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ÖMER RAFİ ÇİÇEK*

ABSTRACT

This review examines *Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*, a volume that explores 'ışk as a key concept in early modern Ottoman literary culture. It discusses how the collection approaches love through social, spiritual, ontological, and poetic perspectives. The review evaluates the book's thematic organization, interdisciplinary scope, and editorial coherence. By situating individual chapters within the book's overall structure, it highlights how the volume treats love not only as a literary theme but also as a broader field of intellectual inquiry.

Keywords: Ottoman Literature, Ottoman Poetry, Classical Age, Poetics of Love, Lovers, Beloveds.

ÖZ

Bu inceleme, Challenging *Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry* adlı eseri ele almaktadır. Kitap, erken modern Osmanlı edebî kültüründe *'ışk* kavramını temel bir çerçeve olarak inceleyen bir derlemedir. Bu çalışma, derlemenin aşkı toplumsal, manevi, ontolojik ve şiirsel boyutlarıyla nasıl ele aldığını tartışmakta, ayrıca kitabın tematik düzenini, disiplinlerarası kapsamını ve editoryal bütünlüğünü değerlendirmektedir. Bireysel bölümleri kitabın genel yapısı içinde konumlandırarak eserin, aşkı yalnızca edebî bir tema olarak değil, daha geniş bir düşünsel inceleme alanı olarak ele aldığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Edebiyatı, Osmanlı Şiiri, Klasik Çağ, Aşkın Poetikası, Âşıklar, Maşuklar.

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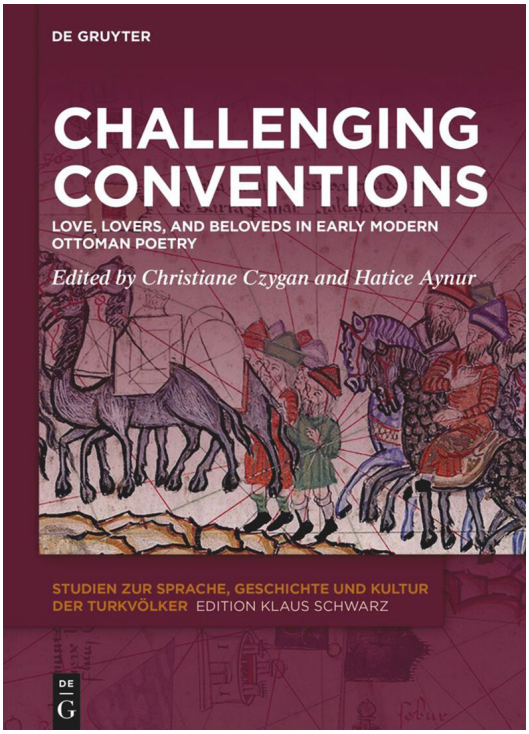
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Ömer Rafi Çiçek



This volume grew out of the online workshop "In the Quest of 'Işk," held at the University of Bonn on June 27–28, 2022. Edited by Christiane Czygan and Hatice Aynur, the book was published in 2025 by De Gruyter under the title *Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*, as part of the "Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur der Turkvölker" series, and is dedicated to Victoria Rowe Holbrook and Edith G. Ambros. In her substantial introduction, Czygan organizes the volume into five sections: "Social Configurations," "Ontological Configurations," "Spiritual Configurations," "Beyond Lyrical Conventions," and "New Sources", with two articles under each category. Also, it includes two additional contributions, "Love, Gender, and Self-Presentation in the World of Early Modern Ottoman Court Poetry" by Mehmet Kalpaklı and Walter G. Andrews, and Ambros's "Ottoman Catechism (*ʿİlm-i Hâl*) Goes Popular: Love, the Girl, and the Jew"—that were not part of the original workshop program.

In the "Introduction" (pp. 1–8), the volume's central framework is set out clearly by positioning *ʿışk* not merely as a literary theme, but as an anchor for social, ontological, and spiritual understandings of love in the Ottoman world. Drawing on both medical and lyrical discourses, the introduction situates *'ışk* within its etymological and Sufi lineage —through Ahmad al-Ghazâlî (d. 1126), Ibn al-'Arabî (d. 1240), and Mansûr al-Hallâj (d. 922)— and frames the love–madness nexus as one of the central driving forces of Ottoman poetry. The following chapters are organized around social structures (gender, the public sphere, and patronage) and ontological constructs (the relationship between beauty, goodness, and truth), thereby orienting the reader to the volume's interdisciplinary scope. The literature review critically situates approaches ranging from Andrews to Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth within a continuum, while also addressing methodological problems such as the invisibility of female poets and the limitations of genre as an analytical category. Despite its occasionally dense conceptual texture, the introduction provides the reader a guiding map and convincingly demonstrates that the book is a comprehensive study that approaches *ʿışk* as a transformative field of thought and experience in Ottoman culture.

In the "Social Configurations" section, the article "Love, Gender, and Self-Presentation in the World of Early Modern Ottoman Court Poetry," (p. 11-23) by Mehmet Kalpaklı and Walter G. Andrews, persuasively shows how male and female poets in fifteenth- and

sixteenth- century Ottoman court poetry employed a shared vocabulary of love through different aesthetic, social, and rhetorical strategies, with a particular focus on gendered self-presentation. Necatî's (d. 1509) "bu gece / geçen gece" ghazals construct a universalized and timeless lyrical subject, whereas Mihrî Hâtun's (d. after 1512) nearly parallel poems adopt a consciously situational, dated, and narrative mode. This difference is associated with the intimate audience addressed by the female poet. The article's most compelling contribution lies in showing that Mihrî did not write a "failed imitation" of the male tradition, but rather consciously distorted and reinterpreted it. Satirical ghazals and praise poems read in the context of *harem* provide particularly strong support for this argument. By addressing the invisibility of female poets as a methodological problem and challenging male-centered aesthetic judgments, the study secures an important place in the scholarship. Although lengthy quotations and detailed poetic analyses occasionally slow the flow of the argument, the article invites readers to reconsider Ottoman poetry not as a singular and neutral tradition, but as a multi-layered practice shaped by gender, space, and audience.

Another contribution in this section is Christiane Czygan's article, "The Dual Impact of Madness in Sultan Süleymân's Third Dîvân (1554)" (pp. 25–39). The study examines the triad of madness, love, and poetry in the early modern Ottoman world through a reading of Muhibbî's poetry (Sultan Süleyman I, r. 1520–1566). The author effectively shows that madness occupies a legitimate place in the poetic world as the ultimate expression of love, even though it remains incompatible with sovereignty. The article's principal contribution lies in showing that the image of *Mecnun* is not merely a literary motif but also serves the lyrical subject as a conscious means of escape from political identity. In these poems, Muhibbî suspends his sovereign identity while positions himself instead as the "perfect lover." Close readings of the ghazals substantiate the relationship between locks of hair, chains, and melancholy, while also highlighting the permeability between *ʿışk* and madness. Furthermore, philological doubts regarding the authorship of certain poems add a further layer of critical depth to the text. While the detailed historical and literary context enriches the article, streamlining these sections would enhance the clarity of the central argument. Nevertheless, by positioning love as a lyrical realm detached from politics, the study makes an important and original contribution to rethinking the relationship between subject, power, and madness in Ottoman poetry.

In the "Ontological Configurations" section, Victoria Rowe Holbrook's article, "The Separation of Goodness and Beauty: Plato, Galip, Lacan" (pp. 43–58), argues that the concept of *kalon* in Plato (d. 347 BC), which unites goodness and beauty, became divided in the Latin translation tradition. Holbrook further suggests that this separation had significant consequences for Western thought on love and ethics. It further contends that, in the Arabic-Persian-Turkish tradition, this unity (husn/cemâl/beauty) was preserved continuously from the Qur'an to the Ottoman period. This argument thus suggests that the Ottoman poetic understanding of love developed within an intellectual tradition in which beauty and goodness remained conceptually unified, unlike the conceptual separation that emerged in the Latin reception of Plato.[1] The strength of the study lies in its broad comparative thesis, made concrete through Şeyh Galib's (d. 1799) *Hüsn ü Aşk*, and its positioning

1 Victoria Rowe Holbrook, "The Architecture of Mimesis in Plato and in the Quran", *Nesir: Journal of Literary Studies* 9 (2025), 33-35.

of the imagination (*'âlam al-mithâl*) as the essential medium of continuity between the perceptible and the intelligible. The articles's comprehensive theoretical framework makes the comparison between the Latin tradition and Islamic/Ottoman thought intellectually productive, while its engagement with modern interpretations, particularly those associated with Henry Corbin and Jacques Lacan, extends the discussion to a broader philosophical context. Overall, the article makes an important and groundbreaking contribution to the scholarship by moving love beyond the realm of emotion and relating it to subjectivity and the production of truth, while also opening up a distinctly interdisciplinary field of inquiry.

In this section, Fatih Altuğ's article "Narratives of Devotion and Transformation: Procedural Dynamics of Love, Truth, and Subjectivity in Nergisî's *Meşâkku'l-ʿUşşâk* and *Nihâlistân*" (p. 59-75) examines how love in seventeenth-century Ottoman prose, as articulated through Nergisî's (d. 1635) *Meşâkku'l-ʿUşşâk* and *Nihâlistân*, is constructed not merely as a narrative theme, but as a process of producing subjectivity and truth. The article's main contribution is its interpretation of the differences between the two works, not in terms of superficial criteria such as the degree of ornamentation, but through strategies of rewriting, abstraction, and universalization. In *Meşâkku'l-ʿUşşâk*, concrete settings, characters, and historical details give way in *Nihâlistân* to generalized figures and a timeless poetics of love. Alain Badiou's[2] notions of the "event of love," "fidelity," and the "truth procedure" provide an effective critical framework for elucidating how, in Nergisî, love functions as a constitutive rupture through which the subject is necessarily transformed. By framing Nergisî as an 'artisan-lover,' the article contributes to our understanding of how love in Ottoman prose comes to be articulated through an increasingly abstract ,universal ,and multi-layered language.

In the" Spiritual Configurations" section, Sadık Yazar's article "On the Tidal State of Love: The Representation of Telvîn in Turkish Sufi Poetry" (pp. 79–101) adopts a love-oriented perspective on *telvin* in classical Turkish Sufi poetry and analyses how the emotional and spiritual oscillations experienced expressed by the Sufi are reflected in the verse. The author lays out the theoretical background by discussing al-Qushayrî's (d. 1072) concept of *telvin* as the transient states of the human seeker, and compares this view to Ibn al-'Arabî, who interprets *telvin* more positively in relation to divine manifestation. He then turns to linguistic and formal expressions of *telvin* in the poetry of Yunus Emre (d. 1320 [?]) and Eşrefoğlu Rûmî (d. 1469/70). In particular, repetitive and oppositional structures such as "bir dem gelür...," "gâh... gâh...," and "ne... ne..." are shown to function as aesthetic devices that make *telvin*'s oscillating nature experientially palpable for the reader. The study stands out for conceptualizing *telvin* not merely as a Sufi term, but as an aesthetic principle through which meaning is continually set in motion. In this way, it convincingly demonstrates how love in Sufi poetry is constructed not as a fixed state, but as an ever-transforming experience.

Another contribution in this section is Betül Sinan Nizam's article "Displaying Competence through Love: A Typology of Lovers in *Kasîde*s with the *Redîf ʿIşk*" (p. 103-119). The study argues that love in Ottoman poetry is not confined to the ghazal or the masnavi, and that the *kaside*, too, can be read through the triad of love, lover, and beloved. It substantiates this claim through an analysis of the rare *kaside*s from the classical period whose *redif* is *ʿışk*. The author explains the relatively marginal position of love in the *kaside*

2 Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, interviewed by Nicolas Truong, translated by Peter Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012).

by pointing both to the explicit identity of the addressee (the sultan or patron) and to the implicit reciprocity structuring the relationship between poet and recipient. The article's original contribution lies in identifying three distinct types of lovers within these limited examples: in Üsküdarlı Aşkî (d. 1576), the dervish-lover oriented toward the *sultan*; in Askerî (d. ?), the guide-lover who has completed the Sufi path; and in Hayretî (d. 1534), the *abdal* poet-lover situated within a *Melamî* framework. In this way, the article demonstrates that the *kaside* functions beyond a vehicle of praise, operating also as a literary space in which the poet positions himself as an authoritative subject of love and articulates his expectations indirectly.

In the "Beyond Lyrical Conventions" section, Gülşah Taşkın's article "Power is Speaking: What Does the Beloved Tell about Love?" (p. 123-135) examines the eighteenth-century Ottoman ghazals written from the perspective of a beloved and aims to reconsider the interrelation between love and power through concepts such as language and role. Based on the work of Serâyî (d. ?), Nâbî (d. 1712), and Çeşmizâde Reşid (d. 1770), Taşkın suggests that the beloved in these ghazals is represented not as a power itself, but as an agent through whom power is inscribed in language. Extending Andrews's[3] reading of the ghazal as a "theatre script," the article demonstrates that the lover–beloved relation corresponds with Ottoman ruler–subject relation, while also showing that the two also intersect and partially overlap. The article then draws on John L. Austin's theory of speech act to show how the beloved's speech acts function as commands that produce effects in action. From this premise, the article views the working lover's ghazals as texts empowered and legitimized by a discourse of love, interpreting these ghazals as deriving their authority from this discourse. Ultimately, it demonstrates that love in Ottoman lyric poetry is less a stable emotional domain than a dynamic structure shaped by historical and social power relations.

Benedek Péri's article "Love Poetry with or without Love? Classical Ottoman Amorous Ġazels in the Early 16th Century" (p. 137-153) questions the criteria by which amorous ghazals were considered "good" or "elegant" in early sixteenth-century Ottoman poetry, and examines to what extent such poems reflect genuine emotion. Drawing on Persian and Ottoman literary criticism and biographical dictionaries (*tezkire*), the study identifies the essential components of a successful ghazal as originality of poetic idea (*ma'na/bikr-i ma'na*), imaginative power (*hayal*), and style/diction (*eda/elfaz*), while treating meter as an assumed prerequisite. Péri argues that the classical love ghazal gradually became less a vehicle for lived emotion than a stage for rhetorical virtuosity and poetic competition. He further examines examples of the *mekteb-i vukû'*, which developed a plainer idiom grounded in everyday life, but notes that this style, too, soon became codified as a technical model. In conclusion, the article argues that Ottoman amorous ghazals -whether classical or *vuku'*-oriented- should be understood not as documents of personal experience, but as literary forms in which poetic skill is displayed through the possibilities offered by tradition.

In the "New Sources" section, Hatice Aynur, one of the volume's editors, focuses in her article "In the Quest for a Lyrical Persona: Love in Tatavlalı Mahremî's Gazels," on Tatavlalı Mahremî's (d. 1535) *Dîvân* and examines how love is conceptualized in Ottoman poetry, par-

3 Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985), 145-47.

ticularly through the distinction between divine and earthly love in Mahremî's ghazals. The study's main contribution lies in highlighting that these ghazals were consciously classified as *Gazeliyât-ı İlahî* and *Gazeliyât-ı Hüsnîyyât*—a distinction that appears to have been rarely, if ever, made explicitly in Ottoman poetics more broadly. By grounding Mahremî's conscious lexical choices in close textual readings, Aynur reveals the distinct semantic regimes governing different modes of love. The analysis situates Mahremî's lover-narrator-poet persona not as a transparent autobiographical self, but within the shared aesthetic and affective codes of the period. In this respect, the article offers a systematic and compelling contribution to debates on Ottoman ghazal poetics by explaining Mahremî's love poetry in both conceptual and generical terms.

Edith G. Ambros's article "Ottoman Catechism (*'İlm-i Hâl*) Goes Popular: Love, the Girl, and the Jew" (p. 175-198) examines the fourteenth-century *Kız Destanı* (Hâzâ hikâyet-i kız ma'a cühûd/Hâzâ hikâye-i garâ'ib) through the concept of the "popular catechism," exploring its role in transmitting religious knowledge and affect among Ottoman audiences. Drawing on Halil Ersoylu's edition based on two manuscripts, the study shows that the tale is likely attributable to Yusuf-ı Meddah (d. ?) and circulated widely in more than a hundred copies. Ambros argues that, through its simple plot and vernacular idiom, the narrative effectively conveys both an uncompromising rejection of apostasy and a passionate 'ışk for the Prophet, thereby sharing the pedagogical goals of classical catechisms, even though it does not formally belong to this genre. The article further explores stylistic elements such as enjambment, rhetorical parallelism and temporal shifts that contribute to the performative dimension of storytelling, and shows how the representation of the Jewish figure as "oppsitional other" allows the tale to serve not only pedagogical purposes, but also processes of boundary-drawing.

In conclusion, *Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry* is a carefully structured and conceptually coherent volume. The book's organization into sections titled "Social Configurations," "Ontological Configurations," "Spiritual Configurations," "Beyond Lyrical Conventions," and "New Sources" not only provides a clear thematic structure but also establishes an analytical framework through which the multifaceted dimensions of *'ışk* in Ottoman thought and literature can be meaningfully traced. This structure helps the reader navigate the chapters while also enables implicit dialogue among the contributions, thereby reinforcing the volume's interdisciplinary scope. At the same time, the density of footnotes in certain sections -particularly where philological and historical details are elaborated at length- can occasionally interrupt the flow of reading. Nevertheless, this feature may also be seen as indicative of the volume's scholarly rigor. Overall, the consistency of the editorial approach and the book's internal organization elevate it beyond a mere collection of essays, shaping it instead into a cohesive and intellectually guided work.

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