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Comic Routines of the “Traditional” and the Text in Turkish Theatre

“Geleneksel”in Rutinleri ve Türk Tiyatrosunda Metin

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Turkish theatre and text by questioning conventional historiographical frameworks that classify certain models as “traditional” and define them as anonymous, improvised, and fundamentally textless in opposition to authored, written, and dramatic literature. It argues that such classifications and binaries obscure the oral and literary features through which textuality operates in Turkish theatre. Focusing on *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, *meddah*, and village plays (*köy seyirlik*), it examines a corpus of published plays, manuscript scenarios, and documented performance scripts, and drawing on the concept of *lazzi* in *Commedia dell’Arte* as an analytical point of reference rather than a genealogical model, it aims to illustrate comic routines, formulaic dialogues, stock characters, and scenario structures that function as core text-building materials. It also demonstrates how routine-based compositional units circulate across performance modals and contexts through repetition, adaptation, and reconfiguration, enabling continuity and variation. Ultimately, it proposes a re-evaluation of authorship, improvisation, and text-making in Turkish theatre in accordance with its own methods of composing texts and devising performance.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Türk tiyatrosu ile metin arasındaki ilişkiyi, belirli modelleri “geleneksel” olarak sınıflandıran ve bunları yazarlı, yazılı ve dramatik edebiyata karşı biçimde anonim, doğaçlamaya dayalı ve temelde metinsiz olarak tanımlayan alışlagelmiş tarihyazını çerçevelerini sorgulayarak incelemektedir. Bu tür sınıflandırma ve ikiliklerin, Türk tiyatrosunda metinselliğin sözlü ve edebî özellikleri görünmez kıldığı ileri sürülmektedir. Karagöz, orta oyunu, meddah ve köy seyirlik oyunlarına odaklanan çalışma; matbu oyunlar, elyazması senaryolar ve kayda alınmış temsil metinlerinden oluşan bir külliyatı incelemektedir. *Commedia dell’Arte*’deki *lazzi* kavramını köken bağlantısı sunan bir model olarak değil, analitik bir referans noktası olarak ele alarak, komik rutinlerin, kalıplaşmış diyalogların, tiplerin ve senaryo yapılarının metin oluşturmada temel bileşenler olarak nasıl işlediğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, rutin temelli bu bileşenlerin tekrar, uyarılma ve yeniden yapılandırma yoluyla farklı performans bileşenleri ve bağlamları arasında dolaşıma girerek hem sürekliliği hem de çeşitliliği mümkün kıldığı ortaya konulmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, Türk tiyatrosunda yazarlık, doğaçlama ve metin oluşturma kavramlarının, metin kurma ve performans üretme süreçleri doğrultusunda yeniden değerlendirilmesini önermektedir.

Keywords

Traditional theatre,
lazzi,
comic routine,
Karagöz,
Orta oyunu

Anahtar Kelimeler

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Introduction

The General Directorate of Fine Arts of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism provides financial support each year to private theatre companies whose applications are approved. The applicant theatres are classified into three categories: professional theatre, professional children's theatre, and traditional theatre. Theatre companies that receive funding are required to document their expenses through invoices, and specific criteria determine which costs are eligible for reimbursement. While professional theatres may list royalties paid to playwrights for the texts they use as eligible expenses, this provision does not apply to artists working in traditional theatre forms such as *Karagöz* or *orta oyunu*, which are evaluated under the traditional theatre category. The reason for this distinction lies in earlier consultative meetings—attended not only by bureaucrats but also by academics, theatre practitioners, and experts—in which the prevailing consensus defined traditional theatre as “textless” (*metinsiz*). This case exemplifies how dominant historiographical and theoretical discourses in theatre and performance studies in Türkiye from the second half of the twentieth century to the present have defined the “professional,” the “modern,” and the “traditional,” and have influenced contemporary cultural policies, institutional frameworks and artistic practice.

While acknowledging the presence and significance of authored texts, this paper proposes a rethinking of the binary oppositions established between authorship or author-centred texts scripts, and improvisation with an aim of reframing the definitions of Turkish theatre in accordance with its process-oriented and performance-generated textuality. In this respect, the first and second parts focus on major twentieth-century debates and definitions of Turkish theatre articulated by authoritative figures, as well as on their contemporary interpretations within so-called revisionist paradigms. Part three and four make use of a corpus that includes published texts, manuscript scenarios, and documented performance scripts mainly of *Karagöz*,¹ *orta oyunu*,² village plays (*köy seyirlik*), and partially *meddah*.³ They employ a comparative reading into that corpus to identify recurrent routines, formulaic dialogues, and scenario frameworks with an aim to highlight how these elements function as text building material across different genres and performance contexts through repetition, circulation, adaptability. Part three presents a comparative reference to *Commedia dell'Arte*—particularly Mel Gordon's taxonomy of *lazzi*—as an analytical lens rather than a genealogical claim, allowing for the identification of shared compositional logics without implying historical derivation. The fourth part concludes by illustrating how this shared repertoire is embodied across a range of texts and performances.

¹ *Karagöz* is a form of puppet theatre in which semitransparent colorful leather puppets are manipulated by one puppeteer against a screen made of cotton sheet and illuminated by a light source behind it.

² *Orta oyunu* is one of the names given to dramatic performances which include music, dance, and buffoonery.

³ *Meddah*, which is a loan word from the Arabic language, literally means a panegyrist or eulogist but in terms of Turkish theatre it is used for storytellers who are distinguished by the dramatic elements they use when narrating a story such as mimicry, gestures, voice modulation, and accessories.

Theatre of the Conqueror, of the Islamdom, and of the Nation

The Turks take you round, and show all they have not themselves built, calling every ruin by the simple name of the “old walls.” They know nothing of traditions, for they are only conquerors here, and extremely ignorant; but I required no guide; the stupendous ruins proclaimed their builders, and their situation told who selected it. The site of the theatre is truly Greek.⁴

British archaeologist and explorer Charles Fellows’ above given view on the state of the amphitheatre of *Pergamus* illustrates not only certain perceptions of philhellenic travellers of the nineteenth century but also the fundamental narratives framing what Steve Tillis defines as the “standard Western approach” to theatre and theatre history.⁵ Fellows’ personal accounts additionally reminds us of the potential of the travelogue as a historical source because regardless of their route or interests, travellers to Türkiye (including former Ottoman territories and Central Asia) provided information on various aspects and forms of a theatrical past as they witnessed imperial pageants, street comedies, public performances in coffee houses or exclusive private entertainments either in capitals or in rural regions. Their observations were followed by the scholarly investigations of European orientalists in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The first known translation of a Turkish theatrical piece—*Şair Evlenmesi* by İbrahim Şinâsî—was published in Ármin Vámbéry’s *Sittenbilder aus dem Morgenlande* (Scenes from the East, 1876). Scholars of literature and theatre have notified that the play draws on themes and motifs that could be found in *Karagöz* or *orta oyunu*, but conventionally it is defined as the first example of Turkish dramatic literature in Western style because it was aimed at being performed at the Dolmabahçe Palace Theatre on Sultan Abdülmecid’s command. Vámbéry’s interest, however, was not in individual accomplishments of authors. As a linguist, he was searching for a diverse literary corpus that would help him study not only the languages but also the life and customs of the Orient, and their transnational interaction. His student Ignác Kúnos and several other orientalists such as Georg Jacob, Helmut Ritter, Felix von Luschan, and Edmond Saussey were amongst the pioneering figures to study what they defined as “Turkish folk theatre” or “folk literature.” These scholars were mostly specialised in linguistics, literature, anthropology and theology in a century characterised by the discovery of the people,⁶ and they were interested in forms that were rich in tales, dialects, songs, riddles, jokes, etc. Accordingly, *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* provided them with a wide range of material about the *volkschauspiel* in question, but more importantly about the *volk*.⁷

⁴ Charles Fellows, *A Journal Written during an Excursion in Asia Minor* (John Murray, 1838), 34.

⁵ Steve Tillis, *The Challenge of World Theatre History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2.

⁶ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 3.

⁷ As “people” and “folk” attracted more attention, related vocabulary became popular amongst German speaking scholars and other European intellectuals of the nineteenth century (Burke, *Popular Culture*, 3).

Theatre and performance studies had not emerged as an independent field during the rise of oriental expeditions and research, so the initial information gathered on Turkish theatre was published as monographs in attendant journals of Oriental studies or as entries of *Encyclopaedia of Islam* that is known to be the archetype of twentieth-century scholarship.⁸ Such publications were aimed at academic circles in Oriental and/or Turkish studies, instead of common readers of a World theatre. As the written material became available for the scholars of classical philology too, knowledge on theatres of the Islamic Orient was sometimes incorporated as evidence to support either Hellenic or Indo-European origins of theatre and drama.⁹ For instance, in his authoritative work *Der Mimus*, Hermann Reich allocated a full chapter on *Karagöz* and partook in the Westward distortion as follows:

The simplest approach would be to view the *Karagöz* plays, the humorous-dramatic expressions of Turkish folklore, as a Turkish invention. [...] But who would attribute such an invention to the Turks, of all Islamic peoples, who are so untalented and uninventive in poetry? [...] the similarity of this Turkish continuation of the Hellenic *mimus* to its original is so extraordinary that we could consider the connection between *Karagöz* and *mimus* certain even without any evidence.¹⁰

Although parallels between *Karagöz* and Greek or Roman theatre are not difficult to identify, Reich's quest for a theatrical homeland (*Heimat*) rests on far-fetched analogies drawn between Attic comedy or the Byzantine *mimus* and Asian puppetry through a very limited body of sources. I argue that Reich's approach partakes in the "Westward distortion" which prioritises the ancient glory of the Greek Eastern theatre and identifies later Eastern and Western theatrical forms as lesser qualified descendants of it.¹¹ Similar approaches motivated Turkish scholars of the twentieth century to revise the widely accepted narratives.

When the first compilations of Turkish theatre were circulating in European libraries, prominent literary figures of the Tanzimat period had long been arguing over how to build a national (*millî*) theatre. Some favoured European-style productions and dramatic literature over the text-free and "degenerate" performances of *Karagöz* or *orta oyunu* because authoring and staging decent theatre was one of the musts of a civilised society, and it was the Western civilisations who had succeeded in it. On the other hand, some argued for the retention of *Karagöz* or *orta oyunu* after reforming them along Western lines because without them a national theatre would not survive. Both arguments converged in favour of a Western style legitimate theatre. With the founding of the Turkish Republic, longstanding debates over the nature of Turkish theatre took on a new urgency. Although scholars of the early Republican period still had disagreements on how a national theatre would progress, they mostly objected the rhetorical assumptions which outcast

⁸ Peri Bearman, *A History of the Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Lockwood Press, 2018), 1.

⁹ See, for instance Josef Horovitz, *Spuren griechischer Mimen im Orient* (Mayer & Müller, 1905), 28.

¹⁰ Hermann Reich, *Der Mimus* (Weidmann, 1903), 623–624. Translations from German are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ Reich, *Der Mimus*, 692–693. See more on "Westward distortion" in Tillis, *The Challenge of World Theatre History*, 65.

Turkish theatre from an idealised theatrical past.¹² In the official journal of Darülbedayi,¹³ Ahmet Kutsi Tecer argues that *orta oyunu* is no different than the national theatres of the Western world and criticizes certain historiographical fallacies as follows:

For some of us, it has been habitual to date the beginning of our theatrical past to the start of European influences. According to them, we did not have theatre before the nineteenth century but that is not true. We did not have theatre buildings, but we did have theatre [...] The stage is the tradition of European theatre, and it is correct to say that performing on stage in European standards started in the nineteenth century but rejecting what was there before that new era is not correct with respect to cultural matters.¹⁴

Some contemporaries of Tecer also questioned the validity of prioritising Western style dramatic literature over the universality of *mimesis* or ritual. If Western theatre was a continuation of Ancient Greek theatre which was rooted in rituals, Turkish theatrical past could also have been traced back to shamanism and to Central Asia or investigating Turks' possible interactions with ancient civilisations would have explained more about the theatrical heritage. They were also familiar with the new arguments flourishing in Western institutions where scholars and practitioners rejected the authority of authors, darkened auditoriums, and conventions of the bourgeois drama. Therefore, they treated *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* as fundamental forms of Turkish national theatre because the Western models were not in the picture before the 1850s. It is not surprising that Selim Nüzhet Gerçek, who wrote the first independent publication on Turkish theatre (*Türk Temaşası*, 1930), divided his work into three chapters as *Karagöz*, *meddah* and *orta oyunu*.¹⁵ However, the Western Standard Approach was passed on to the second half of the twentieth century as illustrated below by Alessio Bombaci:

It is well-known that during the last century did the Turks first acquire a theatre in the Western sense of social institution, I mean the theatre that sprang from religious rites in Greece and developed from antiquity, through the Middle Ages to modern times. The term “Turkish theatre” is usually taken to mean those forms of spectacle that flourished in the Ottoman Empire, the well-known *qaragöz*, *orta*

¹² Nazlı M. Ümit, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihyazımı ve Avrupalı Şarkiyatçılar* (Libra, 2020), 205–277. See also Nazlı M. Ümit, “Theories of Origin Reconsidered: Narratives of Migration and Central Asia in Turkish Theatre Historiography,” paper presented at the IFTR World Congress, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, University of Arts, Belgrade, 2018.

¹³ A journal named after the first state conservatory established in European model, later known as Şehir Tiyatrosu.

¹⁴ Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, “Ortaoyunu Tiyatrodur,” *Türk Tiyatrosu* 24, no. 277 (1954), 7–9. Translations from Turkish are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁵ For more detail on the pioneering examples of national theatre histories see Ümit, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihyazımı*, 107–203.

oyunu, quqla and meddah [...] It is unnecessary to comment on the audacity of speaking about the Turks and the existence of dramatic pieces in China two thousand years before Christ.¹⁶

Bombaci's statements illustrate how some orientalist were not convinced that the Turks, who were not considered to be "indigenous" to the lands where once the Dionysian ritual evolved into the classical theatre, would possess an ancient theatrical culture. On the other hand, as Bombaci notes, pioneering initiatives were taken to start "a theatre in the Western sense" by private theatre companies in the nineteenth century and the first state conservatory was founded prior to the founding of the Republic. In other words, when theatre studies were first institutionalised academically in 1958, "theatre in the Western sense" was already a period of the national theatre history and was becoming the major reference for its future because a selection of theatrical practices that were relevant to the West and its traditions became the "modern" model, and the Turkish theatrical past was reinterpreted accordingly.

From Asian Steppes to the Cradle of Civilisations: Metin And's Interpretation of the "Traditional"

Metin And, one of the prolific researchers of the period, embraced a series of arguments that would reconcile the theatre historiographies of the early Republican period with Eurocentric myth-ritualist scenarios and origins theories. His works, especially when they introduce Turkish theatre to a non-Turkish speaking reader, begin with an introduction summarising Türkiye's position as a bridge between East and West, and how the migrations from Central Asia to the Anatolian plateau led to the mingling of dramatic practices through diffusion. Drawing on field studies carried out in villages by scholars of folklore and theatre, he classified Turkish theatre in two main groups: the traditional (*geleneksel*) and the Western model. To him, traditional theatre, a term which he introduced to the academic literature on Turkish theatre, also falls into two types as folk theatre (*köylü tiyatrosu*) and popular (*halk tiyatrosu*) theatre, and he bases his division on dichotomies between the amateur-professional, urban-rural, and improvised-written.¹⁷

Tom Pettitt draws our attention to how James Frazer's *Golden Bough* and subsequent studies of Cambridge classicists influenced the way theatre historians identify origins of folk drama and classify dramatic features or customs to observe the transition from the proto-dramatic to the drama-proper in a linear theatre history which identifies dramatic customs and commercial

¹⁶ Alessio Bombaci, "On Ancient Turkish Dramatic Performances," *Aspects of Altaic Civilization, Proceedings of the fifth meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference*, no. 23 (1963), 87–88.

¹⁷ Alpay Ekler is one of the pioneering figures who questioned the concept of the traditional and suggested that every theatrical form is, by default, traditional. He also criticised the theatrical terminology used to define certain aspects of Turkish theatre, arguing that it is constructed according to Western standards, Alpay Ekler, "Geleneksel Türk Tiyatrosunda Dil ve Konuşma Üslubu," in *Dümbüllü İsmail Efendi ve Düünden Geleceğe Geleneksel Türk Tiyatrosu*, ed. Süleyman Şenel (İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2008), 69–72.

dramatic entertainment as distinct systems. Similarly, Metin And suggests that the dramatic performances discovered in rural areas are folk theatre which is rooted in prehistoric rites determined by pastoral and agricultural calendar whereas *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* constituted the popular theatre performed by professionals in urban settlements. He elaborates more on what he means by “popular theatre” and says that it corresponds to theatre that was not enjoyed by the elite, the aristocracy and the intellectuals,¹⁸ a definition that is irrelevant to the social stratification of the Ottoman empire. Besides, *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* were performed in a variety of settings (imperial palace, inns, coffee houses, private households etc.), and a considerable number of intellectuals both from the Ottoman Empire and early Republican period not only had a high opinion of *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* due to their historical background and potential but also there were sufficiently familiar with them as they were the audience. For these very reasons, Şinasi’s *Şair Evlenmesi* draws on the conventions, character types, and comic strategies of the “traditional.”

Metin And suggests that the ritualistic elements in folk theatre still practised in Anatolian villages are the main source of the ancient Greek theatre that gave rise to the Western theatre, but interestingly he denies a similar link between folk theatre and popular theatre. Despite the common characteristics such as presentation techniques, the usage of masks, puppetry, crossdressing or storytelling, he claims that these two forms did not have an influence on each other as they developed in separate settings.¹⁹ He criticises scholars who name traditions of folk theatre as *orta oyunu* in villages because he claims that *orta oyunu* emerged in Istanbul and was hardly ever performed in other cities, but historical records say otherwise. Although the word *orta oyunu* is mostly associated with some of the renowned professional companies of the late nineteenth century, it is only one of the names used to describe dramatic performances, which were performed in various regions either independently by small groups or as a part of a larger ceremonial events by relatively larger companies. More importantly, it is the villagers who call their plays *orta oyunu* or their performance space *orta* in some regions just like the professional comedians and buffoonery performers hired for imperial weddings do.²⁰

Professionalism emphasised by And is also a controversial feature to differentiate between the rural and the urban. Scholars who studied the plays in rural areas noted that performers did not just randomly take on roles. Their age, experience, interest, and talent in *taklit* (mimicry), shape the organisation of the cast and determine who would be the leader. Although such plays are community products, there are cases in which performances cannot be organised because the village lacks people who would carry them out properly. In such cases, professionals from neighbouring villages are invited to perform and their service is paid.²¹ Similarly, even in Istanbul,

¹⁸ Metin And, *Geleneksel Türk Tiyatrosu* (İnkılap, 1985), 43.

¹⁹ Metin And, *Geleneksel Türk Tiyatrosu*, 43.

²⁰ Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, “Taklit ve Oyun,” *İstanbul*, no. 7 (1955), 16.

²¹ For more information on such plays and how they are organised see Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, *Köylü Temsilleri* (Çığır Mecmuası, 1940); Şükrü Elçin, *Anadolu Köy Orta Oyunları* (Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1964); Süleyman Kazmaz, *Köy Tiyatrosu* (CHP Halkevleri, 1950); Nurhan

orta oyunu was never merely a commercial entertainment monopolised by its professionals. For instance, in 1890, basket makers of Galata district asked for permission to stay in an excursion area for a couple of days and practise *orta oyunu* to celebrate the apprentices' becoming masters, which indicates that in some special occasions, *orta oyunu* was a ritualistic medium and a community work to celebrate passing on professions.

Furthermore, Metin And separates folk theatre performances from the popular ones by suggesting that they are not “true theatre” but semi-plays because they lack a properly sustained story or unfolding of a plot.²² In his further investigation into their similarities, he says “both theatres pledge no allegiance to literature, or to writing of any kind. Both are anti-writing, anti-author [...] in both no theatre building or playhouse is used, performances are held in an arena at ground level.”²³ In terms of improvisation and authorship, I would not suggest that And strictly positions traditional theatre to the “little culture” end of the cultural spectrum, but that his analysis of the traditional theatre, which is already separated from the modern, is predicated on what features the traditional forms lack compared to Western models of literary drama written by authors as poets in line with classical norms for a select audience.²⁴

To Tilles, reinforcing literary work as the primary unit of study is a “crippling limitation” and it means “to ignore, as a matter of definition, not only everything from non-literate societies, but also most folk theatre in literate societies [...] whose quite literate performers made the conscious choice not to have a dramatic literature.”²⁵ In this respect, I argue that categorising the “traditional” as merely anonymous and non-literary/non-textual, or approaching its texts with a Westward distortion in favour of a progressive theatre history is a crippling limitation. Therefore, the following part is dedicated to three textual aspects of Turkish theatre to emphasise that its relationship with written or unwritten, anonymous or authored texts should be examined in accordance with its own processes of composing texts and devising performance.

Anonymous *Logos* and Authored Repertoires

First, the traditional forms of Turkish theatre and performing arts operate through oral and literary modalities of *logos*. Not only performance genres with pre-established dramatic structures, such as *orta oyunu* and *Karagöz*, but also a wide range of entertainment practices—from ceremonial pageantry to everyday spectacles—meld literature and orality. For instance, Tülün Değirmenci draws our attention to a debate between İshak Çelebi, a sixteenth-century figure of *divan* poetry, and Şah Kasım, a scholar of the same period. During a wedding, İshak Çelebi watches jugglers

Karadağ, *Köy Seyirlik Oyunları* (Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1978); Metin And, *Dionisos ve Anadolu Köylüsü* (Elif Matbaası, 1962).

²² Metin And, “The Turkish Folk Theatre,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 38, no. 2 (1979), 155.

²³ Metin And, “The Turkish Folk Theatre,” 157.

²⁴ Thomas Pettitt, “When the Golden Bough Breaks: Folk Drama and the Theatre Historian,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 4, no. 2 (2005), 24.

²⁵ Tilles, *The Challenge of World Theatre History*, 96.

(*kâse-baz*) reciting ghazals (*gazel*) composed by him and remarks, “I wonder, had it not been for my *gazels*, what would they recite?” and Şah Kasım responds, “I wonder, had it not been for them, who would recite your *gazels*?”²⁶ Enriching performances with rhyming couplets, riddles or puns was also a part of optical entertainment as well as circus acts or variety shows. Malik Aksel reminds us of the musical rhyming couplets uttered by peepshow men (*panoramacı*) in line with the pictures (*nev-icad resim*) displayed to attract customers.²⁷ However, poetry or dialogues were not just to draw attention to the performance or for the comic effect. They were also a tool for distraction. John Mulholland claims that Turkish *hokkabaz* (conjurer, juggler) differed from their Western variations because of the dialogues (*muhavere, söyleşme*) between *Usta* (master conjuror) and *yardak* (assistant), which were “very much similar to Turkish shadow and puppet theatre and the improvised popular Turkish comedy. The routine not only contained jokes and comical skits to create laughter and amusement, but also by clever misdirection distracted the attention of the spectators.”²⁸

Second, the generous use of *logos* in performance provided European orientalists with a wide range of available literary and linguistic material; therefore, figures like Georg Jacob or Ignác Kúnos produced works on Turkish theatre at the beginning of their career. Moreover, like Edmond Saussey, they categorised texts of Turkish theatre as “folk literature” or “popular literature.” Anthologising play texts was a common practise among such scholars as they based most of their arguments on them. The texts they worked on were collected not only through performance and dictation but also from written or published copies as “reading” Turkish theatre was already becoming a popular practice in the second half of the nineteenth century. Masters of *Karagöz* and *orta oyunu*, as well as actors engaged in Western-style drama, published plays or compiled their own repertoires (e.g. Sefer Mehmed, Hayalî Memduh Bey), perhaps with the intention of publication though many were unable to achieve this during their lifetimes. Notebooks of masters were circulating amongst scholars and publishers when Hellmut Ritter was provided with an almost complete repertoire of classical *Karagöz* plays by Nazif Efendi. For this reason, academic research on “traditional” theatre or “folk literature” have used such play texts as the primary literary source. The majority of these plays are variations of master copies, but except for a few handwritten copies, almost all of them are credited to an author or to an identified source. For instance, Hermann Reich reached his conclusions drawing on Georg Jacob’s *Karagöz Komedi*, which was a study on a series of *Karagöz* plays called *Letaif-i Hayal*, and one of the authors of the series was the renowned actor of the nineteenth century, Ahmet Necip Efendi.²⁹ Also, contemporary *Karagöz* masters still

²⁶ Murat Keklik, *Üsküplü İshak Çelebi Divanı* (PhD diss., Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, 2014), 30; Tülün Değirmenci, “Osmanlı Görsel Kültüründe Meddahlar ve Meddah Kitapları,” paper presented at the workshop *Storytellers in Ottoman Society*, Department of Turkish Language and Literature, Samsun University, 6 December 2025.

²⁷ Malik Aksel, *İstanbul’un Ortası* (Elif Matbaası, 1977), 197.

²⁸ Metin And, *Magic in Istanbul* (Mickey Hades International, 1978), 28.

²⁹ Marvin Carlson and Nazlı M. Ümit, eds., *Letaif-i Hayal*, in *Turkish Traditional Theatre: Karagöz Puppet Plays* (Martin E. Segal Theater Center, 2019), xi–xxiii; Nazlı M. Ümit, “Temaşanın Komedyası

draw on these written or published copies when composing their own plays, unless they acquire their repertoire exclusively through oral transmission.

Third, scholars who approached the established repertoire as part of folk literature have emphasised the role of the master-apprentice relationship in transmitting plays to future generations. However, the circulation of texts was not confined to practitioners or professionals within a single form. Rather, texts moved across “folk” plays and “popular” theatre, irrespective of whether they were enacted as customary practices or as commercial entertainment. Moreover, the “traditional patterns, stock phrases, verses, songs, and opening-closing formulas” that And associates with folk theatre are also used in the popular forms. In this respect, I argue that “traditional theatre” operates through formulaic and recurring structures in which texts, gestural enactments, modes of acting, and performance conventions are recycled, circulated, and continually reworked before being individualised by professional practitioners. The performance follows a regular scheme and compositional rules comparable to those of illustrated manuscript miniatures, which display continuity despite being produced by groups of artists within a single workshop under the name of one master. At the same time, as a consequence of its improvisational nature, the performance is bound by the principle of irreproducibility, as observed in the art of *ebru*. It should also be noted that the improvisational nature of performance paves the way for concepts such as anonymity and non-textuality. Therefore, it is relevant to suggest that “the flexibility of improvisation always requires some degree of structure.”³⁰ I argue that Turkish theatre also relies on structural and substructural units, and if it were compared only to European examples—as has often been the case in defining its traditional and modern phases—*Commedia dell’Arte* (*CdA*) would offer an ideal point of reference.

Routines of *Commedia dell’Arte* and *Taklits of Comoedia Turcica*³¹

To Tim Fitzpatrick, performance in *CdA* is generated through the deployment and interaction of three variables: a set of roles, a scenario which is the textual codification of schemas and subschemas, and a repertoire of set interactions, speeches, and business.³² One of the set comic businesses that *CdA* is characterised with is the *lazzi*, a term for stage tricks (see also Tr. *trük*) that are “witty, foolish, or metaphorical in word and action.”³³ *Lazzi* are defined both as independent

ile İmtihani: Ahmet Necip Efendi’nin Hayal Oyunları,” *Folklor Araştırmaları Dergisi* 6, no. 3 (2023), 1314–1318.

³⁰ Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia Dell’Arte* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12.

³¹ One of the terms used by European travellers to describe *orta oyunu* from the seventeenth century onwards. (Cevdet Kudret, *Ortaoyunu* (YKY, 2007), 26.

³² Tim Fitzpatrick, *The Relationship of Oral and Literate Performance Processes in the Commedia Dell’Arte* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 4–5; 74–81.

³³ Andrea Perrucci quoted in Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’Arte* (Theatre Library Association, 1981), 4.

and spontaneous interruptions and as planned and rehearsed interventions that are sometimes initiated for short scenes or extended and integrated into the plot. Mel Gordon classifies *lazzi* according to their comic appeal, and some of these correspond to specific comic routines in Turkish theatre. The following eight examples—selected from a total of two hundred and seven—aim to illustrate such correspondences and to highlight the shared oral and literary sources within the repertoires of Karagöz, *orta oyunu*, village plays (*köy seyirlik*), and *meddah*.

Acrobatic and Mimic *Lazzi* (A05&A08)

- *Commedia dell'Arte*: “Through magic, Pantalone is transformed into an ass. Zanni mounts him and feeds him leaves from a tree & A magician transforms Arlecchino into a wild crane. As he pleads with the magician, Arlecchino notices his neck becoming longer and longer.”³⁴
- *Karagöz*: Zenne, Çelebi, Karagöz, and Hacivat are struck by witches. They are transformed into various animals such as a donkey, a tortoise, and a goat. Karagöz mounts Zenne—who has been turned into a donkey—and tries to ride her.³⁵
- *Orta oyunu*: The Magician casts a spell on Kavuklu, turning him to stone. At Pişekâr’s request, he is forgiven; however, when Kavuklu seizes the Magician’s wand, he casts spells on all his creditors, freezing them in place. Kavuklu lines them up like statues, shapes them into the form of a ferry, and plays with them.³⁶

Comic Violence/Sadistic Behaviour (B02)

- *CdA*: a) “Zanni hides in a sack, which the Captain trips over and begins to beat in anger. b) Hoping to be sneaked into his beloved’s house (...) the Captain is tricked into hiding in a sack.”³⁷
- *Karagöz*: Hacivat’s daughter instructs the Bey she loves to hide inside the sack that she will send with her father to the public fountain. Karagöz, who wants to catch the Bey in the act of being with his wife, begins kicking the jar as soon as Hacivat arrives.³⁸
- *Orta oyunu*: Kavuklu’s wife secretly lets Çelebi into the house. When Kavuklu returns home, Çelebi hides inside a basket (*küfe*). Suspecting his wife’s infidelity, Kavuklu uses washing the wool as a pretext and takes the basket—with Çelebi hidden inside—to the public fountain (*çeşme*).³⁹

Comic Violence/Sadistic Behaviour (B15)

³⁴ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 11.

³⁵ Hayalî Memduh Bey, *Karagöz Perdesi Külliyyatı: Çifte Sihirbazlar* (Gayret Kütüphanesi, 1922); Hellmut Ritter, *Karagös: Türkische Schattenspiele, Zweite Folge* (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1941), 128–171.

³⁶ Ignác Kúnos, *Das Türkische Volksschauspiel: Orta Ojnu* (R. Haupt, 1908), 108–137.

³⁷ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 14.

³⁸ Wilhelm Radloff and Ignác Kúnos, *Proben: Der Volkslitteratur der türkischen Stämme VIII* (St Petersburg, 1899), 362–375.

³⁹ Kúnos, *Das Türkische Volksschauspiel*, 108–137.

- *CdA*: “Directed to beat Zanni ten times, the Turk loses count repeatedly. As he flogs Zanni, the Turk counts, “One, two, three... What comes after three? Zanni shouts “Ten!” The Turk begins again “One, two, three...No, four comes after three”. He starts to count again.”⁴⁰
- *Karagöz*: Karagöz is punished and beaten (*falaka*) for cutting down a tree, and each blow is counted one by one. However, after every blow the Kır Serdarları muddle the count, and the punishment starts over each time.⁴¹

Sexual/Scatological *Lazzi* (F07)

- *CdA*: “The mistress has fainted and the servant-girl cries for water. Pulcinella brings her all kinds of water [...] finally he pisses in a cup and splashes it on the mistress. This revives her.”⁴²
- *Dede Oyunu* (village play): At the end of a collective dance, the Dede dies. The girls gather around him and perform laments. One of the girls cannot endure the situation and dies as well. The Shepherd says, “Let me pour some water on her” to bring her back to life, but instead urinates into her mouth. The girl revives, and the audience laughs.⁴³

Stage/Life Duality (Death) (H09)

- *CdA*: “After Pulcinella is killed and put in a coffin, he pops up several times during the performance to tell the audience not to disturb the dead.”⁴⁴
- *Karagöz*: Karagöz falls and dies while performing tightrope walking. His funeral is held, and Karagöz is placed in the coffin. Karagöz suddenly jumps out of the coffin, and everyone runs away.⁴⁵

Stupidity/Inappropriate Behaviour (I04)

- *CdA*: “Zanni divides Pantalone’s money in the following way: He counts, “One for Pantalone, two for me. One for Pantalone, two for me.”⁴⁶
- *Tarla Sürme Oyunu* (village play): Two brothers refuse to divide the field they inherited from their father. In the autumn, during the wheat-sowing season, they disguise themselves as oxen and harness themselves to the plough. They both plough the land and sow the wheat. At harvest time, they reap the crops and attempt to divide the wheat. While counting the produce, the Cunning Brother (*Kurnaz kardeş*) deceives the Wretched Brother (*Sefil kardeş*) by having three for himself

⁴⁰ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 17.

⁴¹ Carlson and Ümit, *Letaif-i Hayal*, 27–30.

⁴² Gordon, *Lazzi*, 33.

⁴³ Karadağ, *Köy Seyirlik Oyunları*, 41–42.

⁴⁴ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 42.

⁴⁵ Ritter, *Karagös: Türkische Schattenspiele, Dritte Folge* (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft) 297–316. See also Ritter, *Karagös*, 1953, 541–566; See also “D10 Lazzo of Pulcinella’s Death i Gordon” and “K14 Lazzo of the Living Corpse.”

⁴⁶ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 43.

and giving two to his brother each time. When they cannot reach an agreement, they go to the village headman (*muhtar*) who also fails to make a fair distribution.⁴⁷

Trickery *Lazzi* (K10)

- *Cda*: In order to bring Ruffiana out of her house and deliver a message, Zanni asks her to help him look for an imaginary gold coin. Looking for the coin and whispering his message, Zanni manages to fondle her at the same time.⁴⁸
- Karagöz: Hacivat deceives Karagöz into coming down by pretending that he will give him money, food, and various goods.⁴⁹

Word Play *Lazzi* (L01)

- *Cda*: “The lovers have quarrelled. They call on Pulcinella. The man says to Pulcinella, “Tell her she is an ingrate” Pulcinella goes to woman and says, “He says that he will grate you.”⁵⁰
- Karagöz: Çelebi wishes to court Zenne through Karagöz and asks him to convey the couplets he recites to her; however, Karagöz fails to understand the words and repeatedly delivers them incorrectly.

Although Mel Gordon’s classification includes further examples that show similarities to routines found in Turkish theatre,⁵¹ considering Turkish theatre’s distinctive motifs, stock characters, linguistic features, dramatic principles, audience, its position within cultural history, and social reception, it would be more appropriate to develop a separate, indigenous classification to identify and understand these routines more accurately. This paper does not seek to propose such a classification; rather, the following section illustrates how these routines function in the construction of text and performance within Turkish theatre.

Extant texts of *orta oyunu* illustrate how some routines designate the key parts of a play. As soon as Kavuklu enters the performance area, Pişekâr withdraws to one side, falls silent, and

⁴⁷ Karadağ, *Köy Seyirlik Oyunları*, 107–108; Editörden, “Dramatik Köylü Oyunları- Erkek Oyunları,” *Tiyatro Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 12 (1995): 149–151.

⁴⁸ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 52.

⁴⁹ Wilhelm Radloff ve Ignác Kúnos, *Proben: Der Volkslitteratur der türkischen Stämme VIII*. St Petersburg, 1899), 324–327; Muhittin Sevilen, *Karagöz* (Milli Eğitim, 1969), 207–209.

⁵⁰ Gordon, *Lazzi*, 56.

⁵¹ Compare “A01 *Lazzi* of the Ladder” and “A02 *Lazzi* of Falling” with “Hamam” in Ritter, *Karagös*, 1953, 411–438; “A20 *Lazzo* of Axe Grinder” with “Değirmen Döndürme Oyunu” in Karadağ, *Köy Seyirlik Oyunları*, 100–150 and Editörden, “Dramatik Köylü Oyunları,” 149–51; “B18 *Lazzo* of the Circumcision” with “Sünnet” in Ritter, *Karagös*, 1953, 1–52; “D01 *Lazzo* of Six Fathers” and “D10 *Lazzo* of Pulcinella’s Death” with “Seni Kim Doğurdu muhaveresi” in “Karagöz’ün Şairliği,” Ritter, *Karagös*, 1953, 331–333; “L07 *Lazzo* of the Other’s Name” with “İsim Muhaveresi” in “Cazular,” Ritter, *Karagös Türkische Schattenspiele, Dritte Folge* (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1941) 137–140; “G05 *Lazzo* of Repetition” with “Evet Efendim Muhaveresi” in Sevilen, *Karagöz*, 27–30; “F01 *Lazzo* of Enema” with “Al-Afranjün (The foreign doctor)” in Enno Littmann, *Arabische Schattenspiele* (Berlin, 1901), 24–35.

remains motionless. When Kavuklu first sees him, he mistakes him for a gravestone or a statue (see *Lazzi of the Statue A09*) (Fig.1) walks around him, speaks, and says a prayer, etc. Startled by Pişekâr's sudden speech, Kavuklu reacts in shock, and their dialogue begins. This encounter is followed another routine. In some texts, they do not instantly recognise each other, so they introduce themselves at length, and in the end, they realise that they are in fact already acquainted (see Transformation *Lazzi J04*), which marks the end of *arzbar*. This order of routines is realised regardless of the story developed in the main schema. The clues regarding how the story would unfold are also given in the dialogue between the main characters. Kavuklu often looks for a job, a house to rent or a useful advice to overcome an unfavourable situation, which is similar to opening scenes of village plays in which a shepherd or a seasonal agricultural worker looks for a job or a place to stay.⁵²



Figure 1. *Ah Nigâr vah Nigâr* performed by Tiyatro Merdiven on behalf of Üsküdar Karagöz Tiyatrosu, Kavuklu-Alpay Ekler, Pişekâr-Selçuk Delipınar. Courtesy of Tiyatro Merdiven

⁵² See *Oduncu Oyunu* or *Bostancı Oyunu* in Süleyman Kazmaz, *Köy Tiyatrosu*, 42–54.

The beginning of the main part (*fasıl*) in some Orta oyunu and Karagöz plays also deploys an encounter between Kavuklu or Karagöz and Zenne (women). The dialogue between them may well be identified as sexual-erotic *lazzi* due to direct or indirect allusions and mimicry performed. Kavuklu or Karagöz, either hides himself as he sees the women coming or confronts them with unusual behaviour. He pretends to be another object or an animal while women examine him, sometimes physically, and try to guess what the object would be depending on its shape, stiffness, or movements. In some texts, the gravestone analogy between Pişekâr and Kavuklu is repeated with certain phallic references added. The extracts given below illustrate how the dialogue is generated based on similar stock phrases and allusions.

Madımak Oyunu (Village play)

Zekine and Medine walk around the performance space singing songs. They are on their way to pick up knotweed. Meanwhile a third player lays down with a stick between her legs.

Zekine- Medine, sister!

Medine- What happened?

Zekine- Look, there is something here.

Medine. Where?

Zekine- Is this a hatchet stick?

Medine- I do not know, it is erected. There is something dusty on its tip.

Zekine- Measure it and see how much of it you can eat.⁵³

Mahalle Baskını (*Karagöz* play)

Kız- I wonder what is standing there. A stone for porters to rest I suppose.

Karagöz- Yes, you are right.

Kız- No, no it doesn't look like it... I'd say a fountain, if it had a cup with it, but...

Karagöz- What a clever woman.

Kız- Darling, what are you?

Karagöz- A man!⁵⁴

Çeşme (*Orta oyunu* play)

Zenne- Oh! Where am I? Looks like I've ended up in a cemetery. Kavuklu—an old grave. I cannot read what is inscribed on it.

Kavuklu- Look at the date.

Zenne- Oh! It speaks like a person.

Kavuklu- I am a person, not a gravestone.

Zenne- Why are you standing here?

Kavuklu- I was revived at the sight of you.⁵⁵

⁵³ Karadağ, *Köy Seyirlik Oyunları*, 87–88.

⁵⁴ Carlson and Ümit, *Letaif-i Hayal*, 37. See also Nazlı M. Ümit, “In Search of Lost Performances: The Challenges of Reconstructing a Nineteenth Century Karagöz Play,” in *Researching Popular Entertainment*, ed. Kim Baston and Jason Price (Routledge, 2025), 81–101.

⁵⁵ Kudret, *Ortaoyunu*, 245. “Standing” (*dikilmek*) may also be translated as “erected.” Similarly, “revived” (*dirildim*) can correspond both to “rising from the dead” and to “arousal.”

It should also be noted that although different performance genres draw on similar themes, narratives, character types, and compositional flows, the ways in which these elements are employed and reshaped vary according to the communities in which they are performed. For instance, erotic skits in village plays tend to be presented in a more explicit manner, both verbally and physically. By contrast, in extant *Karagöz* and *orta oyunu* texts, indirect verbal mediation becomes more dominant. In *Karagöz* plays, this routine appears to have been markedly softened, almost to the point where the dramaturgical motivation for its use becomes difficult to discern. When historical documents about *Karagöz* and the testimonies of witnesses are taken into account, it can also be suggested that such routines are in fact censored survivals of what were known as “Toramanlı *Karagöz*” performances, in which *Karagöz* appeared on the screen with a phallus attached to his body and employed it explicitly as part of the performance. This is a reminder that *Karagöz*, as a form of puppet theatre performed through two-dimensional puppets (*tasvir*), possesses its own distinctive visuality and expressive possibilities in the construction of the text.

In one of his recollections of Istanbul, Selim Nüzhet Gerçek makes the following observation: “It would take us too long to count each gate in Istanbul, much like the *orta oyunu taklit* who attempts to find a friend living at one of Istanbul’s gates and enumerates the names of all the city gates in a rhythmic mode as lacks precise information.”⁵⁶ This comparison highlights how certain routines are conventionally associated with specific stock characters (*taklit*). Examples include Yahudi (the Jew), who insults *Karagöz* by deliberately mispronouncing his name (See *Lazzo* of the Insult I10), gets into mock fights with Kavuklu (see also *Cûd*) and cries for help as if in pain although not being attacked, or Arap (Mercan Ağa), who repeatedly asks the same questions—often with grammatically or phonetically unintelligible Turkish—to the point that the dialogue fails to progress. On the other hand, such classical routines are also used interchangeably among different characters. In his performance of the play *Çeşme*, *Karagöz* puppeteer Tuncay Tanboğa (1937-1997) employed the routine of repeated questions in the enactment of each character who enters into dialogue with *Karagöz*. At the beginning of the play (*fasıl*), Hacivat informs *Karagöz* that his wife is being unfaithful. *Karagöz* refuses to believe him and decides to verify the claim by questioning people from the neighbourhood, at which point the routine becomes operative. In other recorded variations, the characters refrain from giving direct answers, either because they consider it inappropriate to interfere in a private family matter or because they advise *Karagöz* to confront his wife himself. Therefore, in Tanboğa’s performance, the systematic application of the repeated questions routine to each successive character functions in full accordance with the general compositional scheme and the theme of the play. Contemporary practice and new plays also demonstrate how the anonymous, short but well-known units of “folk literature” like riddles are used in the composition of dialogues as given in the second following extract from *Truvalı Karagöz* (*Karagöz* from Troy) by Nazım Öney Olcaytu.

⁵⁶ Selim Nüzhet Gerçek, *İstanbul’dan Ben de Geçtim*, ed. Ali Birinci and İsmail Kara (Kitabevi, 1997), 39.

Çeşme

Karagöz- Hacivat told me that claims my household is dishonoured.

Kayserili- Oh my! Who told you that?

Karagöz- Hacivat told me.

Kayserili- Did he tell that to you?

Karagöz- Yes.

Kayserili- What did you tell him?

Karagöz- I told him that there is nothing wrong with my household.

Kayserili- Oh my! When did he tell you that?

Karagöz- Just now!

Kayserili- Did you tell that to you?

Karagöz- Yes, to me.

Kayserili- What did he tell you?⁵⁷

Truvalı Karagöz

Karagöz- [...] Ha ha ha! They came and went just the same. And thank heavens, Hector's revenge is taken too! (*Paris enters.*)

Paris- I've found a perfect name for the horse! Oh, wait! Where's the horse?

Karagöz - It fell into the water!

Paris- Where's the water?

Karagöz- The cow drank it.

Paris- Where's the cow?

Karagöz- It ran off to the mountain.

Paris- Where's the mountain?

Karagöz- Burnt, vanished, turned to ashes! (*Slaps Paris.*)⁵⁸

The ways in which certain routines, stock characters, stock phrases, etc. gather in one scenario and how scenarios are shaped and transmitted in oral or written culture offer important clues to the construction of text in Turkish theatre. For instance, a manuscript of scenarios prepared by a *meddah* in 1742 includes texts abridged with specific codes instead of fully developed narratives. Only a selection of important dialogues and series of events are provided because *meddahs* who have access to the manuscript were supposed to produce their own versions depending on their creativity and dramatic skills.⁵⁹ One of the stories in this manuscript primarily features characters who get away with every immoral deed they practise and acquire wealth that they do not earn or deserve, which is connected to popular anecdotes or jokes in which a thief pretends to be deaf or dumb to avoid accusations when he is interrogated by a judge, mostly a qadi (*kadı*), or by a *hoca*. In fact, one of common features among the texts of dramatic forms is to mock representatives of certain trades, professions or juristic and religious authorities, like the imam in *Şair Evlenmesi*.

⁵⁷ From *Çeşme* by Tuncay Tanboğa https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VZnZu_4p18 (24.02.2025)

⁵⁸ *Truvalı Karagöz (Karagöz from Troy)* by Nazım Öney Olcaytu, unpublished play text, 2025.

⁵⁹ Özdemir Nutku, *Meddahlık ve Meddah Hikayeleri* (Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1997), 209–211.

Impersonating authority and religious figures was so common among amateur or professional comedians with masks and costumes that special *fetvas* were issued as warnings even in the first half of the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ The first extract below titled *Parayı Ver* (Give Me the Money) is from a village play whose scenario is fully based on trickery and deception towards judicial figures and the community. The following one was composed by Ottoman Armenian priests of Mekhitarian Order in the Island of San Lazzaro, and it reworks the same theme in a narrative format within the play titled *Hasan Kadı yev Hırya Avram* (Hasan the Qadi and Avram the Jew).

Parayı Ver

Kadı (*judge*) sits on a higher mattress at the corner. Players come and stand in front of him one by one.
Kadı- What is the matter? Tell me what you want.

Policeman- *Kadı efendi*, these men had a bath at the bath (*hamam*), but they did not pay for it. I warned them but they just did not care. That is why we are here.

Kadı- (*To the bath keeper*) Is that true?

Bath Keeper- Yes. It happened exactly like he said.

Kadı- (*To the customer*) Will you pay his money, or do you want me to get you beaten up and thrown into the jail?

The Customer- (*To his son*) Come one my son, give the money.

Customer's Son- (*In a melodic mode*) I swear father the money is lost. It really is lost.

(*The customer and his son begin repeating the following refrain*)

Rayyaya ra...Rayraray ray... ray...

Rayyaya ra...Rayraray ray... ray...⁶¹

Hasan Kadı yev Hırya Avram

Bekir- When Hacı Hüseyin served as a judge, a poor man went to the bath with his son. As he was not good at cutting his coat according to his cloth, he gave his money bag to his son so that he can pay the money for the bath. After cleaning themselves they wore their clothes and sat to cool down. Meanwhile they were besieged by the bath attendant (*tellak*), furnace attendant (*külhancı*) and the coffee seller to ask for money and as the son pays them their money, he is left with none give to the bath keeper. The son calls out to his father with a singing voice so that others hear and says: My dearest father, we have no money left. The father replies with a melodic mode too: My dearest son, I have no money in my pocket. The Albanian bath keeper stands over them with a mirror in his hand and demands the money. They all start saying *findirilon, findirilon...*⁶²

The repertoires of *Karagöz* and *orta oyunu* also deploy a similar scheme in plays with different scenarios. Upon Hacivat's advice, *Karagöz* refuses to return a large sum of money entrusted to him when its owner demands it back, instead he constantly replies by saying "ham

⁶⁰ Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, "Mukallid-Mudhikler," *İstanbul* 3/7 (1956), 16–19. See also Jessica Milner Davis and Sharyn Roach Anleu ed., *Judges, Judging and Humour* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶¹ Şükrü Elçin notes that performed by farmworkers gathered to separate nuts from their green peels (Elçin, *Anadolu Köy Orta Oyunları*, 73–74).

⁶² Yervant Baret Manok, *Doğu ile Batı Arasında San Lazzaro Sahnesi: Ermeni Mikhitarist Manastırı ve İlk Türkçe Oyunları* (BGST, 2013), 97–98.

hum şaralop.”⁶³ This routine appears as *ara muhavere* (additional dialogue) Muhittin Sevilen’s (Hayalî Küçük Ali) *Büyük Evlenme*. Throughout the main play (*fasıl*) Karagöz eventually spends the money on wedding expenses. Similarly, after this *ara muhavere* in *Karagöz’ün Mirasyediliği* (Karagöz the Prodigal) by Hayalî Memduh Bey, Karagöz announces himself as an *ağa* and wastes all the entrusted money on luxurious items and service. However, this *muhavere* is also used independently of the main play.⁶⁴ In its *orta oyunu* version, Kavuklu gambles with the wealthy Acem and wins. He refuses to return the money and spends it recklessly. Acem complains to Matiz who is introduced as an authoritative figure like a judge (qadi) in *meddah* stories. However, Kavuklu avoids giving the money back by repeating “ham hum şaralop.”

Karagöz’ün Mirasyediliği

Karagöz- Gentleman, who are you looking for?

Fidan Bey- Who am I looking for? I have come here to look for you. I need those five hundred liras which I just handed over to you.

K- I do not understand. How do you mean?

F- What do you mean how? I need to buy something. I found something to invest my money in.

K - What money?

F-The money that I handed over to you five minutes ago.

K -Are you daydreaming? What money? You handed it over to whom? Who took it? To whom was it handed over? Who saw it? Who says so?

F- Dear baba, it is not time for joking. I am losing my mind. Please hand me my money.

K -As if I care... *Ham hum!*

F-Come on baba, I do not have time.

K - *Ham hum.*

F -What is ham hum? Give me my money!

K- Ham hum.⁶⁵

There are many other recorded *meddah* stories or scenarios which predate the earliest known *orta oyunu* or *Karagöz* scripts. For instance, Ármin Vámbéry was intrigued by a Turkish tale titled “Muslim ve Cuhûd ve Kâzî-(y1) Hâmiş” (The Tale of a Muslim, a Jew, and the Qadi of Homs) because compared to its variations in the east, it was the earliest available copy (ca. 1451) regarding the possible origins of Shylock in William Shakespeare’s *the Merchant of Venice*. The tale was included in a manuscript corpus of tales known as *Ferec Ba'd eş-Şidde* and such compilations were not only used by the *meddah* to enlarge their repertoire but also, they used to be read aloud in public places. The story unfolds as follows: When the Jew is unable to recover his debt from the Muslim borrower, he demands his pound of flesh, and they go before the qadi. As the Muslim is dissatisfied with the qadis they visit, they set out for the qadi of Homs. Each character they

⁶³ Similar to “*Bize de mi lo lo.*”

⁶⁴ See, for instance “*Ferhad ile Şirin,*” in *Şarklı ve Kantolu Karagöz Kitabı*, published by İhsan Rahim, (İstanbul: Hürriyet Matbaası, 1325 [1909]).

⁶⁵ Hayalî Memduh Bey, *Karagöz Perdesi Külliyyatı: Karagöz’ün Mirasyediliği* (Gayret Kütüphanesi, 1922).

encounter along the way is victimised in one way or another by the Muslim, and they are ultimately compelled to appear before the qadi. The qadi renders judgments according to his own understanding of justice, leaving each plaintiff with no option but to concede. An *orta oyunu* interpretation of this story was discovered in Turkish state archives in 2020. The text had been compiled by Ressay Muazzez Özduygu in the 1940s so that future generations would know more about *orta oyunu* and practise it. As a text intended to be performed by sixteen actors with one central figure that is Kavuklu, it differs from the *meddah* story in that, rather than the journey to the qadi and the misfortunes encountered along the way, the performance centres on each plaintiff's ordeal with Kavuklu who pretends to be the qadi.⁶⁶ All stock routines, phrases, dialogues, etc. are arranged accordingly.

Connections between texts enacted in different forms should not necessarily mean that common scenarios and their variations have directly evolved into dramatic texts from written copies because the transaction could have worked the other way around, if there is any. There are also play texts which cannot be traced to another dramatic form or a recorded narrative. However, the connections illustrate that written, oral, or verbal products of culture transcend their forms and how the corpus of Turkish theatrical texts is established over the history of each theatre form.⁶⁷

Tillis argues that texts are one of the aspects theatres in which both the artists and the audience make investments.⁶⁸ Similarly, as for Turkish theatre, both the amateurs of folk plays or the professionals of popular theatre invest in a dramatic literature that is not necessarily authored but continuously adapted, and the uniqueness of the play is not bound to how it was once written in a manuscript or a notebook or a published series but rather to how it is adapted and performed. The audience happens mostly to be familiar with the master copy, but they are more interested in what they are about to watch because the dramatic literature of the "traditional" is constructed mostly to be heard or performed rather than being written or read.

Conclusion

The pioneering independent studies on Turkish theatre were conducted by European Orientalists within the frameworks of various disciplines such as literature, folklore, ethnography, and even theology, and the initial theatrical forms examined were *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah*. From the early years of the Republic until the mid-twentieth century, these forms were considered to be fundamentals of an ideal national theatre, in other words, *millî temaşa*, and often defined as historical theatre, *tarihî temaşa*, as they frequently discussed them in terms of the loss or distortion of their essence. As Western-style theatrical practices became institutionalised both in the private sector and under state patronage, and with the establishment of the first theatre departments, the

⁶⁶ Nazlı M. Ümit, "Bir Hikayenin Ortaoyununa Dönüşüm Örneği: Zorlu Kadı'nın Yenidünya Sahnesine Yolculuğu," in Ressay Muazzez 'den Ortaoyunları (Karagöz Derneği, 2021), 47.

⁶⁷ Tillis, *The Challenge of World Theatre History*, 214.

⁶⁸ Tillis, *The Challenge of World Theatre History*, 213–215.

scope of theatre research expanded, leading to a gradual transformation of these definitions. Particularly through the works of Metin And, two terms came to dominate the prevailing terminology by which Turkish theatre is still most broadly divided: traditional and modern. The former encompasses *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, and *meddah* as forms of popular theatre, as well as village plays classified as folk theatre. When studying or investigating Turkish theatre, the characteristics of “Western-style theatre” are often employed as the standard frame of reference. As a result of this conventional framework, these forms are commonly defined as anonymous, improvised, and textless. However, “Western-style theatre” should no longer be understood solely as the theatrical practices experienced in major cities during the nineteenth-century Westernisation period. Additionally, the relationship of Turkish theatre to text cannot be adequately defined and classified through binaries such as written/unwritten, authored/anonymous, or scripted/improvised.

As argued, “traditional” forms of Turkish theatre make extensive use of literary and oral forms, with poetry, dialogue, and wordplay functioning as integral elements of performance across a wide range of popular and ceremonial entertainments. These verbal components are not limited to comic effect but also enable routines, distraction, and interaction within performances. In addition, a considerable corpus of written and published play texts exist, collected through performance, dictation, notebooks, and print, and widely used by both scholars and practitioners from the nineteenth century onwards. By tracing recurrent routines, formulaic dialogues, stock characters, and scenario frameworks across *Karagöz*, *orta oyunu*, village plays, and *meddah*, it has been demonstrated that Turkish theatre operates not necessarily through author-centred texts but as a flexible repertoire shaped through repetition, circulation, and adaptation across different genres and performance possibilities which also highlights its process-oriented, performance-generated textuality of forms that are conventionally classified as traditional, therefore anonymous and/or textless. Recognising the shared compositional logics of routines or *taklits* allows for a re-evaluation of how texts are produced, transmitted, and invested in by performers and audiences alike.

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Statement on the Use of AI and AI-Assisted Tools

No AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this work. All content has been created solely by the author, who takes full responsibility for its integrity.

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