⁴³ Reaching the targeted post, he can dispense with his companion. The double is no longer needed, and "I bade him farewell, thanking him for his help and appreciating his courtesy, and I left him and embarked on my way. That was the last I heard of him."⁴⁴ To dispense with the *deus ex machina* is to assert identity and independence. The speaker or narrator is on his own now, and must proceed in a formal manner to attain this post. Having learned the nature of the chancery and its network, "I returned to him [Badr al-Dīn], and raised my petition,

³⁹Ibid., 141.

⁴⁰Ibid., 1:31. See Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 204–5, but also *Ṣubḥ*, 1:80–81, on the confusion between the learned and the functionary and the ignorant. In relation to the learned, see Jonathan P. Berkey, "Culture and Society during the Late Middle Ages," in *Cambridge History of Egypt*, 1:375–411.

⁴¹*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141.

⁴²Ibid., 1:138.

⁴³Ibid., 14:144.

⁴⁴Ibid.



and requested his approval of my application, which he accepted. What a munificent master he is, and he assigned me to the honorable *kitābat al-darj*.⁴⁵ Although al-Qalqashandī speaks of credentials and suitability, insofar as his choice is concerned, the chancery builds on *hierarchy*. His very language regarding his patron betrays as much, for he "delves into his domains, and swerves to his abode to have a glimpse of him, who appears glowing and glittering as light, and his moons shine with glory, brimming with dignity, submerged in quietude, imbued with authority, and endowed with happiness."⁴⁶ Even the design of place and seats was meant to assert this gradation. *Kuttāb al-dast*, or scribes of the bench, sat on a raised platform or bench so as to present or respond to petitions offered to the sovereign in the House of Justice. Sometimes they were called *muwaqqi*'s, for they used to append or inscribe the royal signature on petitions. By contrast, *kuttāb al-darj* were primarily concerned with letters of fief grants, appointments, explanations, salutations, and their likes, which might not demand the immediate involvement of the chief scribe.

Hierarchy, gradation, and hegemony manifest themselves in the nature of discourse, then, whenever the narrator is on his own. He accepts subordination, but, ostensibly, because he thinks of the *kātib al-darj* post as the most fitting for his credentials. But while the *darj* post is not the highest in the *dīwān*, al-Qalqashandī attempts cleverly to add to it its lost prestige.⁴⁷ Indeed, the narrator's effort in this direction strives to combine a personal sense of importance and the patron's reputation as *kātib* with the aspiration to regain the glorious past of the profession. It is part of the biographical design, after all, to glorify oneself within loyalty to the profession in its epistolary dimension and historical context.

When 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132/750) is mentioned,⁴⁸ for instance, there is along with him some allusion to the Umayyads. The same applies to eleven scribes whom al-Qalqashandī mentions in this respect. The office and practice of *al-kātib* gained power and prestige in the Umayyad period not only due to interaction with the culture of other civilizations, but also for the needs of legitimacy in the context of the rivalry with the Prophet's descendents, known as among the most eloquent Arabs. Their discourse posed serious problems to the Umayyads, who spent enormous amounts of money and energy to compete with them. Falsification of records and pretensions to wit were widespread in order to impose legitimacy in a period of great political dissent. In the footsteps of their ostensible precursors, the descendents of the Prophet, the Fatimids elevated their *kātib* to a vizierate, a

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷See *ibid.*, 1:63–81.

⁴⁸Ibid., 14:141.



position belonging “to the men of sword and sometimes to the men of the pen,” with “full delegated powers.”⁴⁹ Some of their scribes, like al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (529–96/1135–1200), were to rise to the highest positions. So was their vizier Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. The Ayyubid period (589–658/1193–1260) brought along with it, through this combination of the sword and the pen, a great deal of the Fatimid preoccupation with culture and faith. Although a Kurdish warrior-chief, with little concern for the Fatimid protocol and hierarchical structures, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn inherited their keen interest in culture. But instead of looking for a chief missionary to propagate a faith, he came upon al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (“The Excellent Magistrate”) ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Bīsānī, to join him in his endeavor to regain conquered lands from the Crusaders. The testimony to the power of the word was more eloquent coming from a warrior. Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī reports that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn cautioned his ruling elite not to assume that he conquered his enemies by their swords but by the pen of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil.⁵⁰ This reference is not out of place here, especially as al-Qalqashandī specifically chooses al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil to head the list of writers and scribes cited for comparison with his patron: “Had the Excellent ‘Abd al-Raḥīm seen him, he would never have claimed for himself excellent traits and would never have had recourse to writing.”⁵¹ Every other scribe or writer is of secondary significance in comparison, and every other glory fades in the presence of the overwhelming magnitude of Badr al-Dīn.

Such comparisons and discursive attempts at balanced discussions are part of the autobiographical structure of the *maqāmah*, and should be seen in their subtle ramifications. Every *muwāzanah* (“balanced assessment and debate”) is a strategy of evasion or assertion, for al-Qalqashandī lauds the art of writing in each of these to glorify the patron and himself. The comparison of the patron to his precursors, for example,⁵² is functional in more than one sense. It is attuned to the panegyric, and to the personal need to demonstrate allegiance and affiliation to be sure. By implication, it sets the patron and the writer in a genealogy of writers which derives its power from expertise, value, and connection to the sovereign.⁵³ But it is also an attempt to set the record straight in terms of a response to challenges, professional and political. Aside from the encroaching presence of the *dīwān al-jaysh*, i.e., the military department, there is also the challenge of *kuttāb al-māl*, i.e., of the financial or treasury department.⁵⁴ Therefore, enumerating the merits of

⁴⁹From al-Qalqashandī, tr. Bernard Lewis in *Islam* (Oxford, 1987), 1:203.

⁵⁰Yūsuf ibn Qizughlī Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt al-Zamān* (Mecca, 1987), 8:472.

⁵¹*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 131–32.

⁵⁴See also his view on the urgent need for such a discussion, *ibid.*, 1:83.



the art of literary composition, the narrator recapitulates: "These are the traits of kings, and kingly traits, of the best merits, and the highly merited, for I never thought that writing as art had such a magnificent role and station."⁵⁵

Al-Qalqashandī's deliberate discourse on the art of prose writing clearly intends to underscore the role of epistolographers among the learned, for there was a tendency to look upon the functionary side of the profession as less qualified for refined knowledge and elitist presence.⁵⁶ Thus, he argues that the chancery *kātib* is a learned person, 'ālim.⁵⁷ He cites the philologist al-Mubārak ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1209) to explain the Prophet's use of the term "scribe" as a learned person, a point which al-Qalqashandī has already made in the *maqāmah*, when citing Quranic verses and the Prophet's sayings, in order to place epistolography and literary writing ahead of every other vocation.⁵⁸ The amount of emphasis laid on the significance of this writing as profession makes it not only the most prestigious, but also the most needed for statecraft and culture. Indeed, his vindication of *kitābah* as a vocation is so carefully and meticulously argued that it almost convinces the reader that the speaker is not that desperate for the post, and that the post is offered to him because of a dire chancery need for his services.⁵⁹ Yet the *maqāmah* is careful in pointing out that this craft is adequate to preserve one's integrity. As Bosworth notices, the thesis lies in the contention that there must be a profession or a vocation for a living.⁶⁰ As for "the student of science," i.e., learning, this vocation is "writing," or epistolography, and the scribe should never veer away from it.⁶¹

As the phrase *kitābah* includes chancellery correspondence in general, al-Qalqashandī unequivocally sides with "*kitābat al-inshā'*," or literary prose.⁶² The art itself, *kitābah*, is a "conceptual" or "spiritual" craft, meaning in al-Qalqashandī's terms "utterances imagined by the writer whereby he images through combinations an inner picture that exists deep in the recesses of the mind."⁶³ This *rūḥānīyah* ("conceptualization") materializes into *juthmānīyah*, or bodily form, via inscription. He adds, "the pen turns it from a conceptualized notion into a concrete [i.e.,

⁵⁵Ibid., 14:129.

⁵⁶See Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 204–5.

⁵⁷*Ṣubḥ*, 1:82.

⁵⁸Ibid., 14:129–30.

⁵⁹Ibid., 129.

⁶⁰Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 292–93.

⁶¹*Ṣubḥ*, 14:126.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 1:82, also 64.



substantial] one." To al-Qalqashandī and other authorities, inscription is *inshā'*, inclusive of every artistic composition.⁶⁴

As a result, al-Qalqashandī takes great care to draw a line between *kitābat al-inshā'* and *kitābat al-daywanah*, or the department of finance. In the *Ṣubḥ*, he pointedly argues that "in Egypt the word scribe came to refer solely to the scribes of the treasury. When it is used, nothing else is meant. As for the craft of composition, it began to have two meanings, a private one used by the people of the *dīwān*, denoting *kitābat al-inshā'*, and a public one for the people, which is *tawqī'*. As for naming it *kitābat al-inshā'*, it is . . . *inshā'*, or literary composition, [which] is at the root of its subject."⁶⁵

Aside from the known arguments in support of literary or artistic prose, al-Qalqashandī's references to the patron and his family, as well as the whole inventory of support for prose as such are deliberately couched in a register of royalty and war to cover and account for nepotism, affiliation, and rivalry among professions in times of mercurial politics. Badr al-Dīn is "the close advisor of the king and his companion." He is "his keeper of secrets" and the one in charge. "He is the closest to him when others are away, and the one endowed with the highest post when others are thrown out." He is the king's secretary who speaks for him. "He is the one who comes forth with the decisive saying when others are mute, and he is the warrior who fights gallantly with the sword of his tongue and the spear of his pen." Hence, he "is the defender of kingdoms with the battalions and armies of the line of his inscription and the soldiers of his language. He is the one who scatters the enemy with the originality of his utterance and delicacy of maxims. . . ."⁶⁶

This panegyric derives its effectiveness from *al-ḥamāsah* poetry, with its emphasis on glorious wars, and battles where the human element derives significance and volume from both courage and weapons. It is not surprising that al-Qalqashandī enlists a verse from Abū Tammām (d. 231/846), renowned for his chivalric poetics:

A stroke from a writer's hand is deeper and more cutting than a smooth sword. They are a tribe who, when provoked by the hostility of the jealous, shed blood with the blades of pens.

The text as a whole sets this *kitābah* as the "canon for politics." In Bosworth's version of this passage, this "encomium of secretaries" runs as follows: "they are the far-seeing eyes of kings, their all-hearing ears, their eloquent tongues, and their all-embracing intelligences . . . indeed, kings have more need of secretaries

⁶⁴Ibid., 82.

⁶⁵Ibid., 83.

⁶⁶Ibid., 14:142.



than secretaries have need of kings.⁶⁷ Al-Qalqashandī's *maqāmah*, then, aims at making a case for the learned among writers. Its urgency of tone and immediacy of purpose could have something to do with the Circassian period, and its failure to recognize the critical role of the learned since the times of al-Zāhir Barqūq (783–801/1382–99).⁶⁸ The emphasis on reciprocal benefits is not hard to follow, for, as W. W. Clifford notices, "Through such patronage networks the Mamluk political elite functionally exchanged economic benefits for social validation from the cultural elite."⁶⁹

But emphasis on the use of epistolographers and the learned at large is only one side of the coin. In more than one sense, they were the intermediaries between Mamluk oligarchies and the people. "Seeking legitimacy through the support of intellectuals," argues Donald P. Little, the Mamluk sultans "spent enormous sums on their salaries and patronage, sometimes in return for their specific services to the court but often for their function as devotional and educational intermediaries with the public."⁷⁰ Quoting 'Alī ibn Khalaf (d. 455/1063) in *Mawādd al-Bayān*, al-Qalqashandī asserted such a role. Writers are "the medium between kings and subjects," as they are "the only class which shares with kings grandeur and great significance while they are like the rest of the people in modesty and restrained expenditure."⁷¹ For this reason, they are indispensable "to protect the interests of people while securing the rights of sultans and maintaining the adequate connection between the two."⁷² Al-Qalqashandī never tires of quoting authorities that endorse the view that epistolographers are "the ornament of the kingdom and its beauty." It is the epistolographer's discourse which "uplifts its [the kingdom's] value and raises its reputation, magnifies its power, and indicates its merits." He contends further that, "On the sultan's behalf, he warns and persuades, praises or chastises. He articulates words to ensure the subordination and obedience of supporters, and drives away the intentions of foes to disobey or to continue hostility."⁷³ While relying on Ibn Khalaf in theory, al-Qalqashandī also enlists the views of kings and sultans on his side, as these are more acceptable among their equals. Abū al-Fidā', al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad of Ḥamāh (d. 732/1331) describes the role of epistolographers and writers as "the most noble profession after the caliphate, as it is the best of

⁶⁷Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 296.

⁶⁸Petry, *Civilian Elite*, 20.

⁶⁹W. W. Clifford, "Ubi Sumus? Social Theory and Mamluk Studies," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 51.

⁷⁰Little, "Historiography," 413.

⁷¹*Ṣubḥ*, 1:73.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 73–74.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 86.



favors and the most ultimate desire.⁷⁴ As for the Abbasid caliph al-Mustarshid Abū Ja'far (caliph in 512/1118), he was reported to have described writing as the "root" and the "pillar" of the kingdom, "separate branches of one tree."⁷⁵ These and similar opinions are also found in the *maqāmah*.⁷⁶

But there is a third side in this delicate intersection between epistolographers, prose writers, and intellectuals in general. In gratuitous comments, writers are never short of anecdotes and reports which address sultans and kings as liking to "own something of eloquence and good writing," as the Fatimid 'Alī Ibn Khalaf stipulates. Al-Qalqashandī uses this notion to forward his contention that epistolography is the "best of crafts,"⁷⁷ or, as he puts in the *maqāmah*, it is "the canon of politics."⁷⁸ Obviously, statesmen and sultans needed a powerful bureaucracy in the early pre-modern periods, and this materialized in the growth of a "class of secretaries," which Bosworth is right in describing as "numerous and powerful."⁷⁹ But, as J. H. Escovitz notes, this class was rather professional, with no absolute loyalty to the chancery.⁸⁰ Loyalty is ambiguous as a term, however, and we need to set the whole issue in terms of competitiveness, interests, and patterns of independence and subordination. In the *maqāmah*, then, al-Qalqashandī has an eye, too, on his present times, their precariousness and confusion. In assessing the situation, there is a need to maintain a divide between functionaries as part of bureaucratic and financial apparatus, usually inherited and developed by the Ayyubids and Mamluks, and the learned who were simultaneously needed, feared, and challenged by circumstance and division.⁸¹ The period itself had a mixture of authoritarianism, eclecticism, and sentimentalism towards knowledge. Sultans like Baybars could well intervene, for instance, in the judicial system, altering the judiciary by appointing four qadis for every Sunni school. The intervention was not whimsical, for the very structural change in centers of power in the Islamic world impelled him to meet this diversity in predilections, loyalties, and outlooks. The attitude itself should be seen as signifying a centralizing tendency, which involved a drive towards homogeneity and sameness through a wider accommodation of schools and sects in a Cairo which was growing as the center for Dār al-Islām. What Berkey signaled in architectural monuments as "statements

⁷⁴Ibid., 65–66.

⁷⁵Ibid., 66.

⁷⁶Ibid., 14:129–30.

⁷⁷Ibid., 1:67.

⁷⁸Ibid., 14:130.

⁷⁹*Medieval Arabic Culture*, 292.

⁸⁰Escovitz, "Vocational Patterns," 62.

⁸¹Berkey, "Culture and Society," 398.



of integration into an urban society which valued knowledge and piety, and which relied upon the private exercise of power and wealth to generate its cultural tradition and to protect its social order⁸² should be seen as a manifestation of a centralizing outlook. Nelly Hanna is surely right in suggesting that "the [Mamluk] sultans and their ruling amirs for over two centuries created the models and set the fashions, in the arts and in architecture."⁸³

Similarly, rulers' interest in writing, epistolography, and eloquence should not be seen as the whim of dilettantes, but as a drive for power and control through appropriation. Upon noticing his chancery potential as manifested in the *maqāmah*, al-Qalqashandī's patron, or some other authority, directed him to write a manual, more elaborate and extensive than the existing ones, including those by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad and Ibn Nāẓir al-Jaysh, which, for all their merits, "could not compensate for others," nor could they be comprehensive enough to "go beyond the science of rhetoric" which is the staple of other manuals.⁸⁴ The increasing production of compendiums, manuals, and teaching material in the art of epistolography was meant to meet a demand, which was also impelled and perpetuated by the sovereign whose power was to be sustained through a sophisticated bureaucracy and financial apparatus.

"*Al-kitābah qānūn al-siyāsah*" (literary composition is the canon of politics), says the *maqāmah*, and we need to assess the interrelatedness of the two in contextual terms. While alienating other departments of the army and treasury, for instance, al-Qalqashandī valorized the art of chancellery correspondence in its literary dimension. Although we have no information regarding specific royal orders for manuals or compendiums, these could be seen as ultimate markers of professional grounding and knowledge, which could have secured their authors a good, and, perhaps, lasting position in the chancery. In these manuals on procedural matters, formats, varieties of address, samples of polished correspondence, and stylistic needs and applications, the emphasis is laid on conformity, not deviation. Although knowledge admittedly varies between one person and another, the whole idea of a guide and a manual is to ensure symmetry and uniformity. Patronage by Mamluk sultans and ruling groups involved elite culture in some sameness, for, as Bakhtin argues, "The ruling class strives to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign," in order to render it "unaccentual".⁸⁵

⁸²Ibid., 397.

⁸³Nelly Hanna, "Culture in Ottoman Egypt," *Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge, 1998), 2:87.

⁸⁴*Ṣubḥ*, 1:31–35.

⁸⁵M. M. Bakhtin, "On Dialogic Discourse," in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London, 1997), 55.



Using these manuals and theoretic readings of the profession, al-Qalqashandī certainly catered to this centralizing drive while participating intellectually in defining culture and its magnanimous interest in and use of prose. Linking himself to such illustrious names and authorities as Qudāmah ibn Ja‘far (d. 326/938), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 275/889), ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib, Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 775/1374), al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, al-Ṣābī (d. 383/994), Ibn Nubātah, Ibn al-Athīr, along with Ibn Khalaf, Ibn Mamātī, and the dynasties of Banū Faḍl Allāh, Banū ‘Abd al-Zāhir, and many others,⁸⁶ al-Qalqashandī as a self-made scholar established for himself a professional lineage in the absence of reputed familial and blood connections. On the other hand, this subtext of belonging also highlights his patron’s achievement, for he surpassed all in competence and grandeur. But by so doing, al-Qalqashandī also glorifies his own role and achievement for he, after all, claims to have improved even on al-Qāḍī Shihāb al-Dīn ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī.⁸⁷ Saying as much, al-Qalqashandī proves that, based on his hard work and skill, he deserves great acknowledgment and merit.

Yet to emphasize value and use for the state is not enough, especially among the literati. Poetic leanings and achievements were still in vogue, and the *maqāmah* never loses sight of this. The *kātib* is addressed as a flowering and ultimate maturation from poetry, and al-Qalqashandī could find no better lineage to allegorize his career than *al-Nāthir ibn al-Nazzām* (The Prose Writer Son of the Versifier). Sealing a tradition, he pointedly elevated prose to the highest position, and he is at pains to enlist every authoritative view on this subject, particularly ‘Alī ibn Khalaf (d. 455/1063) and his *Mawādd al-Bayān*. ‘Alī ibn Khalaf is one of the illustrious figures in *Ṣubḥ* for the simple reason that he divides the “art of composition” in three: *kitābah*, oratory, and poetry, emphasizing superiority in sequence, a point which al-Qalqashandī endorses, especially in his *maqāmah*.⁸⁸ Moreover, in his third chapter, al-Qalqashandī entitles his discussion unwaveringly “Prioritization of Prose to Poetry.” This prioritization takes for granted that powerful prose should make intensive use of other styles and genres so as to reach large audiences, while keeping to the Quranic tradition of restrained and balanced use of assonance and figurative language.

It is within this prioritization of genres and the valorization of epistolary art that al-Qalqashandī targeted poetic license as an invitation to laxity, and openness to all including the “rabble” and the “reprobates.”⁸⁹ But he is for the positive sides of poetry, too, especially its poetics of style. Indeed, “*ḥall*,” poetic prosification,

⁸⁶*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141, 1:35, 135–45, etc.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 1:35.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 14:130.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 1:92.



was repeatedly emphasized as a prerequisite to epistolography. Abū 'Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī (d. 685/1286) was strongly drawn to the practice in his *Luma'*. The scribe or clerk in *dīwān al-inshā'* should be "well acquainted with sciences, especially literature, to reach the highest station in verse and prose, even to reach that stage of rhetoric to be able to put poetry into prose, or vice versa. . . ."⁹⁰

'Abd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1038) explains in detail his practice of *nathr al-naẓm*, or the turning of poetry into prose. But Ḍiyā' al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr (d. 636/1239) goes even further, for his book *Al-Washy al-Marqūm fī Ḥall al-Manzūm* is meant as a manual for prosification. This tendency was never incidental, for even the application of the method itself to the Quranic verse was meant to manipulate classical poetics into epistolography. Further in *Al-Mathal al-Sā'ir fī Adab al-Kātib wa-al-Shā'ir*, Ibn al-Athīr is unequivocal in prioritizing prose in keeping with the spirit of the age. Insofar as Arabic poetics is concerned, the attempt falls within a larger drive to account for change and intercultural inroads which also imply leaving Abbasid poetics behind, alienating classical poetry, its centripetal power and unifying tradition. Al-Qalqashandī's focused appropriation of Ibn al-Athīr, along with other authorities in epistolography, is carefully done in order to underscore the notion of change in state machinery and the corresponding priority of prose.

In his *maqāmah* as well as in his elaborate discussion of the qualifications of the epistolographer,⁹¹ al-Qalqashandī again enlists authoritative writers on the prerequisites and attributes of the *kātib*.⁹² He must be a male, a free person, who is just and decent, knowledgeable in the Quran and hadith. He must be a rhetor, for he is the "sultan's tongue and hand, and an effective scribe may well replace battalions, and his pen could substitute for the most sharp and cutting swords."⁹³ He is to be sensible, mindful, insightful, and reasonable. He should be well acquainted with the Islamic judiciary and law in general. His knowledge of the sciences is to be wide and extensive, including relevant branches and disciplines. He is to be of solid caliber, respectable and daring to be effective in address. Efficiency and resolution are required, too, to ensure high morale among Muslims. But these are among the basic requirements which he terms '*ulūm*, or the requisites that cover the following: the Quran and its sciences; principles of statecraft; the heritage of

⁹⁰*Luma' al-Qawānīn*, ed. C. Becker and C. Cahen (Port Said, n.d.), 24–25. Also see in this issue Geert Jan van Gelder, "Poetry for Easy Listening."

⁹¹*Ṣubḥ*, 1:95–98.

⁹²Along with Abū al-Faḍl al-Sūrī, al-Madanī (d. 849), al-'Askarī (d. 1009), Ibn Mamātī (d. 1209), Ibn Khalaf and Ibn al-Athīr, documentation is drawn from the Quran and the Prophet's tradition, and the sayings of his companions and other notables.

⁹³*Ṣubḥ*, 1:98.



the Arabs; their orations and epistles; history of their dynasties and chivalry; their rhetoric and grammar and chancery skills.⁹⁴ As for the *rusūm*, as delineated in the *Kawākib*,⁹⁵ they are no less varied and diversified, covering calligraphy, knowledge of chancellery correspondence, geography and cultures of other nations. The list is ambitious and demanding, and, perhaps, smacks of self-glorification.

Al-Qalqashandī further implies in the listing of the qualifications and their complementary procedures and acquisitions that he is not only endowed with these, but also qualified enough to assess and set guidelines for others in the field. In a word, he shines as one of the most illustrious epistolographers in this *maqāmah*. But this should not be surprising. Since the middle of the twelfth century many epistolographers had been called upon to write down “the official histories of the dynasties in whose chanceries they held important positions” as Makdisi argues,⁹⁶ and on many occasions they were unable to remain as ghostwriters. In keeping up with their sovereigns and their feats and conquests, they found themselves too closely involved and intimately entangled to sustain a low profile. Those epistolographers who began an early career as *kātibs* in the chancery of state were, as al-Nābulusī argues, asked to be “of distinctive merits to be ahead of the rest, of wonderful *naẓm* [poetry] and wonderful prose that shines in the vast domain of writing, bringing about a light of unfamiliar literature whose secret is somewhere like the heart of a wise, reasonable and intelligent person.” As for the rest, they are “copyists or embellishers, job holders of some talent in literary or colloquial utterance.”⁹⁷

In such a context, the *Kawākib* speaks then for epistolographers of some renown against reputed poets and *maqāmah* writers, and a post at the chancery was the desire of no less talented poets than Ibn Sanā’ al-Mulk (d. 607/1211) and Ibn Nubātah (d. 766/1365). Prose writers were to vie with poets. Thus, in the manner of exemplary *maqāmah*, the *Kawākib* engages issues of immediate interest to the literati, and particularly scribes, epistolographers, and poets. The naming of the protagonist “the prose-writer son of versifier” is meant to carry on the argument that prose grows out of poetry and outgrows it. His contention is that prose matures out of verse in order to cope with expanding undertakings, issues, domains of interest, and extensive knowledge. Indeed, the *‘ulūm* and the *rusūm* which al-Qalqashandī enumerates make epistolography comprehend every other genre and field of knowledge and technique. Further, drawing on antecedent authority, including Ibn Qutaybah, Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd, and al-‘Askarī, al-

⁹⁴Ibid., 14:133–37. See also Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 296.

⁹⁵*Ṣubḥ*, 14:137–40.

⁹⁶*The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh, 1990), 166.

⁹⁷*Luma’ al-Qawānīn*, 25.



Qalqashandī is keen on establishing a genealogy of ancestors, among whom the narrator aspires for a distinguished presence despite his post as *kātib darj*. We should remember that he resolves to put aside personal inhibitions and expectations and settle for a place where Badr al-Dīn and his brother were in charge.⁹⁸ But the outcome, in terms of literary writing, demonstrates also that he is so well-qualified that he can uplift the whole *darj* profession to the station of the ulama and the learned.⁹⁹

On the other hand, this *maqāmah*'s literary value also lies in its subtle attempt to undermine ancestry. Indeed, if we accept the earlier contention that the effort to prioritize prose implies a decentralization of a classical tradition of poetic supremacy, it is even more tenable to see al-Qalqashandī fighting back against his literary father, al-Ḥarīrī. Indeed, no matter how eloquent al-Qalqashandī is in relying on antecedent authority, he is no exception in betraying a great anxiety of influence. But he sets a theory for that, for, like poetry, epistolography is a negotiatory textual space. Writing as craft is a "growth," and "construction should have a base, and branch should have a root," he says¹⁰⁰ upon improving on his immediate epistolary precursors, al-Qādī Shihāb al-Dīn and Ibn Nāzīr al-Jaysh. As a growth, the craft of writing is bound to outgrow the precursor, namely the former epistolographers. By the same token, he, in the present *maqāmah*, has to outgrow al-Ḥarīrī. Since the literati had been very receptive to al-Ḥarīrī and his art, al-Qalqashandī should have experienced some anxiety of influence. His argument for prose is applied also against the *maqāmah* of al-Ḥarīrī. Relying on Ibn al-Athīr's derogatory remarks against al-Ḥarīrī,¹⁰¹ al-Qalqashandī sided with the former's conclusion that al-Ḥarīrī was not an adept in epistolography, a conclusion that is rife with implications, for Ibn al-Athīr was no less anxious to prove his literary prestige at a time when al-Ḥarīrī's reputation was so overwhelmingly present as to allow little space for the rest. Ibn al-Athīr used the disputed anecdote of Ibn al-Khashshāb (d. 567/1172) to imply that al-Ḥarīrī was good only as a *maqāmah* writer, but not as epistolographer.¹⁰²

Al-Qalqashandī argues that Ibn al-Athīr "had not given him [al-Ḥarīrī] his due and had not treated him fairly."¹⁰³ Yet al-Qalqashandī mentions, nevertheless, the whole story of al-Ḥarīrī's failure to write epistles, along with the vindictive poetry against him. He goes so far as to quote Ibn al-Athīr's suggestion that to write a

⁹⁸ *Ṣubḥ*, 14:145.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:34.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 86, 14:125.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 14:125.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*



maqāmah does not entail good style and acumen, for "all *maqāmāt* have only one orbit revolving around a tale with a conclusion, unlike epistolography which is a sea with no borders, for its themes are endless and are renewed in pace with time and events."¹⁰⁴ Still, in his attempt to outgrow his ancestor, al-Qalqashandī comes to internalize him, and on occasion, to recollect his style and highlight al-Ḥarīrī's stylized diction. In such a game there is, in Bakhtin's words, "intensification of others' intonations in a certain discourse or a certain section," delivered in such a manner "so that his own present writer's direct or refracted word might ring out all the more energetically." The tendency throughout is to keep al-Ḥarīrī in subordination, "a passive tool in the hands of the author wielding it," to use Bakhtin on parody again.¹⁰⁵

Yet, while al-Ḥarīrī's own profession and career drew sharp criticism from professional *kuttāb* of literary prose, his elegant prose put many of them to shame. Ibn al-Athīr repeats the story that his own output in writing equals thousands of *maqāmāt*. Yet al-Ḥarīrī (445–515/1054–1122) and his *maqāmah* signify a turning point in the history of *belles lettres*. His contemporaries and immediate followers were so impressed by his stylistic virtuosity and use of narrative that they, like Ibn Ḥamdūn (d. 495/1102), collapsed *maqāmah* and *risālah*, using them interchangeably. More importantly, al-Ḥarīrī leaves al-Hamadhānī's ingenious and eloquent beggars behind to be replaced by scholars and marginalized intellectuals with extensive knowledge in mystical, geographical, medical, and other professional engagements. Thus, his protagonists speak for epistolographers of the self-made kind. The shrewd forebear anticipates his grandsons who will try to keep his ghost in the background. No wonder he is so much present in al-Qalqashandī's *maqāmah*, despite the counter presence of Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn al-Khashshāb.

In particular, al-Qalqashandī calls upon al-Ḥarīrī's *Al-Furātīyah*, which recalls a mission up the Euphrates when scribes were engaged in debates identical with those of al-Qalqashandī. As al-Ḥarīrī's *maqāmah* goes, Abu Zayd al-Sarūjī is in the boat in the company of secretaries who are busy arguing for or against chancery vocations. His intervention is not welcome at first. But, upon listening to him, they find it worth attention. Insofar as the chancellery correspondence is concerned, he argues: "The *munshi*" is the confidant of the mighty and an important figure amongst the boon-companions. His pen is the tongue of sovereignty and the knight of the skirmish, the Luqmān of wisdom and the interpreter of resolution. It bears good tidings and warnings alike, it intercedes and acts as an envoy. By it impregnable fortresses are won and key-points conquered." On the other hand, he

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 126.

¹⁰⁵"Dialogic Discourse," 109.



defends the treasury scribe with equal force, for the financial secretary has a pen which is "always firm." He adds, "accountants are the guardians of wealth, the bearers of burdens, the reporters of attested statements, the trustworthy envoys, the ones prominent in meting out justice and securing it for others, the legal witnesses whose testimony is adequate in disputes."¹⁰⁶ Although seemingly attracted to this balanced argument, al-Qalqashandī follows a stylization process which is subtly placed in a context of other competing views and reviews. In the process, al-Ḥarīrī's views on the benefit of each profession enjoy some activation in order to prepare for the postmaturation of al-Qalqashandī's ultimate triumphal note in respect to epistolography, which Ibn al-Athīr thought of as too wide-ranging for al-Ḥarīrī. The concluding note of triumph only supports Bakhtin's discussion of parody at large: "Every struggle between two voices within a single discourse for possession or dominance in that discourse is decided in advance."¹⁰⁷

While there is self-glorification, al-Qalqashandī's *maqāmah* ultimately is a testimonial epistle whose comprehensive overview and literariness stand for an outgrowth, a maturation that surpasses and supersedes earlier practices. Indeed, by citing Badr al-Dīn as unprecedented, whose *merits* supersede al-Qāḍī's *faḍā'il* (merits),¹⁰⁸ al-Qalqashandī the epistolographer glorifies his own achievement, too. Playing on the meaning of *faḍl* (favor and merit) in Badr al-Dīn's *nisbah* or lineage, and the somehow identical connotation in al-Qāḍī al-Faḍīl's attribute (the excellent or the erudite magistrate), al-Qalqashandī asserts both his own stylistic skill in coining the right comparison, his mastery of puns and metaphors, and his faith in the growth of chancellery correspondence, whose theory and practice is attested to by the summation and the compendium at hand.

Yet the mere use of the *maqāmah* genre betrays resignation to al-Ḥarīrī's powerful presence. Further, al-Qalqashandī concludes that what his *maqāmah* "includes in respect to the tributes of *kitābah* and the honor of writers [scribes] excludes the need for any other."¹⁰⁹ But the conclusive remark is belied by his text full of citations to *maqāmāt* and epistles, and so alludes to a cultural climate rife with controversy and difference. His *maqāmah* is meant to sum up a profession and map out a career, which it aptly does. However, success on a personal level is set within other accounts and significations of achievement and failure, like the epistles and *maqāmāt*, which he cites and includes before and after his own *maqāmah*.

¹⁰⁶Cited in Bosworth, *Medieval Arabic Culture*, 293–94, from T. Chenery's translation of the *Assemblies*.

¹⁰⁷"Dialogic Discourse," 112.

¹⁰⁸*Ṣubḥ*, 14:141.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 145.



While al-Qalqashandī's compendium is the largest and most extensive encyclopedic effort in epistolography, his *maqāmāt* are of great cultural relevance, too. Further, al-Qalqashandī's highly spirited account of chancery posts and scribal vocations should not blind us to his intentional design to set his own *maqāmah* among others that reveal a great deal about the history of epistolography, its achievements and failures. Against his seemingly balanced argument to promote the profession, there stands Yaḥyá ibn Salāmah al-Ḥaṣkafī's (d. 551/1156) epistle.¹¹⁰ This "supreme orator" and "crown of the learned" wrote an epistle, in a *maqāmah* fashion, entitled '*Itāb al-Kuttāb wa-'Iqāb al-Alqāb*, to chastise those who "settled for lowliness instead of striving for requisite knowledge."¹¹¹ Al-Ḥaṣkafī holds the chief chancery clerk and his staff responsible for the deterioration of prose, and he castigates the vizier and secretaries of the bench and their deputies, along with secretaries of finance and keepers of secrets, for unwarranted arrogance and failure in performance. By so doing, al-Ḥaṣkafī provides a counter treatise and devastating account that reveals a chancellery of reprobates headed by "our master the minister who is lapsing into vice."¹¹²

Of no less significance is Abū al-Qāsim al-Khawārizmī's (d. 387/997) *maqāmah*, which al-Qalqashandī contrasts with his own panegyric *maqāmah*.¹¹³ Al-Khawārizmī's *maqāmah*, which is originally cited in full by Ibn Ḥamdūn, is written in lofty prose with an ornate style and elevated rhetoric to attack the pretensions of a certain pedant named al-Hītī, who undeservedly gained the reputation as one of the learned and the ulama among his community. The argumentation is carried out smoothly, with great serenity and vigor, to explode the myth which al-Hītī had perpetrated about himself. Incorporating it in full, al-Qalqashandī balances his own positive appraisals of the profession.

Moreover, al-Qalqashandī's citations of such criticism make up a body of texts with a historical and political referentiality that endow his *maqāmah* with some discursive strategies of oblique criticism, indirection, parody, and stylization. Indeed, al-Khawārizmī's *maqāmah* is not alone in its biting sarcastic tone and pointed exposure, for Ibn Nubātah held similar views of his critics among chancery clerks who, "except for the turban, had nothing in their heads." They "were ignorant of *tarassul* (epistolography) and unqualified in rhetoric."¹¹⁴ These remarks came in a letter of gratitude addressed to Ibn Fahd, Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī, who was in charge of the *dīwān* in Damascus, after he made an eloquent defense of Ibn

¹¹⁰Ibid., 230–36.

¹¹¹Ibid., 231.

¹¹²Ibid., 233.

¹¹³Ibid., 146–56.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 279.



Nubātah against his critics. Al-Qalqashandī himself was critical of the style and language of a number of letters¹¹⁵ which he criticizes for “coarse utterance” and structural lapses despite the fact that they were drawn up in the reign of both al-Zāhir Baybars and al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn who “were among the most magnificent of kings.”¹¹⁶

These epistles and *maqāmāt* cited by al-Qalqashandī act as paratexts for his *Kawākib al-Durrīyah*. They recapitulate the common view of the degeneration of epistolary practice, for which al-Qalqashandī offers two explanations. First, following Ibn Ḥājjib al-Nu‘mān (d. 951/1031), al-Qalqashandī argues that “scribes used to compete in earning the right merit, aloof from any vice of ignorance, striving to gain whatever improves utterance, and beautifies their performance, in order to reach the highest station and to win the best of favors.”¹¹⁷ Presently, things took the opposite direction, for the ignorant and the greedy received advancement. Thus, “arts were shunned as taboos and sciences were discarded as if the greatest sins.”¹¹⁸ Second, while leveling blame on generations of scribes with little grounding in arts and sciences,¹¹⁹ al-Qalqashandī believes that the domination of non-Arabs (*a‘jam*) led to this confusion between the “dumb” and “unversed” in Arabic and the learned. Nevertheless, the *maqāmah* is keen on forwarding epistolography as the best of arts, that subsumes every genre without loss of its own richness. It befits a growing empire in its official discourse, for Egypt “still grows in stature and reputation until it has become the abode of the Abbasid caliphate, and the base for the Islamic kingdom. Its kingdom takes pride in serving the two holy shrines, and the rest of kings and nations served it for this reason.”¹²⁰

Finally, then, al-Qalqashandī’s defense of the profession and the craft should not be taken at face value. Employment in the chancery had its many ups and downs, and competition among other secretarial occupations was intense at times. If earlier records testified to gain and loss, the later periods were no less rife with competitiveness, malice, and cruelty.¹²¹ A pertinent illustration is the allegorical

¹¹⁵Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 1:80.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 78.

¹²⁰Ibid., 31.

¹²¹Zamrak’s (d. 1393) hatred led to Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s death. Indeed, many writers of prose, like Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd (d. 656/1257) and ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī al-Kātib (d. 597/1201) blamed, for instance, Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr (d. 637/1239) for his negative influence on Ṣalāh al-Dīn’s son, Al-Afḍal. In his book on the latter, Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd traced in Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn’s *Al-Mathal* negative and positive sides. On the negative side, he found Ibn Al-Athīr “highly proud of himself,” to the extent of “raising objections against the honorable.” See *Al-Falak al-Dā’ir ‘alā al-Mathal al-Sā’ir*,



tale reported by ‘Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī.¹²² There was a merchant who was so learned that a certain sultan was advised to choose him as vizier, for the kingdom had lost so many. According to tradition, each minister was deported to an empty and deserted island upon terminating a year in that position. The merchant asked to see the island, and in a very discreet manner moved his family and servants there along with manufacturers and laborers so as to make it habitable in preparation for such an end.¹²³ The anecdote speaks of the other side in the life of *kātibs* and viziers.

In all, al-Qalqashandī’s vindication of the profession, his autobiographical review of his own career, and his expressions of homage and allegiance set his *maqāmah* in a ramified engagement of great socio-political, cultural, and textual richness. Brief like any other *maqāmah*, its referentiality extends in time and space, while its textual registers go beyond the compendium, at times, to involve the whole controversy on genres and their prioritizations. It offers a literary history in a nutshell and draws attention to chancery rivalry in its professional dimension, too. Its markers of argumentation, debate, and engagement, and its register of figures and issues testify to its complexity and richness beyond the mere shows of homage or expressions of need and choice. On the other hand, this very extensive referentiality grants al-Qalqashandī another cultural lineage, an intertext of wide-ranging contributions, “embellished” inscriptions with figures who still argue and debate issues and attitudes. The self-made scribe who ironically bewails his lack of lineage survives the ordeal and emerges with another ancestry which is still alive among readers and scholars of Mamluk history and culture.

ed. Aḥmad Al-Ḥūfī and Badawī Ṭabānah (Cairo, n.d.), 32.

¹²² *Luma‘ al-Qawānīn*.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

