

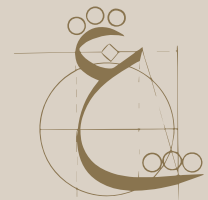
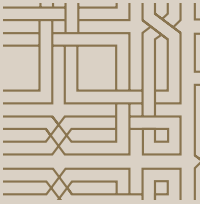


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Comets As Omens of Catastrophe: Halley's Return in 1910 and the Ottoman Empire



KÜBRA FETTAHOĞLU*

ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical role of comets in astrological interpretations and apocalyptic narratives, as well as their psychological and cultural impact on societies. It aims to explore how the longstanding negative perception of comets—often seen as “omens of catastrophe” or manifestations of “God’s wrath”—was reflected in the modern era, focusing specifically on the return of Halley’s Comet in 1910. The study traces the wave of global hysteria sparked by scientific claims that cyanogen in Halley’s tail might slightly affect the planet. Drawing on periodicals and books from the time, it recounts this symbolic doomsday rehearsal and presents examples from various parts of the world to illustrate how Halley’s Comet was represented across domains such as politics, fashion, economics, and literature. By analyzing the interplay between science, the press, and public perception on a global scale, the study, for the first time, reveals how Halley’s return was interpreted in the Ottoman Empire—an empire engaged in European-style modernization—and how it was strategically utilized within that context. Accordingly, the study argues that such popular natural phenomena were not merely subjects of scientific curiosity, but also served as contested arenas where political legitimacy, social order, and collective emotion were negotiated and redefined.

Keywords: Halley’s Comet, Ottoman Empire, Apocalypse, Modern Science, Press, Imagery.



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FELAKET ALAMETİ OLARAK
KUYRUKLU YILDIZLAR: 1910
YILINDA HALLEY’İN DÖNÜŞÜ
VE OSMANLI DEVLETİ

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, tarihsel süreçte kuyruklu yıldızların astrolojik çıkarımlar ve apokaliptik senaryolarda oynadığı role ve bunların insanlar üzerindeki etkisine odaklanmaktadır. Çoğunlukla “felaket alame-ti” ve “Tanrı’nın gazabı” olarak görülen kuyruklu yıldızlar ile ilgili olumsuz algının modern dönemdeki yansımalarını 1910 yılında Halley’in dönüşü olayı üze-rinden tespit etmeye çalışmaktadır. Bilim insanlarının Halley’in kuyruğunda bulu-nan siyanürün dünyayı az da olsa etkileyebileceğini belirtmesi üzerine yaşanan kü-re-sel histerinin izlerini sürmektedir. Bu kıyamet provasında yaşananları, dönemin süreli yayınları ve kitapları üzerinden an-latırken Halley’in politika, moda, ekono-mi, edebiyat gibi alanlarda hangi yöntem-le-ri imgeleştirildiğini dünyadan farklı örneklerle göstermektedir. Bilim, basın, kitle kavramlarının küresel çapta birbir-lerini nasıl etkilediğini sorguladıktan sonra Avrupa tarzda modernleşmeye ça-lışan Osmanlı Devleti’nde Halley’in dö-nüşünün nasıl algılandığını ve hangi ko-nularda araçsallaştırıldığını ilk kez orta-ya koymaktadır. Böylece, bu tür popüler doğa olaylarının, yalnızca bilimsel me-rak konusu değil, aynı zamanda siyasal meşruiyetin, toplumsal düzenin ve ko-lektif duyguların müzakere alanı olduğu gösterilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halley Kuyruklu Yıldız, Osmanlı Devleti, Kıyamet, Modern Bilim, Basın, İmge.

INTRODUCTION

Comets (*aster cometes/zû-züâbe*)¹, named after variations of the word for “hair” in various languages due to their trailing extensions, have long been one of the most enduring and captivating subjects in astronomy. The widespread belief that celestial bodies influence human lives—for better or worse—has created a deeply rooted psychological framework, which has led comets to be valued more for their symbolic meanings than for their physical characteristics. Owing to their sudden appearance apart from the familiar stars, they have traditionally been perceived as omens of extraordinary, often catastrophic, events. Although modern astronomy has made their cycles and physical nature more comprehensible, astrological and apocalyptic interpretations of comets continue to resonate with broad audiences. Historically regarded as manifestations of “God’s punishment” linked to wars, massacres, and epidemics, comets have gradually expanded their cultural impact, taking on prominent roles in doomsday narratives. Similar to many concepts in the modern era, the perceived threat of comets has acquired a more tangible dimension. Beyond their association with ominous energy, they are now also imagined as celestial bodies capable of colliding with and destroying the Earth.

One of the most striking examples supporting this phenomenon is the return of Halley’s Comet in 1910. Although this event was part of a predictable astronomical cycle, it produced notable psychological and socioeconomic effects across various regions of the world. Statements by certain scientists suggesting that cyanogen present in Halley’s tail could have a minor effect on Earth—combined with the press’s tendency toward sensationalism—fueled a climate of global fear and hysteria. The events leading up to May 18, the date on which Halley would pass closest to Earth, offered a shared global experience that provoked reflection on several key issues: the true role of science and scientists revered in the modern era; the part the press played in oversimplifying or distorting scientific knowledge for public consumption; and the power of that role in shaping public opinion. In exploring these questions, this article seeks to examine how the historically ingrained negative perception of comets manifested in the modern period. It begins by discussing, with reference to historical literature, the meanings attributed to comets—particularly Halley’s—in the pre-modern era. It then traces the global atmosphere surrounding Halley’s return in 1910. Finally, it analyzes how the comet’s return was received within the Ottoman public sphere—where debates on Western-style modernity and science had long been unfolding—and how its popularity was strategically utilized, drawing on books and periodicals from that period. While the Western historiography contains a substantial body of scholarship on this phenomenon—some of which is drawn upon in the present study—research on the Ottoman experience remains markedly underdeveloped. This article is therefore significant in offering the first comprehensive examination of both the impact of Halley’s return on Ottoman society and the contemporaneous literature it engendered. In so doing, it seeks not merely to illuminate a neglected dimension of the history of Ottoman science and culture, but also to establish a basis for subsequent scholarly inquiry.

1 In Turkish, the word for comet is *kuyruklu yıldız*, literally “tailed star.” *Kuyruk* denotes the tail, that is, the tuft of hair or feathers located at the rear part of an animal.

1. An Astronomical Cycle or an Omen of Catastrophe

“Did anybody here see Halley, and suddenly turn pale?”² These lyrics, written in anticipation of Halley’s return in 1910, encapsulate the image that comets have left in the collective global memory. Discussions surrounding comets are ancient, appearing as atmospheric phenomena in Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* (384–322 BC) and omens of misfortune in Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* (100–170 AD). Because of their sudden appearances—unlike the fixed stars—and the distinctive shapes they exhibit, comets have consistently been perceived as extraordinary signs. In medieval Europe especially, the Church’s portrayal of comets as manifestations of divine wrath contributed to a prolonged period of superstition.³ The situation was not significantly different in the Islamic world, where comets were likewise considered harbingers of disaster.⁴

Following Paolo Toscanelli’s (1397–1482) observations, Tycho Brahe’s (1546–1601) discovery in 1577—that comets were not located within the atmospheric sphere, as Aristotle had claimed, but instead appeared in distant orbits beyond the Moon—⁵ marked a significant advancement in the field of astronomy. Isaac Newton’s (1643–1727) method for calculating orbits, as outlined in *Principia*, further enhanced scientific understanding of comets.⁶ When Edmond Halley (1656–1742) applied Newton’s method to comets observed in 1531, 1607, and 1682, he concluded that these sightings all referred to the same celestial object, predicting that it would return in 1758, he developed a new orbital model.⁷ Although Halley did not live to witness the confirmation of his prediction, the comet reappeared in 1758 as anticipated. It thus became the first periodic comet to be documented in scientific literature and was subsequently named Halley’s Comet in his honor. Its later appearances in 1835, 1910, and 1986 continued to affirm its regularity, with the next return expected in 2061. Completing its orbit every 75–76 years—within the span of a human lifetime—it remains one of the most well-known comets.⁸ As astronomer Heber Doust Curtis noted, it has justifiably earned the title of the “dean of the entire Comet Family.”⁹

From the 19th century onward, observations made using professional telescopes, along with advancements in physics, chemistry, and mathematics, have gradually clarified the physical nature of comets. Despite the inclusion of the term “star” in their name, these objects—once associated with disaster and seen as omens of extraordinary events—are not stars. They are

2 “Did Anybody Here See Halley?”, *The Bridgemen’s Magazine* (June 1910), 356.

3 Donald K. Yeomans, *Comets: A Chronological History of Observation, Science, Myth, and Folklore* (New York: Wiley, 1991), 2-6, 14-16; Darin Hayton, “Expertise *ex Stellis*: Comets, Horoscopes, and Politics in Renaissance Hungary”, *Osiris* 25/1 (2010), 27-46; Hilary M. Carey, *Courting Disaster: Astrology at the English Court and University in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 94-96.

4 David Cook, “A Survey of Muslim Material on Comets and Meteors”, *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 30/2 (1999), 132, 151–153; Tülay Yürekli, Orta Çağ Müslüman Türk Dünyasında Münecimlik Üzerine Notlar, *Ortaçağ Araştırmaları Dergisi* 5/2 (2022), 331–332.

5 J. R. Christianson, “Tycho Brahe’s German Treatise on the Comet of 1577: A Study in Science and Politics”, *ISIS* 70/1 (1979), 121–122.

6 Isaac Newton, *Newton’s Principia: The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (New York: Daniel Adee, 1846), 471-495.

7 Edmond Halley, *A Synopsis of the Astronomy of Comets* (London: John Senex, 1705), 21-24.

8 Donald K. Yeomans-Jürgen Rahe-Ruth S. Freitag, “The History of Comet Halley”, *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 80 (1986), 62-68.

9 “Astronomer Curtis Lectures to Public”, *The University Daily* (27 June 1910), 1.

now understood to comprise frozen water and gases, cosmic dust, and rock. As they approach the Sun, the frozen components sublimate, creating a thin atmosphere (coma) and a tail around the comet. They may contain substances such as formaldehyde, hydrogen cyanide, and methanol.¹⁰

Given that astronomy and astrology have historically developed in tandem, it is important to emphasize that the production of prophecies and speculative interpretations has often accompanied the gradual advancement of scientific knowledge. To better understand how people have perceived comets and the meanings attributed to them, several illustrative examples are worth considering. When Halley's Comet appeared in 1066 during the conflict between King Harold of England and Duke William of Normandy, it was interpreted by the English as a portent of misfortune. Shortly after the comet's disappearance, Harold's death and the Norman conquest of England were recorded as catastrophes foreshadowed by the celestial event. The depiction of Halley's Comet in a commemorative tapestry of the war reflects the significance attached to its appearance.¹¹ Halley's return in 1456 held even greater symbolic weight for Europe. In 1453, Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror captured Istanbul, and three years later, he laid siege to Belgrade. Following these events, Halley's reappearance provoked widespread fear among Christians, who interpreted the comet as a manifestation of "wrath of God".¹²

A further example from the Islamic world comes from the Ottoman Empire, where a comet observed in November 1577 was believed to presage significant upheaval. It was thought that the East and West would rise against each other, blood would be shed wherever the comet passed, and it would sow the seeds of evil. Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, a chronicler of that period, recorded the comet's appearance and linked it to the Ottoman–Safavid War (1577–1590). Although the Ottoman Empire ultimately emerged victorious from the protracted conflict, Âli concluded his account by noting that Anatolia had been ravaged, bloodshed had been extensive, and many settlements had been abandoned—implying that the prophecy had been fulfilled.¹³

In the 16th century, the French surgeon Ambroise Paré expressed highly fantastical views regarding the appearance of comets. Drawing from historical records, he recounted that a comet, said to have appeared as a flaming sword following the crucifixion and death of Jesus, was linked to the destruction of the Jewish people. According to his account, divine wrath manifested through bloodshed, famine, and fire; mothers were driven to eat their children, and thousands of Jews were taken captive by the Romans. Particularly striking is his description of a comet observed in 1528. He wrote that it appeared in the form of a curled arm wielding a sword, with its tail containing blood-colored swords, axes, knives, and terrifying human faces. Some witnesses reportedly died from fear, and others became ill. Paré included an illustration matching this vision in his work and asserted that comets never appeared without causing harm or leaving behind a sense of ominous foreboding.¹⁴

10 J. Mayo Greenberg, "Making a Comet Nucleus", *Astronomy and Astrophysics* 330 (1998), 375–380.

11 C.M. Botley–R.E. White, "Halley's Comet in 1066", *Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 452/10 (1967), 3–5.

12 Edwin Emerson, *Comet Lore, Halley's Comet in History and Astronomy* (New York: Schilling Press, 1910), 74–75.

13 Gelibolulu Mustafa Âli, *Künhü'l-Ahbâr* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 2009), vol. 1 (facsimile), fols. 483b–484a.

14 Ambroise Paré, *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (Paris: Fleuron, 1996), 304–306.

English writer Daniel Defoe similarly emphasized the destructive power attributed to comets. He noted that the comets observed in 1664 and 1665 preceded two major calamities in London: the plague and the Great Fire. The comet seen before the plague was faint and solemn, interpreted as an omen of a slow but devastating apocalypse. The bright and fast-moving comet that appeared before the Great Fire was viewed as a harbinger of sudden and fiery devastation. In the aftermath of the fire, which reduced much of the city to ashes following the ravages of the plague, Defoe remarked that he “could not help but say God had not whipped the city enough”, suggesting that divine punishment had been delivered through comets.¹⁵ With their appearance, comets were believed to cause not only defeats and massacres, but also natural disasters such as famines, earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruptions. A modern-era reflection of this belief can be found in the work of Thomas Forster, who argued—supported by an extensive list—that such disasters throughout history coincided with sightings of comets.¹⁶

Over time, discussions surrounding comets—long blamed for numerous extraordinary or catastrophic events—have evolved in various ways. In the modern era, rather than being viewed solely as omens of misfortune, public attention has increasingly focused on the potential for cometary collisions with Earth and the societal anxieties these speculations provoke. One notable example is English clergyman and astronomer William Whiston, who proposed a cosmological theory that quickly gained attention. He claimed that the Earth itself was originally a comet, that the biblical Flood of Noah was triggered by another comet passing through Earth’s atmosphere, and that this comet had been sent by God as punishment for humanity’s sins. Whiston further argued that the same body would one day alter Earth’s orbit, bring it dangerously close to the Sun, and ultimately destroy the world in a great fire.¹⁷ When generations of inherited fear and anxiety combine with the mystery and vast unpredictability of outer space, they give rise to a sense of unease that is highly susceptible to manipulation. A striking example of this occurred when French astronomer Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande presented a paper titled *Réflexions sur les Comètes qui peuvent approcher de la Terre* (Reflections on Comets That May Approach the Earth) to the Académie des Sciences in 1773. In his study, Lalande concluded that the probability of a comet colliding with Earth was extremely low. However, due to time constraints during his presentation, he was unable to clearly emphasize this point. As a result, a partial and misunderstood reception of the report gave rise to a sensationalized rumor that a comet would strike the Earth. The rumor spread rapidly and sparked widespread panic in Paris. In an article published on May 7 in the *Gazette de France*, Lalande clarified that the rumor could not be attributed to him and that he bore no responsibility. Nevertheless, even after the full report was published, it took time for the public to regain a sense of calm.¹⁸

Some scientists also leveraged the unsettling popularity of comets to capture public attention. In 1857, Dr. James Bedford gave his work on a comet he believed would soon return

15 Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Years* (London: William Tegg, 1848), 29–32.

16 Thomas Forster, *Illustrations of the Atmospheric Origin of Epidemic Diseases* (Chelmsford: Meggy and Chalk, 1829), 139–180.

17 William Whiston, *A New Theory of the Earth* (London: Sam Tooke and Benjamin Motte, 1725), 186–197, 285–291, 437–443, 446–456.

18 Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande, *Réflexions sur les Comètes qui peuvent approcher de la Terre* (Paris: Gibert, 1773), 36–40; *Gazette de France* (7 May 1773), 162; Yeomans, *Comets*, 166–167.

a striking and speculative title: The Great Comet, now rapidly approaching, will it strike the earth? By using the words “great” and “rapidly,” Bedford heightened the urgency and drama surrounding an already alarming possibility. He claimed that if the celestial body—believed by him to be Pingré’s Comet—appeared according to theoretical predictions, it could significantly raise Earth’s temperature. He urged the public to maintain cleanliness, eliminate unnecessary waste from their homes, and be vigilant about sewage systems, much like during times of plague. Although acknowledging that the chance of a collision was low, Bedford argued that precautionary measures could help avert potential national catastrophes. He concluded with a theological reflection, suggesting that the Creator should not be viewed as “a God of Wrath” but rather as “a God of love.”¹⁹ During the same period, other publications explored the hypothetical consequences of a comet striking or passing near the Earth. Though these works emphasized that such scenarios were theoretically possible, they also stressed their extreme improbability.²⁰ Despite the rising prestige of science and the rapid development of astronomy through new discoveries and expanding knowledge, comets continued to provide fertile ground for apocalyptic speculation well into the 20th century.

2. The Expected Visitor: Halley’s Return in 1910

Following its appearance in 1835, the return of Halley’s Comet in 1910 was eagerly anticipated by the scientific community. Thanks to advances in photographic and spectroscopic technology, more detailed studies could now be conducted, marking a significant departure from previous astronomical observations. As a result, there was widespread curiosity about the timing of Halley’s perihelion and which observer would be the first to detect it. While the world awaited Halley’s return, another comet—later identified as 1910—was discovered independently by multiple observers. This celestial object, which appeared dim in the evenings and brightened during the day, further heightened public excitement. Halley’s Comet was first photographed by Max Wolf of Heidelberg University on 11 September 1909 using a 72-cm reflector telescope. Professor S. W. Burnham of Yerkes Observatory was the first to observe the comet with the naked eye through a refracting telescope on 15 September 1909. In the following months, especially from vantage points in the Southern Hemisphere, Halley became increasingly visible and reached its closest approach to Earth on 18 May 1910. The photographs taken during this period provided the scientific community with valuable new insights into the nature of comets.²¹

Although Halley’s predictable return presented a valuable opportunity for data collection and scientific advancement, it also reignited long-standing public fears about comets on a global scale. In this context, modern mass communication technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, and press played a significant role—spreading both accurate and misleading information rapidly across the world. Beginning in September 1909, when Halley’s Comet was first detected in the sky, media coverage about the event began to increase across the global

19 James Bedford, *The Great Comet, Now Rapidly Approaching, Will It Strike the Earth?* (London: James Gilbert, 1857), 20–21.

20 For examples, see: James C. Watson, *A Popular Treatise on Comets* (Philadelphia: James Challen and son, 1861), 59–73, 270–272; John Russell Hind, *The Comet of 1556* (London: John W. Parker and son, 1857), 28–36, 44–49.

21 David Seargent, *The Great Comets in History: Broom Stars and Celestial Scimitars* (New York: Springer, 2009), 56–59; İ. Ethem Derman & Haldun İ. Menali, 76 *Yıllık Konuşumuz: Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı* (Ankara: Emel Matbaacılık, 1985), 74–77.

press. Some articles focused on presenting astronomical facts, emphasizing that there would be no collision with Earth, as the comet would pass at a distance of approximately 20,000,000 kilometers. Others sought to dispel traditional superstitions about comets, asserting that the significant historical events associated with Halley's appearances in 1066 and 1456 were purely coincidental.²² Reports on Halley's orbital history and trajectory, its visibility to the naked eye in different parts of the world, and the research activities and conferences held at prominent centers, such as Cambridge, Oxford, Paris, Berlin, and Yerkes, began to appear regularly in newspapers and magazines.²³ Scientists like Frank Seagrave, Sherburne Wesley Burnham, and George Mary Searle explained that although there was a chance the Earth might pass through Halley's tail, there was no cause for alarm. They noted that on the night of 18 May, the comet's tail could brush across the Earth for a few hours, but the effect would be so minimal that ordinary people would not even be aware of it. Nevertheless, some newspapers also gave space to more extreme and sensational claims. For instance, Jesuit astronomer Charles Charropin unequivocally stated that Halley's solid mass would collide with and destroy the Earth. He further asserted that this event constituted the fiery end of the world foretold by Jesus, proclaiming that humanity's time had run out.²⁴

In the final months of 1909, a series of earthquakes in various regions of the world, an announcement by Edwin B. Frost and J. A. Parkhurst from the Yerkes Observatory in Chicago that Halley's Comet contained a poisonous gas known as cyanogen, and a major flood caused by the overflowing of the Seine River in Paris in January 1910 all contributed to the resurgence of long-standing fears surrounding Halley and a noticeable rise in public anxiety. In response to the growing confusion and alarm, *Le Petit Journal* consulted Camille Flammarion, the prominent French astronomer of the time. Flammarion, renowned for his efforts to popularize astronomy and make scientific knowledge accessible to the general public, addressed the situation in an article titled "Les Comètes", which appeared on the front page of the 27 January 1910 edition. In the article, he asserted that there was no connection between the recent natural disasters and the appearance of comets. Although he acknowledged that the cyanogen in Halley's Comet could theoretically pose a danger if it were to enter Earth's atmosphere, he emphasized that it remained uncertain whether the tail would even reach the planet. He further explained that insufficient chemical data existed regarding the mass and volume of the tail, and it was unknown to what extent the cyanogen in the comet's head would be transferred into the tail. Consequently, he argued that there was no real cause for alarm and that any potential impact would be minimal—an effort clearly aimed at alleviating public fear.²⁵

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- 22 "The Return of Halley's Comet", *The Times* (14 September 1909), 11; "Comète de Halley", *La Croix* (17 October 1909), 1; "La Frayeur populaire et la comète de Halley", *Le Cosmos* (16 October 1909), 426–427; "Greatest Sight in 100 Years", *The Truly Democrat* (3 September 1909), 1; "Giant Comet is Now Hurling This Way", *The Tacoma Times* (24 September 1909), 1.
 - 23 T. Thorne Baker, "The Secrets of Halley's Comet", *The Daily Mail* (21 January 1910), 11; Camille Flammarion, "Les Comètes dans l'Histoire de l'Humanité", *Le Figaro* (12 March 1910), 1; "Notes on Halley's Comet, Interesting Facts About Our Celestial Visitor", *Scientific American Supplement* (12 February 1910), 107–108.
 - 24 Richard J. Goodrich, *Comet Madness: How the 1910 Return of Halley's Comet (Almost) Destroyed Civilization* (Lanham: Promeheus Books, 2023), 53–57.
 - 25 Camille Flammarion, "Les Comètes", *Le Petit Journal* (27 January 1910), 1; Camille Flammarion, "Rencontre Probable de la Comète de Halley avec la Terre", *Bulletin de la Société Astronomique de France* 1910, 29–31; "La Rencontre de la Comète", 57–62.

As rumors persisted that Halley's Comet might collide with Earth and trigger catastrophic events, a new wave of global debate emerged around the possibility that its cyanogen-filled tail could poison the atmosphere and annihilate all life. Ironically, Camille Flammarion's attempts to clarify the scientific facts had the opposite effect in the speculative media environment fostered by newspapers eager to attract public attention. In particular, the American press published sensational headlines, often quoting Flammarion selectively and out of context to boost circulation.²⁶ For instance, *The New York Times*, in its 8 February edition, ran a story under the headline "Comet's Poisonous Tail", quoting Flammarion as saying: "Prof. Flammarion is of the opinion that the cyanogen gas would impregnate the atmosphere and possibly snuff out all life on the planet." This excerpt, stripped of context, only served to intensify the prevailing hysteria. Similarly, *The Ogden Standard* published an article titled "Coming End of World", quoting Professor Edwin Booth of the University of California:

"If the astronomers are right in their estimations of the amount of cyanogen gas in the tail of Halley's comet, and if that body's vapors do envelop the earth, we may have a chance to feel the sensations of the bugs and insects which are killed by the use of this deadly gas as an exterminator."²⁷

An important factor to consider when evaluating these speculative news stories—particularly those referencing Camille Flammarion—is the influence of his popular novel *La Fin du Monde* (The End of the World), published in 1894. In the novel, Flammarion imagined a fictional scenario in which a comet composed of poisonous gases collides with Earth, wiping out all life. Several articles that attempted to dispel fears about Halley's return explicitly referenced *La Fin du Monde*, arguing that reasonable individuals should not be alarmed by such "nightmares" drawn from fiction.²⁸

As Halley's Comet continued along its orbit, the speculations surrounding it grew increasingly diverse. Some claimed that the Earth would be dragged into the comet's tail and hurled into the depths of space; others believed that Earth—trapped by Halley's gravitational pull—would crash into its nucleus or that the comet's swiftly moving tail would completely disrupt the planet's atmosphere.²⁹ Cartoons illustrating a collision between Halley and Earth gave visual form to these imagined scenarios, adding a more vivid and dramatic dimension to the public discourse.³⁰ There were also those who interpreted the fear surrounding Halley as having accomplished what revolutions and wars could not: uniting humanity. According to this view, the comet had fostered a brief global sense of love and brotherhood, a world in which the strong did not oppress the weak and rulers refrained from tyranny—though it was cynically noted that if the anticipated end did not occur, the world would inevitably revert to

26 For examples, see: "Une Comète rencontrera la Terre au Mois de Mai", *The New York Herald* (29 November 1909), 5-6; "Halley's Comet to Wrap Its Tail Around This Sphere", *Garland Globe* (5 February 1910), 1; "Comet May Kill All Earth Life Says Scientist", *The San Francisco Call* (8 February 1910), 1; "Will Strike The Earth", *The Ogden Standard* (1 February 1910), 1; "Halley's Comet, Will There Be a Cataclysm?", *The East African Standard* (22 January 1910), 8.

27 "Comet's Poisonous Tail", *The New York Times* (8 February 1910), 1; "Coming End of World", *The Ogden Standard* (9 February 1910), 1.

28 "Could the Earth collide with a Comet?", *Scientific American* (5 March 1910), 194.

29 "La Comète", *Le Temps* (20 May 1910), 1.

30 "Sur une Comète", *Les Belles Images* (31 March 1910), 4-5; "Voici La Fin du Monde", *L'Impartial de l'Est-Supplément Illustré* (15 May 1910), 1, 4-5, 8.

its old ways.³¹ In Sudan's Sennar region, the comet's return was interpreted by some fanatical groups as a sign of the awaited Mahdi's arrival, prompting police intervention to suppress the resulting demonstrations.³²

Given that extraordinary events and disaster scenarios tend to draw more public attention than ordinary news and that fear and panic significantly increase media sales, such exaggerated reactions become more understandable. Even so, there were those who sought to restore calm by publishing measured statements from scientists. In the British press, prominent astronomers such as Hugh Newall, Robert Ball, Alfred Fowler, and James Lindsay (Earl of Crawford) were widely featured for their lectures and expert commentary, providing scientific counterpoints to the growing tide of speculation.³³ *The Daily Telegraph* reported that pamphlets circulating in Kiev described Halley's Comet as "the sign of God's scourge and the harbinger of universal war and famine, if not of the end of the world." The article warned the public about opportunists exploiting the fear of the uneducated and superstitious, collecting large sums of money under the pretense of organizing special prayers in churches and monasteries to secure Russia's salvation.³⁴ However, *Le Petit Parisien* reassured its readers that the world was not in danger and encouraged people to prepare to enjoy the rare and beautiful sight—an event they were likely to witness only once in their lifetimes. The newspaper also reported on precautionary actions taken in China to guard against a possible national crisis related to the comet, while noting that in Hungary, individuals convinced that the end was near had begun indulging in their final days, neglecting social norms. Similarly, in Russia, Bulgaria, and Dalmatia, some people were reportedly selling off their possessions in haste to enjoy what they believed were their last moments. The paper stressed the importance of teachers, clergy, and other officials in rural areas taking on an educational role to prevent such reactions. Addressing the French public directly, it called for calm and rational behavior, urging citizens not to embarrass themselves by responding with fear like the "ignorant Chinese" or "superstitious Muzhiks." It warned that if they gave in to panic, they would surely feel ashamed by May 20.³⁵

One of the notable reflections of this period was Europe's framing of Halley's return as a justification for its self-assigned "educational" mission toward societies it did not deem sufficiently modern or civilized. For example, *The Times* published a letter from James Lindsay, in which he raised concerns about the spread of rumors regarding Halley's Comet. He noted that comets had historically been viewed as omens of war, disease, and disaster and emphasized that societies could be easily manipulated by agitators. Although he argued that such susceptibility might be minimal in the United Kingdom, it posed a greater risk in regions experiencing political unrest and lower levels of education—such as Morocco, Egypt, and India. He thus urged the publication of popular science articles in the local press in these regions to help inform the public.³⁶ In line with this appeal, Europeans in Kimberley, South

31 Jehan Rictus, "A Coeur Joie, A Propos de la Comète", *Les Hommes du Jour* (21 May 1910), 4–5.

32 "Égypte, Aux frontières du Soudan égyptien", *Bulletin de Comité de l'Afrique française*, 6, (June 1911), 227.

33 Hugh F. Newall, "Halley's Comet", *The Times* (25 October 1909), 6; "Sir David Gill on Comets", (16 February 1910), 11; "Halley's Comet", (12 March 1910), 12; "Halley's Comet", *The Daily Telegraph*, (25 November 1909) 4; "The Daylight Comet", (27 January 1910), 8; "The Comet's Influence", 2 February 1910, 13.

34 "Panic Caused By A Comet", *The Daily Telegraph* (4 March 1910), 6.

35 "Ne Nous Frappons Pas", *Le Petit Parisien* (4 May 1910) 1.

36 Crawford, "Halley's Comet", *The Times* (13 January 1910), 11. For another example of superstition remaining from ancient times and that the comet should be welcomed with joy, see "Sur la Comète", *Le Radical* (18 May 1910), 1.

Africa, organized meetings to explain to the local population that comets were not harbingers of doom but rather beautiful expressions of the Creator's design. The government also issued an official circular aimed at reassuring the public, stating that Halley's return would not result in any significant danger.³⁷ Astronomer Jean Mascart, who traveled to Tenerife in the Canary Islands to observe Halley's passage, described in his observations that he was unable to convince the local inhabitants that the comet posed no threat. He reported that the islanders believed a powerful impact from the comet's tail might destabilize Earth's balance and cause the planet to capsize.³⁸

The University Daily, quoting astronomer Heber Doust Curtis during a lecture at the University of California, highlighted the enduring human tendency to connect celestial phenomena with earthly events. Curtis remarked: "I have no doubt that the majority of the audience and all thinking men, could you be transported back to the mental attitude of 1,000 years ago, would have had no doubt that the return of the comet and the death of King Edward were most intimately connected." The newspaper emphasized that thanks to the science of astronomy, "our present-day knowledge of the absolutely harmless character of this beautiful [comet]" had been achieved.³⁹ However, in the case of India, there was no need to look back a thousand years. Even among the educated, some interpreted the death of King Edward VII on May 6 as a disaster foretold by Halley's appearance.⁴⁰ In China, revolutionaries viewed the comet as a signal of dynastic upheaval. In response, the Christian Literature Society for China organized the distribution of 277,000 posters explaining the scientific facts about comets in an effort to counter such interpretations.⁴¹

As a subject of intense public fascination, Halley's Comet also became a vehicle for political commentary and satire. In the United States, *Life* magazine writer Wallace Irwin published an article titled "An Interview with Halley's Comet," in which a journalist—imagining a flight to meet the comet—engages it in conversation. Through this fictional dialog, Irwin used irony to critique contemporary values such as wealth, progress, and equality. The journalist attempted to convince Halley that the world, particularly America, had made great strides since the comet's last appearance 75 years earlier, but Halley's sarcastic replies undercut the claim, offering readers a satirical reflection on modern society. The feared visitor's remarks on humanity's proud achievements deeply unsettled his interviewer:

"Don't talk to me of science. Among the fixed stars the scientific fad went out about 110,000 years ago. The best people among our first magnitude stars are going back to nature everywhere in the universe. The most aristocratic place I know of is a little pink planet southeast of Vega. There resides a tribe of three-legged persons who promptly murder their inventors, playwrights and financiers as soon as they are born. Therefore, they live in peace, having neither art, wealth nor luxury."⁴²

37 E. Barrett, "Halley's Comet", *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (11 March 1910), 8; "Halley's Comet, Enlightened Natives", *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (12 March 1910), 7.

38 "La Comète de Halley", *Le Figaro* (23 May 1910), 2.

39 "Astronomer Curtis Lectures to Public", *The University Daily* (27 June 1910), 1.

40 "India, Pessimistic Feeling", *The Times* (9 May 1910), 9.

41 "Christian Work in China", *The Times* (29 December 1910), 5.

42 Wallace Irwin, "An Interview with Halley's Comet", *Life* (5 May 1910), 827, 832, 834.

This article, shaped by anti-positivist and romantic influences, used the image of Halley's Comet as a tool to critique the belief that science had necessarily led to human progress, thereby contributing to the enduring discourse surrounding "the bankruptcy of science."

In the Portuguese press, Halley was portrayed as a civilized and democratic figure—one who, despite being insulted by humanity, bore no ill will. The comet became a symbol of reconciliation, calling for unity across different segments of society.⁴³ In the United Kingdom, Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George invoked Halley in a political rally to address public anxiety over unemployment. Drawing a parallel, he stated:

"You can frighten people about Halley's Comet; you can just tell them what a frightful catastrophe will happen when we pass through its tail, but, once we are through, all the dangers are over and you will know really how thin it is. And it is just the same with this Protectionist bogey."⁴⁴

Halley's popularity also extended into the literary sphere. Poems dedicated to the comet appeared in newspaper columns, and it became a central theme in humorous stories published in magazines.⁴⁵

As May 18 approached, public interest and curiosity intensified. Entrepreneurs eager to capitalize on the comet's widespread appeal pursued various strategies for profit. The Financial Times, seeking to preserve investor confidence, cited Professor Robert Ball's reassurances that a collision with Earth was impossible, affirming that there was no reason to fear any negative impact on the financial markets.⁴⁶ Enoch Morgan's Sons Company drew inspiration from Halley for an advertisement promoting its Sapolio soap brand. The ad featured an image of a comet-shaped soap streaking across the sky, accompanied by the slogan: "Halley's Comet brightens the skies once in seventy-five years. But, every day the earth is brightened by Sapolio."⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the firm Negretti and Zambra promoted the sale of their telescopes with advertisements bearing the simple yet enticing phrase: "to see Halley's Comet."⁴⁸

While "comet suppers" were organized along the boulevards of Paris to witness Halley's passage, street vendors sold hundreds of postcards depicting apocalyptic scenes featuring the arrival of "Mademoiselle Halley."⁴⁹ Newspapers published sensational titles such as "The End of the World," pharmacists marketed anti-Halley pills and oxygen balloons, and restaurants hosted themed celebrations. Among the people of Paris, a range of opinions circulated. Some remarked, "The end of the world is a concern for those with money; those without don't care," whereas others expressed their sentiments more simply: "If I knew we were going to die, I would've treated myself to a nice dinner."⁵⁰ Adding to the atmosphere, Professor Herbert Hall Turner of Oxford University humorously suggested during a lecture that people should bottle

43 Ana Simões, Isabel Zilhão, Maria Paula Diogo, Ana Carneiro, "Halley Turns Republican: How The Portuguese Press Presented The 1910 Return of Halley's Comet", *History of Science* 51/2 (2013), 213.

44 "Mr Lloyd George on Unemployment", *The Times* (1 January 1910), 6.

45 For example, see: E. Sharland, "To Halley's Comet", *The Woman Worker*, (18 May 1910), 975; *Le Rire* (28 May 1910), 2.

46 "Halley's Comet and the Markets", *The Financial Times* (27 April 1910), 6.

47 *The New England Magazine* (April 1910), 1.

48 *The Times* (25 January 1910), 3.

49 "Mademoiselle Halley", *The Daily Mail* (17 May 1910), 5.

50 Henry Bidou, "Au Jour le Jour: Après La Comète", *Journal des Débats* (20 May 1910), 1; "La Fièvre de la Comète", *Le Matin* (18 May 1910), 1.

the air from May 18—when Earth would be passing through Halley's tail—and leave it as an inheritance for their grandchildren.⁵¹

After months of heightened speculation and unusual events, the long-awaited day finally arrived. On the night of May 18, astronomers around the world prepared their telescopes and cameras, while large crowds gathered to observe Halley's passage and await the outcome. In Madrid, people danced in the streets in celebration. In Paris, crowds assembled at the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre, and the Sacred Heart Church, gazing expectantly at the sky. In Rome, cafés and restaurants remained open all night for a festive vigil. In Chicago, people exchanged farewells on the streets with cries of "Good-bye," as if expecting the end. In Berlin, poems were recited at gatherings that featured comet wine, cyanogenic punch, and "end-of-the-world" ice cream, while some ascended in balloons to watch from above. In Atlanta, panic led to a prison riot. In Iran, people prepared small bottles of vinegar, believing it would protect them from the poisonous gas. Elsewhere, people came together in prayer.⁵² Before wiping out the world that night, Halley left a trail of dramatic incidents in its wake. In Paris, J. Monceau fell to his death after slipping from a rooftop while attempting to observe the comet. François Dombala hanged himself out of fear, while Albertine Jolly, in a state of terror, threw furniture out of her window before leaping herself. Paul Louvieu, having overindulged at a "last supper," fatally stabbed himself during a fight in a restaurant. A maid abandoned her job, declaring, "It's the end of the world—I can't stay here."⁵³ In Ontario, some residents refused to buy groceries until the comet had passed, while others sold their livestock in anticipation of disaster. Labor came to a halt in agricultural fields and mining sites. In Oklahoma, a religious cult reportedly attempted to sacrifice a baby to appease Halley.⁵⁴

Due to cloudy, rainy, and stormy weather conditions, the comet's passage was obscured in many regions, resulting in widespread disappointment. Telegrams from across the globe confirmed that in most places, Halley's transit had not been clearly observed. Whether Earth had actually passed through Halley's tail could not be definitively determined by scientists. Initial scientific reports indicated a lack of definitive evidence for such a crossing. It was suggested that the tail may not have extended far enough or that its direction had changed. Some scientists maintained that Earth had indeed passed through the tail, but that the resulting effect was negligible.⁵⁵ By the following morning, it was clear that the world had not ended. *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, seeking to reassure readers after months of growing anxiety, ran the bold headline: "Comet Bumps Us; We're Still Here".⁵⁶ With the threat dispelled, media coverage returned to more conventional reporting—telegrams from areas where Halley was

51 "Halley's Comet: Proposal to Bottle the Air on May 18", *The Daily Mail* (19 February 1910), 7.

52 "Kometenstimmung in Berlin", *Berliner Tageblatt und Handels-Zeitung* (19 May 1910), 1; "The World's Vigil", *The Daily Mail* (20 May 1910), 3; "La Comète", *Le Temps* (20 May 1910), 2; "Effect of Comet", *East Persia Reports* (1906-1910), *Evangelism in Iran: Correspondence of the Board of Foreign Missions, 1847-1911* (Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions), 195, 761; "Comet Stars Panic", *The Tacoma Times* (18 May 1910), 1; "Comet to Bounce off Earth Today", *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (18 May 1910), 1.

53 "Les Victimes de la Comète", *Journal des Débats* (20 May 1910), 2-3.

54 Julian A. Smith, "Halley's Comet: Canadian Observations and Reactions, 1835-36 and 1910", *The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 80/1 (1986), 6.

55 "Der unfichtbare Komet", *Berliner Tageblatt und Handels-Zeitung* (19 May 1910), 1; "Nichts Neues vom Kometen", (20 May 1910), 1; "Wird der Komet noch zu sehen sein?", (20 May 1910), 4; "Les Académies: La Comète de Halley", *Le Pays* (25 May 1910), 2; "Halley's Comet" *The Times* (20 May 1910), 9; "Après le passage de la comète", *La Croix* (20 May 1910), 1.

56 "Comet Bumps Us; We're Still Here", *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (19 May 1910), 1.

still visible, detailed astronomical calculations, and scientific analyses. Observation results and photographs soon appeared in various academic journals, documenting the event from a scientific perspective.⁵⁷

3. The Impact of Halley's Return on Ottoman Public Opinion

The return of Halley's Comet in 1910 had diverse effects across different parts of the world. Despite being in the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" and "Science," humanity remained susceptible to disaster narratives and speculation, capable of responding with irrationality and extremity under the influence of fear and panic. Even as some people feared the imminent end of the world, others sought to exploit the moment for personal or commercial gain. The result was a chaotic yet fascinating rehearsal of the apocalypse. These events—shaped by variables such as religion, culture, education, and geography—were able to reach wide audiences through the telegraph and the press, demonstrating how public perception could be shaped in a rapidly globalizing world. Within this context, the case of the Ottoman Empire—positioned culturally and geographically between East and West and actively pursuing European-style modernization—offers a valuable example for understanding how Halley's return was interpreted and what kinds of impacts it produced. However, it should be noted that the analysis of Ottoman public opinion in this study focuses primarily on the capital, Istanbul, due to the availability and limitations of historical sources. While the effects of Halley's return are explained through examples from various contexts, particular attention will be paid to the points where it diverges from the experience in the West.

Halley's return coincided with a period in which the Ottoman Empire was grappling with a series of critical challenges, including the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era, the 31 March Uprising, the deposition of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the loss of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Crete, the Albanian revolt, and an ongoing financial crisis. At the time, there was no functioning official observatory capable of conducting scientific research on Halley or producing original data. The Rasathane-i Âmire (Imperial Observatory), only official institution with the technical capacity for astronomical observation, had been damaged during the 31 March Uprising, and efforts to restore it were still in progress.⁵⁸ The government's attention was also occupied by the pressing political agenda and unresolved domestic crises, leaving little room to prioritize this astronomical event. The lack of archival records concerning Halley's return is likely among the consequences of this circumstance. As a result, efforts appear to have focused less on scientific observation and more on following and disseminating information obtained from foreign sources.

An examination of the literature on Halley produced during this period reveals a distinctly positivist tone, advocating for science as a tool for societal benefit. This reflects the broader trend of European-style reform efforts in the Ottoman Empire, particularly from

57 Nicholas T. Bobrovnikoff, "Halley's Comet in Its Apparition of 1909-1911", *Publications of Lick Observatory* 17 (1930), 310; Edward E. Barnard, "Visual Observations of Halley's Comet in 1910", *Astrophysical Journal* 39/5 (1914), 378-379; L. de Montarlot, "La Comète de Halley et les observatoires de Paris et de Meudon", *Le Monde Illustré* (28 May 1910), 348-349; *Comptes rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l'Académie des sciences*, Académie des Sciences, (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 6 June 1910), 1496-1498.

58 Kübra Fettahoğlu, *Rasathane-i Âmire (1868-1922)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2019), 52-53.

the 19th century onward, and the Young Turks' emphasis on modern science following the declaration of the Second Constitutional Era. Since the 19th century, the concept of "salvational science," supported and regulated by state authority, had been embraced by a new class of bureaucrat-intellectuals educated in modern institutions. By the early 20th century, the goal of "progress" had become increasingly popular, aligned with the positivist and materialist scientific perspectives promoted by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which had begun to wield significant influence in both government and public discourse. Although the role of modern science remained a subject of epistemological debate among different ideological factions, it was generally accepted as an essential instrument for the development of the state and society.

Nevertheless, elements of older beliefs and interpretive patterns associating comets with disaster continued to persist in segments of Ottoman social memory, as reflected in contemporary literature. In response, intellectuals sought to explain to the public that such interpretations were no longer valid in the modern era, emphasizing that the appearance of a comet was purely an astronomical phenomenon. For instance, Namık Kemal underscored the importance of accurate knowledge in *Osmanlı Tarihi* (Ottoman History), writing: "Those who know nothing of astronomy see a comet and declare that a disaster will strike the world!"—an attempt to persuade readers of the flaws inherent in outdated thinking.⁵⁹ Nazikizâde Mehmed Hilmi mocked the rumor circulating in Istanbul coffeehouses that the fire which destroyed Çırağan Palace on 19 January was caused by Halley's ominous influence, presenting the claim with sarcastic humor.⁶⁰ *Tanin*, the Committee of Union and Progress-aligned newspaper, emphasized that competent modern astronomers had now replaced the astrologers of the past who once issued predictions at the sight of comets, asserting that there was no longer any reason for speculation.⁶¹ Following Halley's harmless passage, the invalidity and exaggeration of such traditional beliefs were humorously conveyed through lines such as:

"There's a fire in Beirut... because of Halley... an ox escaped in Boğazkesen... Halley again... a carriage rolled into the sea in Eyüp... Halley's doing... Oh! Thank heavens... we've gotten past the comet that disturbed everyone's sleep and was blamed for every misfortune."⁶²

As these examples illustrate, the press played an important role in shaping society and promoting modern ideals through the theme of the comet. A model citizen was implicitly promoted—one who did not idle in coffeehouses spreading baseless rumors, who rejected astrology and superstition, and who instead embraced modern astronomy as a legitimate source of knowledge.

Although the front pages of newspapers were largely dominated by political issues, it is evident that the press also monitored developments concerning this globally significant astronomical event and increasingly shared relevant updates with readers. The appearance of Halley's Comet can also be seen as an opportunity to promote scientific knowledge and perspectives within a society where literacy rates remained relatively low. Indeed, some in-

59 Namık Kemal, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, (Külliyat-ı Kemal-İkinci Tertib) (İstanbul: Mahmud Bey Matbaası, 1326), vol. 1, 12.

60 Nazikizâde Mehmed Hilmi, *Yeni Kuyruklu Yıldız: Münecimler Ne Diyor?* (İstanbul: Mürettibiin-i Osmaniye Matbaası, 1328), 5.

61 "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Tanin* (25 January 1910), 3.

62 "Takvimden Bir Yaprak", *Yeni Gazete* (19 May 1910), 1.

tellectuals of the time drew attention to this very point. Ahmed Şinasi, the Edirne correspondent for *Tanin*, expressed this concern in a letter published on 31 January. He noted that although Halley's Comet had been visible in both Istanbul and Edirne for 10 days, the press, which he described as "the educator of public opinion," had mentioned the comet only briefly, relegating it to a few lines. He criticized this as inadequate at a time when the public was in urgent need of scientific information, and newspapers—preoccupied with political matters—had remained largely silent about such a significant astronomical event. He argued that prominent astronomers such as Salih Zeki Bey should have written extensive articles for the press, which would have served as a more effective means of public education. He went on to provide readers with a detailed article of his own, offering accurate information about Halley.⁶³ This lament over the missed educational opportunity represented more than just a critique of media priorities; it was, in essence, a clear expression of the broader argument that "science" was a fundamental component in addressing the state's ongoing problems.

In what appeared to be a response to Ahmed Şinasi Bey's appeal, it is notable that coverage of Halley's Comet in the Ottoman press began to increase in parallel with developments in the international media. Compared to the early months of the year⁶⁴—when the public was reportedly "indifferent" to the comet—March, April, and May marked a period of intensified reporting and growing public interest, fueled in part by widespread global speculation. For instance, during the days of heightened anticipation, the appearance of a newly identified comet—designated 1910 I and also visible from Istanbul—led to confusion among the public. This was eventually clarified with explanations that Halley would become visible at a later date.⁶⁵ *Tanin* took the initiative to share scientific information about Halley's orbit, its distance from Earth, and the timeline of its passage.⁶⁶ Once the comet became visible to the naked eye, the newspaper began offering practical guidance on when, where, and how to observe it, along with descriptions of how it would appear after 18 May.⁶⁷ From mid-April onward, reports noted that Halley had become visible to the naked eye in countries such as France, England, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Prussia and included summaries of observatory findings from these regions.⁶⁸

As speculation intensified regarding Halley's toxic tail and the possibility of global catastrophe, the Ottoman press continued to publish translated statements and reports from foreign newspapers and scientific journals.⁶⁹ However, it is noteworthy that, compared to the frequently seen examples in America and Europe, this reporting did not seem intended to further unsettle the public. On the contrary, they were often accompanied by scientific commentary aimed at reassuring readers that there was no cause for alarm. *Tanin* and *Servet-i Fünûn* published translated excerpts from Camille Flammarion's article, in which he explained that there was no danger associated with Halley's passage or the cyanogen present

63 Ahmed Şinasi, "Edirne Muhabir-i Mahsusamızdan: Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Tanin* (31 January 1910), 2.

64 "Suallerimiz", *Hayâl-i Cedit* (18 March 1910), 2.

65 Şûrâ-yı Ümmet (3 February 1910), 13; "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Yeni Gazete* (23 April 1910), 2; *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (22 January 1910), 4.

66 "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Tanin* (13 April 1910), 3; "Halley Yıldızı Göründü!", *Tanin* (23 April 1910), 3; "Kuyruklu Yıldız Selanik'te Görüldü!", *Tanin* (2 May 1910), 3.

67 "Halley Yıldızı", *Yeni Gazete* (9 May 1910), 3; "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı Yaklaşıyor", *Çolpan* (15 April 1910), 2; "Kuyruklu Yıldız Hakkında", *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (3 February 1910), 1–2.

68 *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (21 April 1910), 2; (26 April 1910), 3; (8 May 1910), 5.

69 For examples, see: Mehmed İzzet, "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı ve Arz ile Tesadüf", *Darüşşafaka* (14 May 1910), 546–557; "İlm-i Hey'etden Malumat-ı Nafia: Kuyruklu Yıldızlar", *Karagöz Salnamesi* (1 January 1910), 66–70; "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Resimli Kitab* (14 February 1910), 373–381.

in its tail.⁷⁰ *Şâkirdân*, while emphasizing the importance and sanctity of journalism, criticized certain reporters who, in their pursuit of attention, had linked Halley's appearance to various perils and contributed to the spread of panic on a global scale. The article underscored the critical role played by the press during this event and, by assuring readers that Halley would pass harmlessly and that they could "sleep peacefully," sought to counteract the effects of speculative fear.⁷¹ *Arkadaş*, after presenting scientific studies and statistical data about Halley, concluded with a reassuring message: "Let's not be afraid anymore."⁷² Similarly, an article in *Musavver Şebâb* argued that the rumors being circulated closely resembled ancient superstitions. It pointed out that no star with a tail dense enough to collide with and destroy the Earth had ever been discovered and urged readers to dismiss such unfounded beliefs.⁷³

Tasvir-i Efkâr, in its coverage of Halley's Comet, included a biography and caricature of Edmond Halley, an illustration of the comet's 1835 appearance, charts showing its angles of intersection with Earth, and a historical overview of its past visits.⁷⁴ The newspaper firmly stated that there was no serious danger associated with the comet. In a series of articles published in April, it emphasized that, while many were writing about Halley—whether accurately or not—it was committed to providing the most reliable and scientifically grounded information. The publication featured statements by Charles Nordmann of the Paris Observatory concerning the comet's orbit, length, the density of the gases composing its tail, and the extent to which it could influence Earth's atmosphere. Special emphasis was placed on Nordmann's explanation that, even in the event of a collision with the comet's tail, the cyanogen gas would have an impact so negligible in comparison to atmospheric oxygen that it posed no threat. Despite these scientific reassurances, the newspaper acknowledged that no one could fully rule out the possibility of public excitement or panic on May 18. In such a scenario, it noted, psychologists—as much as astronomers—would find rich material for observation and analysis.⁷⁵ As these examples suggest, Halley's return was consistently framed as a subject within the realm of modern science, and the most persuasive sources used to inform and reassure the public were drawn from European scientists. Even when some members of the scientific community made statements that could fuel speculation, this did not diminish the perceived credibility or authority of science in the eyes of the Ottoman public. The sanctity of scientific knowledge remained intact, regarded as valid and reliable regardless of the individual behavior of those who represented it.

A general review of the articles about Halley published in the Istanbul press reveals a prevailing tone of calmness and reassurance. Aware of the significant role media had played in fueling global hysteria, the Ottoman press shaped its coverage accordingly. Furthermore, in the newly energized environment created by the lifting of censorship, a more active and vocal press sought to guide public opinion. Halley was, as observed in the West, instrumentalized to convey messages on a variety of issues. Yet, the Ottoman experience diverged notably

70 "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Tanin* (20 April 1910), 1-2; "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı: Avrupa Gazetelerinden", *Servet-i Fünûn* (27 April 1910), 377-379.

71 "Semavi Misafirimiz", *Şâkirdân* (28 April 1910), 10-13.

72 "Fen Aleminde", *Arkadaş* (21 April 1910), 206-208.

73 "Kuyruklu Yıldız", *Musavver Şebâb* (17 February 1910), 7-9.

74 "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı", *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (10 February 1910), 1-2; (14 February 1910), 4-6.

75 "Kuyruklu Yıldız Yaklaşıyor", *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (15 April 1910), 1-2; (16 April 1910), 1-2.

from the Western model. The prevailing political agenda determined the primary sphere in which Halley was most strategically employed. Notably, many of these articles targeted Sultan Abdülhamid II and his administration, commonly referred to as the “old regime.” The echoes of Abdülhamid II’s deposition on 27 April 1909, were still resonating throughout public discourse. The press of the Second Constitutional Era, long suppressed by restrictions, now found an opportunity for retribution—using the theme of Halley to reflect critically on the past era of absolutism. The Yıldız Palace in Beşiktaş, symbolically linked to Abdülhamid II’s rule, became a point of focus for sharp-tongued writers. Significantly, the Ottoman press appears to have been influenced less by “end-of-the-world hysteria” than by what can be described as a “Sultan Abdülhamid hysteria”.

Servet-i Fünûn, speculating on the idea of Halley colliding with Earth, framed the discussion in a politically charged context, stating:

“The supposed comet collision, a kind of fairytale, continues to preoccupy everyone. Yet they forget—after we escaped the Beşiktaş Star that could outshine Halley itself, we’re not the kind of crowd to be shaken by noise... Whether we die together or survive together—it doesn’t matter in the least.”⁷⁶

Through these lines, the article conveyed the weight of the hardships endured during the former sultan’s reign and asserted the public’s resilience. *Muhacir*, adopting a similar tone, argued that drawing conclusions from the appearance of comets was misguided, and that instead, people should be grateful that the “comet of tyranny”—a clear reference to Abdülhamid’s 30-year rule—had disappeared along with all its metaphorical tails.⁷⁷ *Karagöz* commented: “The star of those who plagued us for thirty-three years with tyranny couldn’t do much harm with all its oppression, so what’s there to fear from Halley?” This statement implied that, in comparison to the repressive Abdülhamid era, fear of Halley’s comet was entirely unwarranted.⁷⁸

A writer for *Tanin*, who admitted that journalists had a role in stirring people into strange behavior through fear and hysteria—but who seemed not to believe much in doomsday scenarios—took a different angle. He pointed out that the events under Abdülhamid II and the Yıldız Palace administration had not yet been forgotten and claimed that, for the sake of justice and fairness, he could reassure the people. Arguing that even if Halley were to devastate much of the world, it would spare the Ottoman Empire, he wrote:

“Let’s be fair. How many times can a comet’s tail strike one country? For 33 years, the 33,000 tails of Yıldız have unleashed all manner of doomsdays on this land—shouldn’t Halley show some mercy? Surely even it will think twice and spare this poor country from its list of visits.”⁷⁹

Through this satirical reflection, he underscored the severity of the hardships experienced under the former regime, reinforcing the perception that the suffering of the past far outweighed any celestial threat.

76 “İstanbul Postası”, *Servet-i Fünûn* (21 April 1910), 354.

77 *Muhacir* (26 January 1910), 4.

78 “Muhavere”, *Karagöz* (26 February 1910), 2.

79 “Geçmiş Olsun”, *Tanin* (19 May 1910), 1.

Figure 1: A Caricature Depicting Sultan Abdülhamid II as Halley's Comet

Source: *Hayâl-i Cedid*, “Dün Gece Geçen Kuyruklu Yıldız Münasebetiyle” (On the Occasion of Last Night’s Comet), (18 May 1910, 1)].

Hayâl-i Cedid joined the wave of criticism against the old regime and Sultan Abdülhamid II by publishing a caricature that strongly intensified its satirical tone. The illustration, titled “Dün Gece Geçen Kuyruklu Yıldız Münasebetiyle” (On the Occasion of Last Night’s Comet), portrays Sultan Abdülhamid as a comet moving through the sky. A figure seated on the Earth mockingly gestures and sings a song composed for the comet: “Farewell to you, may Alatini Pavilion be your homeland! I won’t even call you a cuckoo, may the demons be your guides!” Given that the crescent and star were the central symbols of the Ottoman flag, a particular caricature—depicting the crescent (the Ottoman Empire) laughing while the star, symbolizing Abdülhamid II, is cast aside—visually emphasized the separation between the two. The image signified the Sultan’s permanent removal from state affairs, and expressed the hope that he would never return from the Alatini Pavilion in Thessaloniki, where he was residing at the time. The caricature went further, wishing that demons would accompany him on his way, reinforcing the symbolic link between the harmless passage of Halley’s Comet and the perceived liberation from Abdülhamid’s rule.⁸⁰ Additional reports circulated suggesting that Abdülhamid, known for his personal interest in astronomy, was himself fearful of Halley’s return—allegedly watching the skies with anxiety and even neglecting to eat.⁸¹

80 *Hayâl-i Cedid* (18 May 1910), 1.

81 “Abdülhamid Kuyruklu Yıldızdan Korkuyor”, *Sadâ-yı Millet* (20 May 1910), 3. For a caricature depicting Sultan Abdülhamid II observing Halley’s Comet, see *Hayâl-i Cedid* (18 March 1910), 1.

Halley's role as a vehicle for criticism and commentary also emerged through various other angles. Mahmud Sâdık, one of the prominent journalists of the time, used the comet's popularity as a rhetorical device to question municipal inaction. He sarcastically wondered whether the Istanbul Municipality—despite having already secured funding for its promised projects—was waiting for Halley's passage before taking any meaningful steps, thereby grounding his administrative critique in popular discourse.⁸² *Karagöz*, addressing the wealthy, remarked: "Perhaps the comet will throw the world into chaos. What's the use of money? Let them give the excess to the people and show at least one charitable deed."⁸³ In another issue, the paper turned its satire toward *Tanin*, humorously likening it to a cosmic disaster: "Today, this newspaper is something that should be feared like a heavenly scourge—may God protect us from its evil. If we were to call it something like Halley's Comet, we wouldn't be wrong."⁸⁴

In *Kalem*, the satirical magazine, a writer using the pseudonym Diken described the idea that Halley's tail would poison the entire world with cyanogen gas as "eccentric"—yet playfully imagined the benefits if such a belief were to spread. According to him, billionaires like Rothschild, convinced of their imminent demise, would liquidate their assets and spend lavishly, leading to the end of poverty through redistribution. Lovers, wasting no time, would finally marry, thereby addressing concerns over declining birth rates. The heartbroken would redirect their energy into productive work, purging society of weak, parasitic, and melancholic elements. Writers and poets would descend from their "rosy clouds" to engage in more practical and profitable pursuits. Meanwhile, soldiers from major and minor powers alike would expend all their munitions firing into the sky to celebrate their final days—ultimately achieving world peace. The article also referenced suggested precautionary measures, such as sealing doors and windows or storing oxygen, to protect against the supposed threat of Halley's cyanogen gas. However, the author concluded with satire, proposing his own method: simply enjoying a cup of coffee and the smoke from his pipe, which he presented as the most effective form of protection.⁸⁵ While addressing the fear surrounding Halley in a humorous and unconventional way, the article also serves as a valuable illustration of the perceptual transformations underway during the Ottoman Empire's modernization process and the role of intellectuals in shaping that change. A new societal order was emerging—one in which laziness was increasingly viewed as a "crime," and idleness as a "burden" on the nation.⁸⁶ Movement, productivity, and diligence were actively promoted for the advancement of both state and society. Practical, applicable scientific knowledge was held in high esteem, and even poetry was expected to align with "scientific" truth and contribute to the public good.⁸⁷ In this context, the ideal citizen was portrayed as one who pursued "serious" endeavors and remained immune to unfounded speculation.

Another article published in *Ümmet* used the Halley event as a platform to argue that, in an empire undergoing a period of profound difficulty, there was a pressing need for a citizen

82 Mahmud Sâdık, "Payitah", *Şûrâ-yı Ümmet* (28 April 1910), 1-2.

83 "Muhavere", *Karagöz* (9 March 1910), 2.

84 *Karagöz* (14 May 1910), 4.

85 "Halley'e karşı ne yapmalı?", *Kalem* (5 May 1910), 3, 6-7.

86 Melis Hafez, *Inventing Laziness: The Culture of Productivity in the Late Ottoman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 97-105, 224-227.

87 Mehmet Alper Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 165-169.

profile that embodied diligence, resilience, scientific awareness, morality, and public utility. The article suggested that the events of the week surrounding May 18 offered a striking opportunity to examine the complex psychology and survival instincts of humankind. It noted that this moment allowed for a comparative assessment of moral, temperamental, intellectual, and psychological resilience across different nations. While a portion of the global public was paralyzed by fear, the unwavering composure of the British—who continued preparations for the funeral of the recently deceased King Edward without interruption—was highlighted as an example of loyalty to dynasty and national identity. The article then turned its focus to the Ottoman Empire, expressing its point in a dramatic and patriotic tone:

“The fear of Halley did not ease, even for a minute, the pain felt in Ottoman hearts over the Cretan issue... The fleet prepared to protect Ottoman honor, dignity, and rights in the Mediterranean did not delay its movement by even a second. Not even forty-tailed or seven-headed versions of the comet could slow down the actions and operations of the Ottoman military forces moving to pacify the unrest in Albania and restore peace and order- and they did not”.⁸⁸

Through these words, the article emphasized the enduring weight of political realities. Although nature may periodically impose disasters upon humankind, it asserted, such disruptions cannot be allowed to halt the struggle for existence. As long as the world endures, so too will the need for persistent action. The article concluded with a clear message: the survival of the state depends on the unrelenting continuation of its work.

One of the most notable effects of Halley's return on Ottoman public opinion was the renewed interest in scientific and popular astronomy literature. This resurgence included both original writings and translations. These publications aimed not only to educate the public about comets but also to capitalize on the growing curiosity surrounding celestial phenomena. Given the rise in the number and circulation of periodicals following the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era, it is fair to say that book advertisements frequently seen in newspapers served both educational and commercial purposes. Ebüzziyazâde Abdurrahman Velid published a book titled *Kuyruklu Yıldızlar ve Halley Kevkeb-i Gisûdarı (Neler Olacak?)* [Comets and Halley's Comet (What Will Happen?)] during the first week of May, when public excitement surrounding Halley's return was at its peak. In the introduction, he stated that his aim was to inform the public—amidst a flurry of speculation—by drawing on scientific articles published in Europe, particularly those by Camille Flammarion. To strengthen the clarity and appeal of his narrative, the book included numerous drawings and illustrations of comets. After presenting information on the history, structure, and orbital dynamics of comets, Velid concluded that Halley's passage posed no threat to life on Earth.⁸⁹ On 10 May, *Tasvir-i Efkâr* ran a prominent advertisement for the book, promoting it as a remedy for public curiosity and concern, and included an image of the book's cover.⁹⁰ Shortly afterward, *Tanin* reported that the book was nearly sold out and had attracted considerable attention within just a few days of its release.⁹¹

88 “Necm-i Gisûdar ve Vukuat-ı Cihan”, *Ümmet* (26 May 1910), 1-2.

89 Ebüzziyazâde Abdurrahman Velid, *Kuyruklu Yıldızlar ve Halley Kevkeb-i Gisûdarı (Neler Olacak?)* (Kostantiniyye: Matbaa-i Ebüzziya, 1328).

90 *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (10 May 1910), 8.

91 *Tanin* (17 May 1910), 4.

Nazikizâde Mehmed Hilmi also contributed to the popular science discourse with his book *Yeni Kuyruklu Yıldız: Münecimler Ne Diyor?* (The New Comet: What Are the Astrologers Saying?), which opened with a section titled “What Is Prophecy?” Approaching the topic from its roots, Hilmi characterized those who attempted to predict the future as “charlatans” exploiting the gullible. He compared prophecy to an inexhaustible treasure and a highly profitable trade, arguing that the rise of modern science had dismantled such superstitions and reduced them to rubble. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that such beliefs could still find receptive audiences where ignorance persisted. In what he called this “age of civilization,” he urged that the number of people who believed in astrological judgments should decline. He concluded unequivocally that the comet would cause no harm. *Sadâ-yı Millet*, which announced the book’s publication, recommended that all readers obtain a copy.⁹² Meanwhile, Hüseyin Rahmi (Gürpınar) contributed to the public discourse with a humorous novel. In the introduction to *Kuyruklu Yıldız Altında Bir İzdivaç* (A Marriage Under the Comet), written in April, he advised readers not to listen to those attempting to incite fear with exaggerated claims, reassuring them that Halley’s passage would go unnoticed. Through the fictional character İrfan Galip, he constructed a satirical narrative that mocked the comet-induced panic propagated by the press.⁹³

The Turkish translation and publication of Jules Verne’s 1877 science fiction novel *Hector Servadac* (Off on a Comet)—which tells the story of people who find themselves traveling through space on a comet after it collides with Earth—under the title *Kuyruklu Yıldız yahud Âlem-i Şemsde Seyahat* (The Comet or A Journey Through the Solar System) was also a timely and notable coincidence in this context.⁹⁴ Camille Flammarion’s *La Fin du Monde* (1894), translated as *Dünya’nın Sonu* (The End of the World), and Voltaire’s 1752 work *Micromégas*, published in Turkish as *Yıldızdan Yıldıza Yolculuk ve Kuyruklu Yıldızlara Seyahat* (Journey from Star to Star and Travels to the Comets), can likewise be cited among the works that contributed to the cultural and scientific engagement with comets during this period.⁹⁵ Additional examples of the popularization of science include the Turkish editions of J. Norman Lockyer’s *Elementary Lessons in Astronomy* (1868) and Camille Flammarion’s *Petite Astronomie Descriptive* (1877), both released under the title *Küçük İlm-i Hey’et* (Elementary Astronomy). An advertisement for the latter in *Yeni Gazete* asked readers: “Would you like to form a solid understanding, especially of the movements and specific behaviors of comets, which are currently occupying the minds of our people? Get yourself a copy of *Küçük İlm-i Hey’et*.”⁹⁶ The surge in such publications during the Halley craze significantly reinforced the discourse that accurate scientific knowledge could replace restrictive superstitions, and that *fên* (science) should be recognized as the primary driver of societal progress.

92 Nazikizâde Mehmed Hilmi, *Yeni Kuyruklu Yıldız*, 7-8, 35, 42, 63-65; *Sadâ-yı Millet* (17 May 1910), 4.

93 Hüseyin Rahmi (Gürpınar), *Kuyruklu Yıldız Altında Bir İzdivaç* (Istanbul: Mihran Matbaası, 1328); *Tanin* (28 July 1910), 4.

94 Jules Verne, *Kuyruklu Yıldız Yahud Âlem-i Şemsde Seyahat*, trans. M. Sünbülü, (Istanbul: Asya Matbaası, 1326); *Tanin* (15 October 1910), 4.

95 Camille Flammarion, *Dünya’nın Sonu*, trans. Ali Muzaffer, (Istanbul: Necm-i İstikbal Matbaası, 1327); Voltaire, *Yıldızdan Yıldız Yolculuk ve Kuyruklu Yıldızlara Seyahat*, trans. Süleyman Tefik el-Hüseyni, (Istanbul: Artin Asaduryan and Mahdumları Matbaası), 1326.

96 J. Norman Lockyer, *Küçük İlm-i Hey’et*, trans. Ahmed Tefik, (Dersaadet: İkdâm Matbaası, 1326); Camille Flammarion, *Küçük İlm-i Hey’et*, trans. Hüseyin Hüsnü, (Kastamonu: Kastamonu Matbaası, 1325); “Kuyruklu Yıldızın Tarifini Havi Küçük İlm-i Hey’et”, *Yeni Gazete* (18 February 1910), 4.

As the anticipated date drew near, the Ottoman public became increasingly engaged with the tragicomic events and curious reactions unfolding across the globe. One particularly striking example was the case of a Hungarian farm owner who, gripped by panic over Halley's return, committed suicide, leaving behind a note declaring that he "preferred suicide over being killed by a star."⁹⁷ In an article titled "Halley'in Cinayetlerinden" (The Crimes of Halley), *Sadâ-yı Millet* reported that several Armenians in Mersin had died or been injured when the roof of a house collapsed while they were observing the comet.⁹⁸ According to *The Times'* Istanbul correspondent, many individuals, alarmed by the circulating rumors, had withdrawn their children from school to face the supposed end of the world together. Crowds gathered on rooftops and terraces to observe the night sky; amateur and enthusiastic watchers applauded, their clapping echoing through the city. While some prayed solemnly, others treated the occasion as cause for celebration. The report also included a curious hypothetical: had a meteor fallen in Yıldız Park while Abdülhamid II was present, it would likely have been interpreted as a portent of evil or impending doom.⁹⁹

Kalem, which generally approached Halley-related claims with skepticism and humor, observed during the week of May 18 that anxiety had gripped both the uninformed and the educated. The paper reported that some had stopped working altogether, fearing doomsday, catastrophic floods, or cyanide poisoning, while others mocked the fearful with sarcasm. In one satirical piece, *Kalem* featured a fictional conversation aboard a streetcar, in which passengers joked about the comet and the public panic. After a series of puns and wisecracks, the conversation closed with a witty exchange: One student says, "According to our teacher, once we pass through the comet's tail, humans will completely lose their ability to reason." Another replies, "In that case, we won't lose anything at all." Exhausted by Halley-induced stress, the group bursts into laughter. On the morning of 19 May, following Halley's harmless passage, *Kalem* urged its readers not to place their faith in such rumors in the future and encouraged them to treat the experience as a valuable lesson in critical thinking and media literacy.¹⁰⁰

After recounting a series of fantastical scenes and beliefs from around the world, *Yeni Gazete* joyfully announced that life had returned to normal. On the morning of 18 May, those who believed the world was ending awoke in a frenzy of panic. Some imagined that Halley's impact would engulf the Earth in flames and considered fleeing to the North or South Pole, envisioning themselves hiding beneath the ice alongside the polar bears. Others believed that passing through the comet's tail would disrupt the Earth's electromagnetic field and unleash lightning storms across the globe—adding that Americans, in particular, would suffer for their fear of capital punishment. In Istanbul, panic escalated when a violent storm broke out just before dawn. Many interpreted it as a sign that the comet's tail had struck the Earth. Cries and screams echoed from houses, merchants shut their shops and rushed home to be with their families, and the dark, rainy weather throughout the day was perceived by some as proof that Halley had already brought disaster—or was about to. In the face of this

97 "Kuyruklu Yıldızdan İntihar", *Sadâ-yı Millet* (13 March 1910), 3; "Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızının Korkusundan Bir Macarın İntiharı", *Tasvir-i Efkâr* (13 March 1910), 7.

98 "Halley'in Cinayetlerinden", *Sadâ-yı Millet* (7 June 1910), 4.

99 "The Vigil on the Continent, Constantinople", *The Times* (20 May 1910), 9; "Turkish Fears of Halley's Comet", *The Times* (25 May 1910), 7.

100 "Haftalık Dedikodu", *Kalem* (19 May 1910), 1-2.

uncertainty, some said their farewells and made peace with one another. After painting this broader picture, *Yeni Gazete* addressed its readers directly with the following reflection: “All those excitements, panics, and anxieties born of the defeat of people’s illusions and imagination have now vanished... The Earth passed through the comet’s tail... Neither the Earth noticed, nor did the tail.” To reinforce this message, the paper also published a quatrain titled “The Tail Strike”: “Would the carefree child of Earth ever fear Halley? Even if it held spear, arrow, or sword in hand, It passed, despite all the astronomers’ dire claims, Leaving the world unharmed by its tail’s strike”.¹⁰¹ *Servet-i Fünun*, in its 1911 annual, similarly remarked that there was no longer anything to fear from Halley’s passage, that the moment of danger had passed, and that greater trust should be placed in the assurances of science.¹⁰²

Figure 2: Photograph of Anne Held in Her Comet-Shaped, Flower-Decorated Carriage



Source: *Resimli Kitab*, (14 August 1910), 948

101 “Arz Yıldızın Kuyruğundan Geçdi...Geçmiş Olsun!”, *Yeni Gazete* (19 May 1910), 1-2.

102 “Halley Kuyruklu Yıldızı”, *Musavver Salname-i Servet-i Fünûn*, (İstanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekâsı Matbaacılık Osmanlı Şirketi, 1326), 128-130.

While the world anxiously awaited its fate with curiosity and apprehension, Halley's popularity as a cultural image extended across literature, art, politics, and fashion—and this resonance was also felt in Ottoman society. A striking example appeared in an Ottoman magazine, which published a photograph of French stage artist Anne Held participating in Paris's flower festivals in a comet-shaped, flower-adorned carriage—an unusual but vivid expression of the fascination Halley had inspired.¹⁰³ The comet's cultural reach also extended to the theatrical world. The play *Péra-Halley-Retour*, written by Henry Yan as a two-act, four-scene comedy, premiered in Istanbul during the first week of May. The production humorously portrayed how Halley's return was received in the capital and received considerable praise for its staging, costumes, and narrative.¹⁰⁴ During this period, the clearest photograph ever taken of Halley—captured using recently developed photographic techniques—was also made public, further increasing the comet's visual familiarity and symbolic presence.¹⁰⁵

Once the wave of speculation and fear had passed, the Ottoman press gradually scaled back its coverage, limiting reports to tracking Halley's current location and noting the regions from which it remained visible.¹⁰⁶ Yet even two years later, the memory of Halley's 1910 return lingered in both global and Ottoman public consciousness. *Mecmua-i Ebüzziya* reflected on the event with the following words: "The renowned Halley's Comet, whose arrival led to many rumors and conflicting reports, plunging many simple minds into anxiety and providing the global press with rich material for debate and discussion, still remains fresh in the minds of those who read about it."¹⁰⁷ So profound was Halley's impact on collective perception that the word "comet" even entered colloquial usage as a term of insult or derision—an enduring legacy of the fears and absurdities it once provoked.¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

Comets, with their sudden appearances and unusual forms, have long stirred unease in the human psyche. While humanity has persistently sought to understand the workings of the universe, the recurrence of comets in close proximity to significant historical events and disasters has reinforced their predominantly negative associations. This deep-seated emotional response—shaped in large part by religious worldviews that framed comets as "instruments of divine punishment"—continued to resonate even in an era when modern science sought to redefine their meaning. It becomes evident that the positivist model of science, which posits a homogeneous, mechanical, and increasingly predictable universe, encounters limitations when applied to phenomena such as comets—celestial bodies that have long unsettled human imagination. The scientific revelations about Halley's composition, particularly its cyanogen-laced tail, and the theoretical scenarios proposed by experts, produced unintended consequences when filtered through the speculative lens of the global

103 *Resimli Kitab* (14 August 1910), 948.

104 "Une Première a Constantinople", *Stamboul* (13 May 1910), 1.

105 *Servet-i Fünûn* (12 May 1910), 408.

106 For example, see: "Yine Halley", *Sadâ-yı Millet* (23 May 1910), 2.

107 Ebüzziyâde Abdurrahman Velid, "Yeni Kuyruklu Yıldız", *Mecmua-i Ebüzziya* (3 November 1911), 93–94.

108 Yekta Bahir, "Gençlik Kavgası", *Genç Kalemler* (10 May 1911), 36; "Dedi ki, Dedim ki...!," *Cadaloz* (2 September 1911), 3.

press. Faced with the prospect of existential annihilation, humanity responded with a mixture of fear, denial, superstition, satire, and curiosity—revealing not only its instinct for survival but also its intellectual and emotional contradictions. Ultimately, the credibility of scientists’ repeated reassurances—that there was no real danger—was only fully validated after Halley passed by without incident. In the aftermath, science was reaffirmed as the authoritative framework through which such celestial events should be understood.

Although Halley’s return was, in essence, an astronomical event offering valuable research opportunities for scientists, it evolved into a global apocalyptic phenomenon with far-reaching political, socioeconomic, and psychological repercussions—a transformation that must be understood within the broader context of the globalization of modernization. The widespread availability of mass communication technologies—such as the telephone, telegraph, press, and railways—significantly accelerated the circulation of information, shaping public perception and amplifying the scale of response in ways previously unimaginable. At the same time, Halley’s return became one of the early twentieth century’s most revealing global tests for three key actors: science, which was expected to offer definitive and rational explanations; the press, increasingly seen as the most influential educator of the masses; and the public, who believed themselves to be living more enlightened lives under the guidance of scientific progress. Science encountered the limits of its persuasive power in moments of speculation and crisis. The press, aware of its capacity to inform but also profit from sensationalism, grappled with the tension between responsibility and commercial appeal. And the public—while broadly placing its trust in scientific authority—remained susceptible to mass hysteria, fueled by the unpredictability of the cosmos and the enduring pull of inherited fears and mythologies.

Whether or not Halley would bring about the end of the world is ultimately beside the point—the literature, discourse, and cultural production generated around its return offer rich material for understanding what science is for, who scientists are, how mass psychology operates, and who holds influence in the dissemination and control of knowledge. Analyzing this content through the lens of different cultures and geographies—such as the Ottoman Empire—yields valuable contributions to the history of science and thought. In a society with low literacy rates, striving for European-style modernization and “progress,” examining how scientific knowledge spread and became institutionalized is only possible through close analysis of public reactions to such extraordinary events. From this perspective, Halley’s return in Ottoman society unfolded as a process marked by a growing number of scientific publications on modern astronomy, even amid a politically charged atmosphere. Speculation gradually gave way to scientific explanation, and following the comet’s harmless passage, science was once again reaffirmed as the ultimate authority. This process also aligned with the state’s goals and its self-assigned role as society’s “instructor.” Encouraging the pursuit of knowledge, the state promoted the idea that salvation lay in education, productivity, and moral conduct—an ideal citizen profile consistently echoed by the Young Turk-aligned press in their coverage of Halley. With the fall of Sultan Abdülhamid—who had come to symbolize ignorance, stagnation, and repression—the press suggested that a new society would emerge under the guidance of science. In this sense, the use of Halley’s return as a tool in political discourse demonstrates that the Ottoman public sphere was aligned

with the global trend. This fascinating astronomical episode once again illustrates that the perception and use of science cannot be divorced from its political context. Therefore, aside from the question of whether Halley brought the end of the world, it is an undeniable fact that its 1910 return brought many other things to the world.

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