

Occasions for Poetry: Politics, Literature, and Imagination Among the Early Modern Ottomans

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In the early modern Islamic world, and particularly within the Ottoman Empire, poetry was not simply one mode of expression among others; it was the preeminent medium through which truth, beauty, authority, and piety were articulated. Its dominance hardly requires demonstration. The central scholarly problem, therefore, is not *whether* poetry mattered, but rather *when, why, and for what particular purposes* it was mobilized by the learned elite. Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano's *Occasions for Poetry* addresses this problem within the formative context of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Moving beyond aesthetic appreciation, the book presents a social and political history of poetic production, foregrounding the specific circumstances—the “occasions”—that called each poem into being. Organized into an introduction, six substantive chapters, and an epilogue. This structure prioritizes conceptual coherence over strict chronology. The study advances a central argument: poetry was not an ornamental feature of Ottoman elite culture but a constitutive force in the formation of imperial identity, authority, and language. The introduction, “Poetry in the Lands of Rūm,” establishes the conceptual framework by tracing the post-1453 shift that elevated Turkish to a primary language of elite communication.

Aguirre-Mandujano's analysis is grounded in three key concepts. He argues that poetry was not a timeless art, but rather an active “instrument of empire-building,” deriving its power from its “occasionality” (I will return to its meaning in the following pages), its deep roots in the specific political and personal moments of a poet's life. In order to connect these particular moments with broader imperial ideals, poets and statesmen employed “*the imagination*” as a historical force, a creative faculty that enabled them to comprehend change and envisage a unified Ottoman world through their verses.

In Chapter 1, “Another Age of Splendor, 1451–1512,” Aguirre-Mandujano shifts the focus from sultan-centered patronage to bureaucrat-poets and provincial elites—the primary producers

and consumers of Ottoman poetry. He demonstrates how the growing bureaucratic class, as represented by Tācizāde Ca'fer Çelebi (d. 1515) and his family, employed poetry to further their careers and establish a cultural identity grounded in Turkish traditions. Meanwhile, noble-born poets such as Veliyüddin Ahmed Paşa (d. 1496/7) and Mihrī Hatun (d. 1506) relied on family connections to gain entry to courtly circles, while displaced poets from conquered regions such as *Germiyan* introduced older literary models to the Ottoman realm. Through his examination of these interconnected groups, Aguirre-Mandujano reveals that poetic patronage was a dynamic network of horizontal relationships rather than a hierarchical system. This highlights the central role of poetry in the ambitions of the elite during the expansion of the empire.

Chapter 2, “Towards an Ottoman Poetics: History, Language and Politics,” focuses on Tācizāde Cafer Çelebi's *Hevesnāme* (Book of Desire) as an early example of Ottoman literary criticism. Through a fictional dialogue, Tācizāde debates whether poetry is a legitimate pursuit for a devout scholar or a distraction from religious duties—a tension rooted in the Qur'an's ambivalent stance on poets. Convinced that poetry can provide spiritual knowledge (*irfān*) and benefit the Ottoman state, he asserts that it necessitates education and imagination, facilitates moral and spiritual understanding, and demands a new literary canon based on Turkish rather than Persian models. The chapter also examines his critiques of predecessors such as Şeyhī (d. after 1429) and Veliyüddin Ahmed Paşa, marking a generational shift in Ottoman literature. Aguirre-Mandujano demonstrates how these debates intertwine history, language and politics, revealing the role of poetry in shaping a distinct Ottoman literary identity.

Chapter 3, “All the Shaykh's Poets: Poetry and the Making of Charisma,” examines the intersection of poetry, Sufism and politics in Mehmed II's Istanbul (r.1444–1446; 1451–1481) through the figure of Şeyh Vefā (d. 1491), a powerful Zeynī shaykh who inspired poems from the Ottoman elite. Using the concept of “charisma”, Aguirre-Mandujano demonstrates how poetry both reflected and generated the shaykh's spiritual authority. He draws on works by Veliyüddin Ahmed Paşa, Sinān Paşa (d. 1486), and Sinoplu Şafāyī (d.?) to illustrate this point. Ahmed Paşa's poems, written during exile, appeal to the shaykh for support using Sufi terminology, while Sinān Paşa's *Tazarru nāme* (Book of Orations) presents Şeyh Vefā as an authority to rival prophets and sultans. Following Mehmed II's death and the subsequent rise of Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), the Halveti order was elevated, prompting Tācizāde to compose a *naẓīre* (poetic response) that transferred praise from the Zeyniye to the Halvetiye. Aguirre-Mandujano demonstrates that poetry concerning shaykhs mediated between spiritual and political authority, fostering networks of support among scholars, statesmen, and Sufi orders.

Chapter 4, “Inhabiting Constantinople after the Ottoman Conquest,” examines how the Ottoman elite transformed the conquered city into a meaningful, lived space through poetry. Aguirre-Mandujano asserts that Constantinople's status as the imperial capital did not automatically follow in the aftermath of the conquest, but rather necessitated a process of “invention.” While early accounts by Kritavoulos (d. 1470) and Kivami (d.?) emphasised loss and trauma, chronicles by Aşıkpaşazade (d. 1484), Neşri (d. 1520) and Tursun Bey (d. 1499) presented the city as an event of sultanic conquest rather than a place to inhabit. However, poetry, particularly

Tācīzāde's *Hevesnāme*, reshaped the city, presenting it as a timeless, spatial setting for gatherings, desire and daily life. In contrast, Mehmed II's poems highlighted sultanic symbolism, such as water systems, and contrasted Muslim Istanbul with Christian Galata. Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan and Tim Ingold, Aguirre-Mandujano demonstrates how poetry enabled the Ottomans to "dwell" in the city, reconciling conquest with a sense of belonging, and establishing Istanbul at the heart of the Ottoman political and poetic imagination.

Chapter 5, "Loss and Separation: Poetry in Exile, Failure and Death" explores how Ottoman poets used verse to navigate exile, misfortune and mortality. Aguirre-Mandujano posits that poetry offered a means of expressing suffering and a means of understanding the volatility of fortune, linking personal loss to spiritual and philosophical contemplation. For example, Şeyhī's *Harnāme* (The Book of the Donkey) reflects on folly and greed through an animal fable; Cem Sultan's *gazels* and *mersiye* express exile, longing, and grief; and later poets such as Bākī (d. 1600) continue this shared vocabulary of love and separation. The chapter shows that, for Ottoman elites, poetry was a vital medium through which to confront failure, mourn, and situate themselves within a cosmos governed by fate and divine will, rather than mere ornament or propaganda.

Chapter 6, "Imperial Diction: Communication, Language and Choice in the Ottoman Political Imagination" shifts the focus from poetry to bureaucratic prose. It examines how poet-bureaucrats used *münşeāt* (letter collections) and prose manuals to shape political discourse and model ideal behavior. Aguirre-Mandujano analyses three cases: the correspondence between Bayezid II and Cem Sultan (d. 1496), in which poems embedded within the text transformed traditional love imagery into political commentary; Mesīhī's (d. after 1512) letter manual, *Gül-i Şād-berg* (Rose of a hundred petals), which provides examples of letters while revealing the author's personal aspirations during his time in exile; and Lāmi'ī Çelebi's (d. 1532) collection, which defends prose as a means of conveying mystical knowledge. These texts acted as guides for negotiating authority, recording choices and consequences, and shaping bureaucratic practice. The chapter demonstrates that the development of an Ottoman political imagination extended beyond poetry into everyday administrative communication, enabling mid-ranking bureaucrats to express their vision of an ideal society despite personal adversity.

As a final point in the *Epilogue*, Aguirre-Mandujano reflects on the enduring significance of poetry in Ottoman learned society from the empire's origins to 1923. He shows how scholars and bureaucrats participated in social, political and intellectual life through verse. He reiterates that poetry was not merely ornamental or propagandist, but a central mode of communication, imagination and spiritual expression, structured around what he terms "occasions." Ottoman poetry valued creative engagement with tradition and layered metaphors, drawing on sources ranging from the Qur'an to Persian classics. The Epilogue acknowledges the difficulty of understanding these meanings today while appreciating their aesthetic power, presenting Ottoman poetry as a means of communication and a way of creating a world that allowed elite men to understand and interpret their surroundings.

Aguirre-Mandujano draws on a rich and varied range of sources, combining poetry collections (*divāns*), biographical dictionaries (*tezkires*), Ottoman chronicles and administrative documents, such as Bayezid II's gift register. He also analyses letter collections (*münşeāt*) and prose manuals, particularly in his final chapter. However, the study primarily relies on literary sources and engages minimally with archival documents. This textual focus is fitting for a work centered on poetic composition and elite self-fashioning. Nevertheless, it means that the book's claims about "Ottoman political imagination" are almost entirely mediated through the writings of a small, albeit influential, literary network.

He draws on the groundwork of Ottomanist scholarship, engaging most directly with Cemal Kafadar's work on Rūmī identity and Cornell Fleischer's analysis of the fifteenth century as a "fluid world." He also builds upon the literary-historical approaches of Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, who were instrumental in pioneering the study of the social and emotional dimensions of Ottoman poetry, and draws upon the work of Selim Kuru and Sooyong Kim in the areas of poetic tradition, gender and patronage. By linking this scholarship to wider discussions about empires and political imagination, Aguirre-Mandujano situates his work at the intersection of literary analysis and imperial history. However, his main interlocutors remain the generation of Ottomanists who have transformed our understanding of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Building on this foundation, the book puts forward a bold argument decisively beyond historiographies that relegate literature to the margins of political history. Concentrating on the period from 1453 to the early sixteenth century, he contends that Turkish poetry was an active imaginative force that shaped political discourse and elite self-fashioning. At its core is the claim that the rise of Turkish was a deliberate cultural project aimed at articulating a distinct Rūmī identity. The innovative concept of "occasionality" serves as the central interpretive lens, challenging nationalist teleology's and scholarly tendencies to reduce Ottoman poetry to derivative Persianate models or mere ornamentation.

The book's principal strength lies in its micro historical depth. By focusing on a defined network of late-fifteenth-century figures, Aguirre-Mandujano offers a richly textured account of poetry as lived social practice, effectively dismantling sultan-centric patronage models. He reveals a literary ecosystem where bureaucratic elites deployed poetic skill as cultural capital for advancement and alliance-building. This socially grounded approach, aligned with recent work by scholars like Walter G. Andrews and Selim S. Kuru, persuasively reanimates poems as instruments of negotiation, supplication, and competition. The chapters on spiritual networking (Chapter 3) and the poetry of failure (Chapter 5) are particularly compelling for their intimate portrayal of the poetic entanglements of the political and personal.

Despite its strengths, the book reveals a productive tension between its macro-ambitions and its micro-historical method. For Aguirre-Mandujano, "occasionality" is the key to understanding Ottoman poetry, capturing the tension between a poem's fixed form and the real-world circumstances that inspired it. He does not merely frame it as a means of categorizing poems for specific purposes, such as a sultan's panegyric; rather, he views it as a tool that allows us to

appreciate a poem as both a timeless aesthetic object and a work whose meaning is enriched by its occasion. This tension is evident in the interplay between rigid literary forms, such as *kaside* or *gazel*, and the poet's adaptation to personal or political contexts. Even seemingly timeless love poems were composed for particular moments, engaging with social gatherings or other poems. In short, "occasionality" restores Ottoman poetry to its context, presenting poems as communicative acts shaped by politics, patronage, grief or celebration and revealing layers of meaning that a purely aesthetic approach would overlook. While this conceptual framework insightfully illuminates the social functions of poetry, such as its role in patronage networks, professional advancement and the formation of elite communities, it offers less of an investigation into the philosophical and theological underpinnings of poetry's authority. While the book maps how poetry operated within these networks, it engages less systematically with the intellectual traditions that endowed poetry with its epistemological power in the Islamicate world. In this sense, the analysis leans more towards cultural sociology than intellectual history.

Another point to make is that while the final chapter's shift to bureaucratic prose is suggestive, it slightly diffuses the monograph's otherwise tight focus on poetic composition. Finally, the conclusions drawn from this specific network, which is central to the study, could benefit from a more explicit discussion of their applicability to the wider "Ottoman political imagination," as promised in the subtitle.

Occasions for Poetry is a valuable and sophisticated contribution that will be essential reading for historians of the early modern Ottoman Empire and scholars of comparative literary cultures. It delivers a powerful corrective to top-down cultural histories and exemplifies the promise of socially grounded literary analysis. If it stops short of providing a complete theoretical map of the Ottoman political imagination, it nonetheless succeeds brilliantly in re-centering poetry as a dynamic, practical, and indispensable force within the machinery of empire.

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