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Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry

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Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry, edited by Christiane Czygan and Hatice Aynur, is a collection of articles by various scholars and it examines the concepts of love, lovers, and beloveds in early modern Ottoman literature. The volume is structured around five thematic sections—Social Configurations, Ontological Configurations, Spiritual Configurations, Beyond Lyrical Conventions, and New Sources. Each section contains two articles. Across these sections, the contributors explore the characteristics of lovers and beloveds, whether fictional or historical, as well as the functions and meanings of love in different literary genres, but mostly poetry.

The book opens with an introduction by Christiane Czygan, who raises fundamental questions concerning the nature of love and its perception in Islamic thought. She then outlines the key assumptions underlying the volume, most notably the idea that love functions as a challenge to sociopolitical norms and conventions across a range of genres.

The first section, "Social Configurations," begins with the article "Love, Gender, and Self-Presentation in the World of Early Modern Ottoman Court Poetry" by Mehmet Kalpaklı and Walter Andrews. Through a comparative reading of parallel poems by Necātī (d. 1509) and Mihrī (d. 1514–15), the authors examine differences in style, content, and addressees. Their central concern is whether Mihrī—one of the few female poets in Ottoman literature—articulates an original and distinctive poetic voice or positions herself alongside male poets by adopting and reproducing their rhetorical strategies. The authors conclude that Mihrī is not concerned with producing a more complex or aesthetically refined poem than Necātī; rather, she takes the liberty of teasing her male counterpart.

The following article, "The Dual Impact of Madness in Sultan Süleymān's Third Dīvān (1554)," by Christiane Czygan, focuses on the interrelated concepts of poetry, love, and madness, as exemplified by the figure of Mecnūn. Mecnūn represents the ideal lover-poet who experiences love at the extreme limits of madness. His status as the most famous and exemplary lover gives

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rise to a long-standing poetic tradition in which Ottoman poets compare their own love to that of Mecnūn, often claiming superiority. Czygan shows how Muḥibbī (pen name of Sultan Süleymān) participates in this tradition by appropriating the Mecnūn narrative to demonstrate poetic excellence, despite the risk that madness, as a byproduct of this identification, might undermine his political identity as Sultan Süleymān. She argues that Muḥibbī draws on Mecnūn's later transformation into a mystical figure to reinforce his image as the *insān-ı kāmil* (Perfect Man). Czygan draws a thin line between Muḥibbī and Sultan Süleymān, namely between the poetic narrator and the historical figure. This boundary reappears in several other contributions to the volume, in which the voices of narrator and author become entangled.

The section "Ontological Configurations" opens with Victoria Rowe Holbrook's article "The Separation of Goodness and Beauty: Plato, Galip, Lacan," which poses the provocative question: "Is Islam more rooted in Plato than Latin/European thought has been?" (Czygan and Aynur 2025, 43). Holbrook takes as her point of departure the Greek term *kalon*, which encompasses both beauty and goodness, and contrasts this unity with their separation in Latin thought. Through a reading of Şeyh Galip's (d. 1799) *Beauty and Love* (*Ḥüsn ü ʿAşḳ*), she argues that beauty and goodness remain inseparable in Ottoman poetic ontology.

In "Narratives of Devotion and Transformation: Procedural Dynamics of Love, Truth, and Subjectivity in Nergisī's *Meşāḳḳu'l-ʿuşşāḳ* and *Nihālistān*," Fatih Altuğ examines the formation of Nergisī's (d. 1635) literary voice through his two non-lyrical collections of love stories. Altuğ observes that as Nergisī's literary trajectory matures, he increasingly distances himself from external sources and instead foregrounds personal encounters and observations (60). Nergisī even appears as a character in *Meşāḳḳu'l-ʿuşşāḳ*, where love is depicted as a transformative force. Altuğ draws on Alain Badiou's theory of the event to emphasize the central role of love in shaping the characters in these narratives. Love is not just an emotional experience there, but it also generates new modes of consciousness and subjectivity (70).

Love as a transformative force is also the focus of Sadık Yazar's article "On the Tidal State of Love: The Representation of *Telvīn* in Turkish Sufi Poetry," which opens the section "Spiritual Configurations." Yazar examines *telvīn*, a term denoting shifting or unstable spiritual states, commonly associated with divine love in Sufi poetry. Through close readings of poems by Yūnus Emre (d. 1320) and Eşrefoğlu Rūmī (d. 1469–79 [?]), Yazar interprets *telvīn* as the expression of personal mystical experience, positioning the poet as both narrator and protagonist of his own spiritual journey.

Another poetic genre, the *ḳasīde*, is addressed in Betül Sinan Nizam's article "Displaying Competence through Love: A Typology of Lovers in *Ḳaṣīdes* with the *Redīf* ʿIşḳ." Nizam analyzes *ḳasīdes* by ʿAşḳī (d. 1576–77), Şāh Velī ʿAyıntābī (d. 1604), and Ḥayretī (d. 1534) that employ *ʿışḳ* as a repeated word (*redīf*). She distinguishes the *ḳasīde* from the *ġazel* by arguing that beloveds in *ḳasīde*s are typically real individuals whose gender and identity are explicit, whereas these features are often obscured in *ġazel*s. At the same time, because the beloved in *ḳasīde*s is

usually a male patron, poets are constrained in their ability to articulate the true nature of their relationship within the praise section.

The section "Beyond Lyrical Conventions" begins with Gülşah Taşkın's article "Power is Speaking: What Does the Beloved Tell about Love?" Returning to the *ġazel*, Taşkın draws on Andrews's characterization of the genre as a "play script." She examines *ġazels* by Serāyī (d. after 1512), Nābī (d. 1712), and Çeşmī-zāde Reşid (d. 1770) that are written from the beloved's perspective. According to Taşkın, these poems reveal a hierarchical relationship in which authority is firmly located with the beloved. She asks, "How the beloved establishes this absolute power and authority through language?" (131) and answers this question by applying John L. Austin's philosophy of language based on speech acts, encapsulated in the idea that "to say something is to do something." Taşkın argues that in these *ġazels*, the beloved's unquestionable authority is legitimized by social and traditional norms, while the lovers occupy the position of obedient subjects. She also notes that the language attributed to the beloved may in fact be a ventriloquized voice constructed by the lover-poet. Nevertheless, she suggests that this language, once absorbed from society, is returned in an intensified form through poetry, where the subject's voice fades and the language of power comes to dominate.

At this point, it is worth recalling that Ottoman poetry also contains examples in which poets appear as fully-fledged authorities. This mode of writing corresponds to the Persian genre *vāsūḫt*, in which the lover turns away from the beloved. (Behzad 2017, 56–73) In some of its more extreme manifestations in Ottoman poetry, poets openly insult the beloved for disloyalty and indifference. The following couplets by Bahārī (d. 1551), Ḥayretī (d. 1534), and Mānī (d. 1598–99) from the sixteenth century illustrate this tone:

Ġayrılarla ṣalınurmışsın Bahārīyi ḳoyup
Bir gül-i pür-ḫārmışsın uşta aġyār uşta sen (Pomakoğlu 2013, 207)

You have been roaming with strangers, abandoning Bahārī;
You are a thorn-laden rose—here the rivals, here yourself.

Yoġ imiş şānuñda erkeklik nişānı ḥāṣılı
Bī-ḥamiyyet bir zen-i bāzār imişsin añladum (Çavuşoğlu and Tanyeri 1981, 411)

It turns out there is no trace of manliness in your honor at all;
I see now—you are but a shameless woman of the marketplace.

Yüri ey ġayrılar ile idici bāzārı
Ṣatma kendüñ bize ey şāhid-i bāzār yüri (Demirel 2017, 157)

Be gone—you who trade yourself in the bazaar with strangers;
offer yourself not to us, O market whore of a boy—be gone.

Such examples can be found throughout the sixteenth century and, quite possibly, in other periods as well.[1] Indeed, if the *ġazel* is understood as a "play script," poets sometimes deviate from established conventions and assume roles that subvert traditional expectations.

Benedek Péri's contribution, "Love Poetry with or without Love? Classical Ottoman Amorous *Ġazels* in the Early 16th Century," addresses two central questions: 1. What were the essential ingredients of a successful and acknowledged *ġazel* on love? 2. Do all amorous *ġazels* reflect the passion and feelings of its author? Drawing on critical writings and poetry, Péri suggests that the pursuit of *maʿnā* (poetic thought), *ḫayāl* (imagination), and *edā/elfāẓ* (expression and diction) fostered a degree of detachment from lived reality, rendering poetic production a largely technical endeavor. With the rise of incidentalism (*mekteb-i vuḳūʿ*) in early sixteenth-century Istanbul, however, beloveds of flesh and blood begin to appear more prominently in *ġazels*. Péri demonstrates this development through examples from poetic anthologies, noting the popularity of craftsmen beloveds—tailors, cooks, silver thread-makers, and especially barbers. He concludes that love remains the essential element of this poetry, whether composed in a classical or an incidentalist mode.

Péri's observations are further supported by the prevalence of flesh and blood beloveds, particularly craftsmen, throughout sixteenth-century *dīvāns*.[2] Their stories also appear in prose narratives, as demonstrated in Fatih Altuğ's article on Nergisī in this volume (66). This raises the broader question of whether Ottoman poetry was ever entirely detached from social reality in any period.

The section "New Sources" opens with Hatice Aynur's article "In the Quest for a Lyrical Persona: Love in Ṭaṭavlalı Maḥremī's *Ġazels*," which presents an important discovery from a recently identified manuscript copy of Maḥremī's (d. 1535) *Dīvān*. In this manuscript, poems concerning true, divine, or mystical love (*ḥaḳīḳī / ilāhī / taṣavvufī*) are classified with the heading *Ġazeliyāt-ı İlāhī*, while poems addressing metaphorical, profane or secular love (*mecāzī / beşerī / māddī*) are categorized as *Ġazeliyāt-ı Ḥüsniyyāt*. Since Ottoman poetry typically blurs the boundary between divine and human love, this classification is particularly significant, even though it remains unclear whether it reflects the author's or the copyist's intent. Aynur notes that Maḥremī's use of *ʿışḳ* characterizes the secular poems, whereas in the divine poems he prefers *ḥubb*, a term frequently encountered in the Qurʾān and in the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad.

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1 For further sixteenth-century examples in which the lover is depicted as an authority, see Tombul (2024, 833–55), especially the chapter "Otoritesi Artan Âşık / Otoritesi Azalan Sevgili" ("The Ascendant Authority of the Lover / The Declining Authority of the Beloved").

2 Beyond the genre of *şehrengīz*—which is devoted to celebrating the beauty of young men and craftsmen of a particular city—a wide range of craftsmen also appear in sixteenth-century ġazels. The vast majority of these beloveds are mentioned by name (see Tombul 2024, 598–691), especially in the chapter "Esnaf Sevgili (Craftsman Beloveds)."

The same observation is also made by Edith Gülçin Ambros in her article "Ottoman Catechism (*ʿİlm-i Ḥāl*) Goes Popular: Love, the Girl, and the Jew," in which she presents an English translation of *Ḥikāyet-i ḳız maʿa cühūd* ("The Story of the Girl and the Jew"). As a "popular tale of passionate love within Islam," the nature of the love depicted in this narrative is not difficult to determine: it is clearly mystical rather than worldly. The volume concludes with Ambros's article.

As noted earlier, many contributors to the book approach Ottoman poets and authors as protagonists of their own narratives, simultaneously occupying the roles of narrator and author. From this perspective, what is narrated tends to be read as autobiographical. Hatice Aynur, however, raises an important question in this regard, specifically with reference to Maḥremī: "A key question is the lover or speaker in these poems represents Maḥremī himself or a constructed poetic persona?" In support of this distinction, she cites Edith Gülçin Ambros's remarks on Gelibolulu ʿĀlī (d. 1600): "…while lyric poems may contain autobiographical elements, they serve as historical sources only to a limited extent. Poets, especially in the context of lyric poetry, are not expected to be faithful chroniclers of their own experiences" (Ambros 2014, 66, quoted in Czygan and Aynur 2025, 169).

A similar point was articulated long ago by Walter G. Andrews:

> In the *gazel* this author appears to be overtly represented by the pen names of the poets—the Bakî, Hayalî, Muhibbî of the *mahlas* (pen name couplet). A common critical misapprehension with regard to the *gazel* is the confusion of these two voices or the attempt to conflate them into one voice. After all, what is a pen name but a way of providing distance between the actual author and the author as a character in the fictional setting? (Andrews 1985, 8)

This problem invites a broader question: is it ever possible for an author to write about themselves within the boundaries of non-fiction, or does a text inevitably become fiction the moment it is written, causing the living, embodied author to disappear? One is reminded here of Jorge Luis Borges's short piece "Borges and I," in which he struggles to distinguish between the private individual and the public authorial persona. Borges remarks, "I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar," before concluding, "I do not know which of us has written this page" (Borges 1964, 246–47).

If Muḥibbī's biographical identity as both lover and ruler had directly intervened in the composition of his love poetry, one might expect him to write about the great love of his life, Ḫurrem Sultan. How, then, can we account for the fact that her name does not appear in any of his nearly three thousand *ġazels*? Is this absence dictated by a poetic tradition that excludes female beloveds, or by Sultan Süleymān's desire to construct a lyrical persona—a universal lover rather than a historically situated individual? Premodern authors, after all, also possessed the right to fashion literary personas distinct from their historical identities. Perhaps Fużūlī (d. 1556) was gesturing toward precisely this freedom when he wrote:

Aldanma ki şâir sözi elbette yalandur (Doğan 2000, 192)
Do not be deceived, for a poet's word is, in the end, always a lie.

On the other hand, can a narrative composed by an author ever be entirely detached from personal experience? Ottoman poetry has frequently been criticized for its supposed disconnection from social reality and its creation of wholly imaginary worlds and lovers. Yet anecdotes preserved in biographical sources complicate this view. One such story, recorded in *Meşāʿirü'ş-şuʿarā*, suggests that even poems with ambiguous characters and seemingly fictional events may have roots in lived experience.

In this account, Ḫayālī Beg (d. 1557)—the protagonist, lover, and poet—encounters Ṭuraḳ Balı, the beloved, at a gathering where a watchman (*nigehbān*) also appears as a rival. Deeply struck by Ṭuraḳ Balı's beauty, Ḫayālī begins to recite verses expressing admiration and desire. Ṭuraḳ Balı, uncomfortable with being publicly singled out—especially in the presence of the watchman—responds with irritation. According to ʿĀşık Çelebi (d. 1572), Ḫayālī Beg then composes the following couplet:

Nigāruñ itdügi düşnām baña ẕevḳ-i cānīdür
Nice ẕevḳ itmeyem ki ʿālem-i ġayb armaġanıdur (Kılıç 2010, 1550–1551)

The curse my beloved utters for me is a soul-born delight;
how should I not rejoice, when it is a gift from the unseen realm?

What this episode reveals is how Ḫayālī Beg transforms an ordinary social encounter into the material of conventional lyric poetry.[3] Individuals drawn from everyday life are rendered universal and ambiguous poetic figures. In this instance, Ḫayālī Beg may well have wished to avoid further exposing Ṭuraḳ Balı by name. Such a choice should be understood as a deliberate poetic strategy rather than a limitation. Indeed, there are numerous poems in which beloveds appear explicitly by name, and poets sometimes even employ these names as *redīfs* when seeking a specific person's attention or dedicating a poem to them.[4] Conversely, when aiming to compose universal poetry and present themselves as universal lovers, poets create generic beloveds, often inspired by real individuals. Perhaps this, too, was what Sultan Süleymān sought to achieve with respect to Ḫurrem Sultan. In any case, it is ultimately the poet who determines how the "play script" of the *ġazel* is staged.

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3 ʿĀşık Çelebi contributes to this scene by composing a parallel poem: *Raḳīb-i dīv kim ḳaṣr-ı nigāruñ pāsbānıdur / Belā-yı nā-gehānīdür ḳażā-yı āsmānīdür* (That demon-rival who stands guard at the beloved's palace is a sudden calamity, a fate sent down from the heavens). By introducing the watchman-rival (*raḳīb*), he completes the familiar triad of lyric poetry: lover, beloved, and rival.

4 In my survey of 67 sixteenth-century *dīvāns*, I identified 241 male names and only nine female names, predominantly in *ġazels*. Women do not appear as beloveds but are instead referenced in a pejorative manner (see Tombul 2024, 36–561), especially in the chapter "Cinsiyeti Belli Olan Sevgili (The Gendered Beloved)."

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