C S M S

Center for the Study of Muslim Societies at Columbia University

Matthew L. Keegan: The Stakes of Editing the Unruly Past

JULY 16, 2020

Faculty Profile

Matthew L. Keegan is the Moinian Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College. His research focuses on Islamic intellectual history and *adab* (usually translated as "literature" or "belles-lettres"). In particular, he writes about the commentaries on al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, a 12th-century collection of stories about an eloquent trickster.

Over the course of July 2020, he is moderating a series of online workshops hosted by the Columbia Global Center in Amman about *Kalila wa-Dimna*, a collection of stories about fictive humans and

talking animals. *Kalila wa-Dimna* is the subject of the AnonymClassic ERC-sponsored project where Professor Keegan completed a postdoctoral fellowship in 2019. The following post discusses the very different manuscript traditions of *Kalila wa-Dimna* and al-Hariri's *Maqamat*.

The Stakes of Editing the Unruly Past

Arabic manuscripts are documents of social and intellectual history. The scribes who copied them, the readers who perused them, and the scholars who scribbled notes in their margins were all involved in shaping the way that manuscripts came to be read by their later readers. When texts from before the dawn of Arabic print culture in the 19th century came to be edited and put in print, editors often erased these testaments to the social lives of manuscripts.

Maqamat al-Hariri. Image Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arabe 7290 (fol. 4r)

Consider, for example, the case of al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, which was first read aloud to an audience of scholars in Baghdad in the year 1111 AD. Most copies of the *Maqamat* do not contain the brilliant illustrations that have become popular on book covers and event posters. Most copies contain the scribbles of later readers who glossed and annotated the text in the course of their reading and study.

In some manuscripts, readers collated the entire text against earlier exemplars, making notes about variants they found in the margins, a process that I documented in an article from 2017. What I found remarkable as I wrote that essay was the amount of time and effort that collators put into preserving the author's original text by,

paradoxically, discovering and documenting variant readings. Some collators explicitly noted that they had collated the text on the basis of manuscripts that had been written by the author himself, which suggests a concern for the authorial voice.

I can appreciate how effortful that process of collation would have been because, in the summer of 2019, I spent several weeks with my eyes glued to a computer screen full of manuscript images to collate a draft of Michael Cooperson's new edition of al-Hariri's *Maqamat* (now available to download for free). Although I imagine that expert medieval collators worked much faster than I did, our processes were probably quite similar. For one thing, I checked Cooperson's edition against manuscripts that I consider particularly authoritative. We are lucky in the case of al-Hariri's *Maqamat* because we have two surviving manuscripts from the author's own lifetime, one preserved in Cairo and the other in Istanbul. In fact, the Cairo manuscript was part of the first public reading of the *Maqamat* in Baghdad in the year 1111 AD, where the author himself presided.

Having early manuscripts to work from and such an active tradition of medieval collation is particularly fortunate for editors who want to put before the reader a reasonable approximation of what an author actually wrote. But this desire to edit away the unruly past to produce editions that reflect authorial "originals" can be distorting, especially in cases where the author is anonymous or where there is a great deal of variation between manuscripts.

An example of how distorting editions can be is the collection of stories about talking animals and fictive humans that is called *Kalila wa-Dimna*. The text survives in over a hundred copies, and there are significant variations between many of the manuscripts. Copyists felt free to augment, alter, and reinterpret the text that they were copying. And we know in many cases that it *was* copying and not oral tradition because scribes sometimes simply moved dots around or introduced

new words that were similar in *appearance* (but not in sound) to earlier versions.

It would be impossible to produce an edition of *Kalila wa-Dimna*'s "original" version before all the copyists got involved. The story cycle originated in Sanskrit, but they arrived in Arabic by way of Middle Persian at the hands of an 8th-century bureaucrat and litterateur named Ibn al-Muqaffa'. The earliest manuscript that still exists today was produced almost five hundred years later in the 13th century.

Producing a standard, stable edition of a text often functions as a precondition for literary and historical studies. But it shouldn't. To focus our attention on the stable, the authorial, and the authoritative is to let our own proclivities (and our aversion to risk) delimit what can and cannot be studied. I remember feeling a distinct unease when I tried to write about *Kalila wa-Dimna* in my dissertation. I spent several weeks tracking down the twists and turns of its textual history, but I was hesitant to analyze any one passage in the text because it might not "actually" belong to the *Kalila wa-Dimna* that someone might have read in the 12th century when they were reading (or writing) the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri.

But why should the scribal rewritings be any less interesting than the act of translation or adaptation? The scribbles in the margins of the *Maqamat* can be just as interesting and important as what is written in the text itself because they reveal how readers (including copyists) understood the texts they had in front of them. I have come to see these variations and instabilities as part of what Christine van Ruymbeke has called "the *Kalila wa-Dimna* field." The messiness and instability of this field includes the manuscript copies as well as the versifications, translations, and adaptations of *Kalila wa-Dimna*.

This inclusive approach has its challenges, of course. Authoritative editions offer easy answers to the question: What does the text say? An unstable field of textual variation appears daunting and

unmanageable. One cannot study all the available manuscripts oneself. This is where working as a part of a broader scholarly community comes in handy. Beatrice Gruendler at the Freie Universität Berlin has received a grant from the European Research Council, which is supporting over a dozen programmers, scholars, students, and staff, all of whom are working on different aspects of *Kalila wa-Dimna*. Eventually, the project will produce a synoptic digital edition of the text, which will allow readers to see how different manuscripts tell the story differently, sometimes augmenting a particular theme or making new sense of a passage that previous copyists found difficult.

During my postdoctoral fellowship in Berlin (2018 - 2019), I sat with other participants in Gruendler's *AnonymClassic* project reading through parallel versions of the Arabic text, together with scholars of Syriac, Persian, and Sanskrit who could shed light on how the story was told in other traditions with their own complicated manuscript histories. Pinning down the original is thereby displaced by the infinite multiplicity of stories that never settled down. This kind of group effort is rather rare in the humanities (at least in the United States), where institutional structures tend to reward individual effort over collective accomplishment.

In an era of quarantines and remote teaching, I have found these collective scholarly activities particularly rewarding. The project's first co-written progress report was recently published, and we are holding workshops every Monday in July 2020 through the Columbia Global Center in Amman. In conversation with scholars from across the world, we are sorting through the next steps and future challenges that we face in this endeavor. For example, digital media may provide an echo of the dynamism that could be found in Arabic (and other pre-modern) manuscript cultures, but digital humanities projects are often haunted by their impending ephemerality. As digital projects age, they struggle to stay alive and compatible with evolving digital ecosystems.

These collective digital humanities projects are themselves documents of our own social and intellectual history, just as the manuscripts of the *Maqamat* and *Kalila wa-Dimna* are documents of social and intellectual history. They express an outlook on scholarship in the world that is less about individual accomplishment and more about collective flourishing. And we could all use a bit more collective flourishing right now.

FACULTY PROFILES

Newer Older

Powered by Squarespace