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Naming the Beloved in Ottoman Turkish Gazel: The Case of İshak Çelebi (D. 1537/8)*

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The gender of the beloved in Ottoman Turkish gazels continues to haunt modern scholars. In modern descriptions the gazel is often defined as a lyric poem sung for beautiful women—a claim that persists against all evidence to the contrary. In fact, there are lengthy passages in etiquette books, advice manuals, and encyclopedic works on how to treat the mahbūb (the male beloved) and how to deal with boys with beautiful faces. All evidence points to the existence of a well-defined homoeroticism, the song of which was the gazel, and this approach was more dominant and permitted during particular periods. Male homosociality was institutionalized among the Ottoman learned elite. But not only this, the passion felt toward beautiful boys was considered entirely legitimate in learned circles, where it often occurred in the context of the relationship between a master and his apprentice. But our understanding of how a universe of lovers and mahbūbs was organized and reproduced itself for hundreds of years has been blurred by modern preconceptions about sexuality and love.

Scholarly works since the nineteenth century have either defined conspicuous homoeroticism among Ottoman learned men as deviance or else totally omitted it from the record of Ottoman literary history, for one simple reason: homoeroticism has been equated with an anachronistic conception of male homosexual identity.

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* My mentor Şinasi Tekin (1931-2004) had read a first draft of this article, I dedicate it to his memory. I also wish to thank Ash Niyazioğlu, Marina Rustow and Hâtiee Aynur for their helpful comments and trenchant criticism.

* For a recent consideration of gender of the object of love in Ottoman Turkish poetry, see Ahmet Atilla Şentürk’s article, “Osmanlı Şiirinde ‘Aşk’a Dair, [On Love in Ottoman Poetry],” where Şentürk rather courageously focuses on homoeroticism as a literary phenomenon, but defines it merely as a result of restrictions on women’s role in society (Şentürk 2004: 59-64). A similar, yet less tolerant, approach can be found in Abdüllaküroğlu 1988.


* Cihan Okuyucu mentions such sources in his work on Ottoman Turkish poetry, but he claims that boy-love started in the Empire after the 17th century “related to the degeneration in so- cial life” even if some of his source material belongs to the 16th century. See the section “Gender of beloved and social sources of boy-love” in Okuyucu 2004: 218-222, especially p. 222.


* There have been such debates around homoeroticism throughout centuries in the Ottoman Empire, but one of the earliest ‘modern’ debates concerning homoerotic themes in Ottoman
The consequences of both of these approaches is a failure to understand the Ottoman poet in his social context: the former approach imagines an Other in the form of the morally deficient poet, while the latter obscures an eroticism already cloaked in mystical imagery. Consequently, literary historical studies are silent and silencing when it comes to identifying the gender of the beloved. On the other hand, poets themselves were quite open about identifying the beloved’s gender—in particular when they used his name in poetry.

In what follows, I will focus on a particular Ottoman poet, İshak Çelebi, and his work on ‘beauties’—that is, the beautiful boys—of Üsküd, today’s Skopje. İshak Çelebi’s poetry includes gazels that cite boys’ names and present them as their climax, a practice that must be seen in the context of poetic conventions that strove to connect abstract ideals of beauty to concrete manifestations of it. İshak Çelebi’s work therefore not only asks us to develop a new understanding of gender and sexuality in the Ottoman Turkish gazel. It also forces us to reconsider the persistent perception that gazel is a universal, ahistorical form that defies historical contextualization.

İshak Çelebi and mahbubperestî (love of boys)

Around the mid-15th century, poets of Anatolia or Rum started singing their gazels in an unprecedentedly worldly voice.\(^6\) There is an early example in the gazels of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II, who composed a lyric poem on the beauty of a particular boy whom he cites by his name. The name of the beloved forms the repeated post-rhyme element, or redif, of the poem.\(^7\) Several other poets also employed their beloveds’ names as redif’s in their poems. Thereby they located in the boy’s body a worldly and fleshly manifestation of immortal beauty, the primary theme of the gazel. Examples are cycles of gazels written in honour of a boy

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\(^6\) Turkish literature occurred between nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectuals Muallim Naci and Ali Kemâl, (Tarakçî 1994: 173-174). Also in his work on Ahmed Paşa, one of the fountainheads of 15th century Ottoman Turkish gazel, Harun Tolası evades this issue by claiming that poets wrote about boys rather than girls lest their passion be mistaken for sexual desire. It is evident that Tolası assumes that for a male poet, a boy could not inspire sexual passion and that girls would otherwise be their natural objects of passion (Tolası, 90). See footnote 1 and below for further examples of this morally based generalizing explanation.

\(^7\) In a recent monograph Salih Özbaran has deftly explored the much debated topic of Ottoman Rum identity, see Özbaran 2004.

See Mehmed II’s gazel with the redif Veys, which is a boy’s name, in Şentürk 2004: 42. Even though it lacks any overt sexual passion, the poem reads like a love song that does not allow a mystical reading. Şentürk dismisses any trace of homoeroticism in the poem, claiming that love for boys ‘who would be a friend, student or son to the poet would be beautified by openly citing their names ... since they will be the object of a pure love, lacking any self-interest’ and for that reason, there wouldn’t be any shame in keeping such poems in writing for men of religion and rulers (Şentürk 41).
named Kaya, as well as a biographical note on the 16th century poet Visâli, which
states that he composed a gazel sung after the names of each of his beloved ones.9

This approach to lyric poetry – which reflects the popularity of an understanding
of beauty and love that we can call worldly – was characteristic of poets from Rum
in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It culminated in the genre of şehrêngiz,
which consists of listing the most beautiful boys of a particular city.10

İshak Çelebi was a renowned müderris (professor), who in the course of his ca-
ter taught at seven different medreses (colleges) in various cities of the Ottoman
Empire, including his hometown Üsküpl. He also worked as a judge in Damascus,
where he died around 943 A. H. (1537-8).11 Like many other müderrises of his
time, he was also a well regarded poet. İshak Çelebi’s divân consists of 16 kasîdes
(odes), and lyrical poems in different forms of poetry: 6 musammatas, 2 şehrêngiz*,
342 gazels, 12 mukattas, and finally a number of chronograms (tarih). There are
also an additional 10 poems not in Turkish – one in Arabic and nine in Persian. No
piece of the poetry in his divân addresses particular patrons, except for two eulo-
gies dedicated to Sultan Selim I (1512-1520).

Contemporaneous biographical accounts of İshak Çelebi give the picture of a
free spirited man whose interest in love – a particular form of love – made him a
nec of a bygone era.12 İshak Çelebi used a voice and themes similar to those of
other poets who were active under sultans Bayezid II (1481-1512), Selim I, and
Şehzade Suleyman I (1520-66) until the 1530s, especially Me’âli (d. 1535-6) and Gazâli
Mehmeded (d. 1535), whose lives and poetry are usually evaluated in terms more

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1 Ay dém 1999: 46
2 Latifi, 562: Esâmi-i mehâbîb içün her isimde dini mîn bir gaze... varlı. For a preliminary
3 look at the literary transformations in this period see Kuru 2000. The existence of such a tradi-
4 tion in Persian poetry is not known to me. Hasibe Mazıgolu presents two gazels by Hâfitz
5 that mention male names in her masterly comparison of two great poets Hâfitz and Fuzuli, but
6 Hâfitz does not employ these names as redifs (Mazıgolu 1956: 242). It seems that the use of
7 boys’ names as redifs in gazel is an Ottoman Turkish phenomenon that started around the fif-
8 teenth century. Of course this issue requires further elaboration.
9 The şehrêngiz genre has perplexed modern Turkish scholars during the last one hundred
10 years. It became the focus of those who sought an originality in Ottoman Turkish literature
11 that would free it from Persian and Arabic literary influence. But on the other hand, since the
12 şehrêngiz also clearly revealed the gender of Ottoman poets’ beloved ones as male, it also
13 created moral discontent among most of the scholars. Still, since the great Ottoman Turkish
14 literary historian Agâh Sîrrî Levend’s work on the topic published in 1957, editions of many
15 şehrêngiz texts have appeared. These studies present transcribed şehrêngiz texts without any
16 commentary or interpretation. My own recent work focuses on the history, form, content of
17 and the controversy evolving around the şehrêngiz genre. For a list of şehrêngiz texts and ex-
18 amples from those listing beautiful boys of Istanbul see Levend 1957, and for an incomplete
19 list of published texts Aksoyak 1996.
20 According to a couplet cited by all biographers of poets he went to Damascus in 1536. For
21 this couplet see Üsküplü Ishak Çelebi 1989: 7.
22 This era, which I consider roughly as between 1450-1550 and which is marked by an inter-
23 esting understanding of spiritual love that is today lost to us is the focus of my current work.
24 – On İshak Çelebi’s life see Mehmed Çavuşoğlu’s introduction to the edition of İshak
or less similar to İshak Çelebi's. All employed plain language, focused on worldly love, and did not refrain from naming the beloved in their gazels. Doing so was evidently an accepted poetic convention, at least among particular poets, between the late 15th and mid-16th centuries. The practice apparently faded away in the following centuries.\footnote{This desuetude is not easy to explain, but one can find clues to a probable explanation if one considers the transformations in the religious sphere in the mid 16th century Ottoman Empire. For whatsoever reason, it is clear that a direct mention of the beloved's name disappeared in lyrical poems; and after that period, the gender of the beloved was revealed only in the sphere of facetious poetry. See the introduction of Kuru 2000. For an excellent account of the impact of religious transformation during this period on arts in the Ottoman Empire see Necipoğlu 1992.}

Biographical dictionaries of poets describe İshak Çelebi's lyric poetry using two terms: kişâde (plain, enjoyable) and 'âşkâne (amorous).\footnote{Latifi 2000: 172; Kinalzade Hasan Çelebi 1981: 160; 'Âli 1994: 192. There is important work in Turkish on biographical works known as tezkiretû ‘üs-šu’arâ’ genre in Ottoman literature. For an introductory article in English see Stewart-Robinson 1965.} The first term implies that İshak Çelebi’s poetry is free from uncommon vocabulary and dense rhetorical figures, while the second implies a thematic choice.\footnote{Contemporary critical vocabulary defining the Ottoman gazel is yet to be studied, but a set of terms is listed and evaluated by Dîkîn 1986. In this article, Dîkîn brings together several aspects of the Ottoman Turkish gazel along with a brief historical essay. Giving examples and definitions, he discusses the terminology employed by Ottoman authors to describe five different moods of gazels. These are: âşkâne (amorous), rindâne (worldly), şûhâne (impartial), hakîmâne (judicious) and sofîyâne (mystical) (Dîkîn 1986: 140-144). As for terms like tasannû and kişâde, which were used by the first biographers to evaluate poetry, those are apparently context dependent and commonly employed for criticism with positive or negative implications in 16th century literary circles. A listing of those terms can be found in Tolaş 1983. For an evaluation of critical terms used by the 16th century biographer Latifi compare Andrews 1975, in particular 117-131.} The following anecdote by the biographer 'Aşık Çelebi not only reveals his critical look at İshak Çelebi's poems, but it also provides a glimpse on the poetic debates of the period:

"The late İshak Çelebi has an ease and clarity in his gazel style and most of his gazels, lacking luster and perseverance, are affected by a pretty and pleasant manner, so much so that his gazels are used by jugglers and are constantly recited by entertainers. Once, during a wedding ceremony, in his presence, a juggler exclusively recited the late İshak's gazels. Impulsively, İshak said: 'I wonder what these people would be singing if they did not have my gazels.' One of the leading learned men of the period, Şâh Kasım, was also present, and since they frowned upon each other, he was waiting his time with his bow of censure. On this occasion, he replied: 'Who would sing your gazels, if we did not have these people!'"\footnote{Kılıç 1998: 139} (translation is mine).

İshak Çelebi's poems do seem to yield their meanings easily — not necessarily a favorable characteristic at the time. But under this ‘plain’ façade, his gazels betray an excellent grasp of poetic vocabulary and rhetorical figures, which are skillfully
combined. In fact the küşade (plain), or as his late sixteenth century biographer Kınalızade Hasan Çelebi more favorably puts it, 'God-given,' nature of İshak Çelebi's gazels points to a certain attitude in singing gazels.

During the period considered here, even the descriptive term 'aştkâne' suggested gazels that were sung for beautiful boys. The Ottoman historian Geliboluali Āli (1541-1600), who was also a biographer of poets, relates an anecdote about İshak Çelebi that has implications of a commentary on boy-love, or mahbubperestî. Once, İshak Çelebi came across a "shadow-holding cypress, a playful sapling with rosy cheeks" and, losing all his power of judgement, followed him wherever he went. One day he followed the boy even to his home. The boy's father, who was an imam and a friend of İshak Çelebi's, appeared at the door and, understanding that his son attracted the famous mûderris to his doorstep, welcomed the poet. That day İshak Çelebi did not teach but, staying at the boy's house, "gathered the illuminations of pleasure from the enjoyment of the cheeks of that heart-snatcher". At night the father hid behind a vessel and watched İshak Çelebi's behavior towards his son Āli continues the story as follows:

"İshak Çelebi takes his ablutions and, turning his face away from the boy's mirror of beauty, he turns towards Mecca to pray. (...) Then he turns towards the niche of the beautiful boy's eyebrow, and whenever the boy throws away his covers, İshak tucks him in. In this manner, he does not sleep until dawn, continuously contemplating the boy's beauty. Witnessing the situation, the boy's father believes in İshak Çelebi's virtue and renders his son to his service."

In this anecdote Āli defends İshak Çelebi, who is slighted by other biographers for being a mahbub-dostî, i.e. boy-lover. Clearly, Āli's attempt to rewrite İshak Çelebi as a virtuous sufî who follows boys for their being signs of God rather than for any sexual intent, written almost a hundred years after his death tells more about Āli and his period than about İshak Çelebi. İshak Çelebi's poems may not necessarily reflect sexual passion. However, the seeming plainness of his poems may point to the use of gazels in order to 'hunt' beauties, even though the imagery he employs in his poetry, as will be seen in the example below, appears to be mystical. Under this mystical cloak palpitates a yearning in İshak Çelebi's gazels that can be read as

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17 I am indebted to Gönül Alpay Tekin for her help with İshak Çelebi's poetry. Her immense knowledge and understanding of Ottoman Turkish poetry amazingly untied the intricately woven texture of İshak Çelebi's poetry for me.

18 Unfortunately, none of the editions of the Encyclopaedia of Islam includes an entry or any mention of the controversial terms mahbub-dostî or mahbub-perestî (worshipping, adoring beautiful boys) and/or the Persian term shahid-bâzî (witness play, flirting with boy beauties who are symbols of godly beauty), which are parallel concepts with important different connotations in two different cultural contexts. All scholars who comment on boy-love in Ottoman Turkish literature are silent when it comes to such gender-related concepts that were prevalent even until late 19th century, see footnote 4. However, when evaluated against its seeming opposites mahbub-dostî, zên-dostî or zên-perestî (worship, adoring of women), and inquired historically, they will deliver important clues about the prevalent gender system among the Ottoman learned elite.
erotical, since he adores real boys and calls them by their names. Ishak Çelebi’s interest in singing *gazels* for his beloved ones reaches a climax in his *şehrengiz* for beautiful boys of Üsküp, in which he combines two literary fashions of his day: singing *gazels* with boys’ names as *redifs*, and listing the beautiful boys of a city.

*Ishak Çelebi’s Songs for His Beloved Ones in Üsküp*

As a matter of fact, one of the distinctive features of Ishak Çelebi’s *divân* are his two *şehrengiz*. Each one of these two lengthy narrative poems (*mesnevi*) lists the most beautiful boys in two cities, Bursa and Üsküp. The one on Bursa, given the title ‘*Şehrengiz-i Ishak Çelebi’* in the *divân*, follows the general scheme of the genre that originated in the Ottoman poet Mesihî’s work on Edirne (ca. 1512). By contrast, the ‘*Şehrengiz-i mahlûbân-i vilayet-i Üsküp’* stretches the boundaries of the genre in search of a fresh voice.

The initial section of Ishak Çelebi’s *şehirngiz* for Üsküp is unusually short—only 24 couplets—and thus gives the impression of having been hastily written.  

In it, he describes the coming of spring (v. 1-13) and the beauty of Üsküp in springtime (vv. 14-17). He then relates how his friends wanted him to create for them a souvenir of the ephemeral beauty of spring days. At first he hesitated thinking of his predecessors who already had sung so many songs immortalizing the beauty of spring (vv. 18-21). But in the end his resistance is broken by the appearance of six beautiful boys (vv. 22-24). Following the introduction he names and describes these six boys: Mehmed Bekir (vv. 25-36), Mahmûd (vv. 37-48), Pir ‘Ali (vv. 49-60), Mustafa (vv. 61-72), Kılıçoğlu ‘Ali Bâli (vv. 73-84), and Kazancıoğlu Mustafâ (vv. 85-96). The *şehirngiz* ends with a 9-couplet conclusion (vv. 97-105), in which Ishak explains that there are many more beautiful boys in Üsküp, but since he wanted to compose a brief text, he had chosen only six *mahbûbs*.

So far, the *Şehrengiz* of Üsküp does not look different from other *şehirngiz* texts. But Ishak Çelebi did not merely content himself with the depiction of his six favorite boys from Üsküp. For each of them, he also composed a five-couplet poem in the *mesnevi* (paired) rhyme. These poems, composed in different patterns of the *aruz* meter, extol the beauty of the boys by using their names as *redifs*.

As samples I want to present the first of these sections transliterated into modern Turkish and translated into English (vv. 30-41):

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19 According to my ongoing research on the *şehirngiz* genre, the introduction is the most important section of the *şehirngiz*. For instance, Ishak Çelebi’s *şehirngiz* of Bursa has an introduction of 58 couplets length.

20 The abbreviation ‘v.’ stands for verses. All other numbers in parantheses are page numbers in reference to Üsküplü Ishak Çelebi 1989, if not specified otherwise.
Mehemmed Bekir

30.1 Hususa server-i huban Mehemmed
K'eren vashna bulur ömr-i sermed

31.2 Semend-i naza binse kalsa seyran
İder aşıkların hak ile yeksan

32.3 Kamu dîlberlerin serdefteridir
Ya huri ya melek ya höd peridür

33.4 Ruhn arz eyledükce ol kamerveş
Düşer aşıklarî canına aţes

34.5 Söze gelse bulur dîlmûrde lere can
Yâğar man leblerinden Ab-ı Hayvan

35.6 Bekir derler lâkab ol mehtikaya
Irisûr gün yüzinden perêv aya

36.7 Çû gördûm ani oldum mest ü şeyda
Dîlîme geldi pes bu şir-i garra

Bekir

37.1 Olali devlet ile hüüsî iline şah Bekir
Dîrîbalar çâğrur yarsun Allâh Bekir

38.2 Mest olup cam-i mey-i işkun ile aşklar
Bezm-i gamda çâğrur ah Bekir vah Bekir

39.3 Yoluna can viren aşûfe vî üfîadelerê
Rahm idîp bir nazâr it lutfîle geh gah Bekir

40.4 Kant tali 'ki seg-i kuyun ile hemdêm olup
Yüz sûreydûm dûn ü gün işigûne ah Bekir

41.5 Vadi-i fîrkate duşîl gamî i iştunla gönlû
Umaram ola hayalîn ana hemrah Bekir
(vv. 25-36)

Mehemmed Bekir

30.1 In particular, chief among beauties is Mehemmed.
Whoever reaches him finds eternal life.

31.2 When he mounts the horse of flirtation for a promenade
He makes his lovers level with earth.

32.3 He is the first in the book of heart-snatchers:
Either a huri, or an angel, or else a genie.

33.4 As that full moon-faced one displays his cheek,
Fire falls over his lovers’ hearts.

34.5 When he speaks, those dead at heart find life,
It is as if the elixir of life rains from his lips.

35.6 That moon-faced one is called Bekir.
The light of his sun face reaches the moon.

36.7 Seeing him, I lost my mind in drunkenness;
This ornate poem came to my tongue.

I am quoting from Üsküplü Ishak Çelebi 1989, but replacing the alphabet used in this edition (see Üsküplü Ishak Çelebi 1989: 102f.) by the modern standard Turkish alphabet.
Bekir

37.1 Since by fortune he became the king of the realm of Beauty,
The beauties, when in need of a friend, call out ‘God is on your side, o Bekir!’

38.2 Lovers become drunk from the cup of your love’s wine.
At the party of sorrow they call out ‘Oh, Bekir! Ah, Bekir!’.

39.3 Those lovesick and forlorn who sacrifice themselves for you -
Show pity and cast one glance upon them, just now and then, Bekir!

40.4 I wish I were lucky enough to be with the dogs of your street
To put my face on your threshold day and night, o Bekir.

41.5 From the agony of your love, the heart is in the valley of separation.
I hope that visions of you will be its companion, Bekir!

In this section, the poet begins with a description of the boy (Mehmed) Bekir. In rhyming couplets, he describes Bekir as a beauty that paradoxically kills and resurrects at the same time. Whenever Bekir walks around the city flirtatiously, his ways kill his lovers in agony. But whoever reaches him finds eternal life. His cheek shines like the moon and burns lovers’ hearts. But if he speaks to them, his words resurrect them. He is called moon-face, but in fact the moonlight on his face is only a reflection of the light emanating from his sun-like face.

The agony of seeing Bekir’s beauty inspires the gazel (37.1.-41.5.), and it is further elaborated in the section consisting of rhymed couplets (30.1. to 36.7.). Bekir is called king of the realm of Beauty, surpassing the other beautiful boys of the town, who are forced to acknowledge that his beauty is given by God. Apparently, Bekir never appears at parties, since the final couplets describe the yearning of his lovers, and particularly of Ishak Çelebi. The poet, tortured by Bekir’s violent beauty, now demands his resurrecting abilities, that is, union with him. Thus the gazel becomes a plea for Bekir’s attention to cure his lovers’ agony.

The first three couplets of the gazel describe the situation of lovers in general. But it becomes more personal in the ensuing two verses. Here Ishak Çelebi, who staggered around in the ‘valley of separation’ and who is not able to approach even his beloved Bekir’s house, is content with Bekir’s hayal, i.e. his vision, as a company.

Just as the description of Bekir’s power over his lovers inspires the ‘poem’ (siir, v. 36.7.), Ishak Çelebi explains each subsequent poem in this sehrengiz as a result of his amazement upon seeing one of the beautiful boys of Üsküp. In each verse, the poet employs a vocabulary particular to the singing of gazels: ‘si’r dile gelmek’ (‘a poem starts singing’); ‘si’r okumak’ (to recite a poem, v. 43); ‘si’r inşa eylemek’ (to compose a poem, v. 55); ‘si’r terane kulmak’ (to sing a poem, v. 79); and, finally ‘si’r ile hali ‘lam ıtemek’ (to express one’s condition by means of a poem, v. 91).

In every one of Çelebi’s opening verses, he designates the song of the ‘heart’ (gönül) as si’r, using digressions with the rhyme pattern of the gazel, rather than in the form of narratives with mesnevi rhymes. However, the final beyts of these si’r, which are incorporated in the larger mesnevi structure of the sehrengiz, do not con-
tain a poetical signature (tahaliús) as would be the rule for gazels. Nevertheless, the use of the gazel rhyme pattern ruptures the descriptive flow of the şehrengiz text and gives it a more lyrical air. These initial verses mark in each instance songs that the heart sings as a result of its agony in front of the beloved’s beauty. One has the impression that the poet’s heart cannot help but sing. For instance, in verse 43, seeing beautiful Mahmud, the poet sings:

43. Seeing [his beauty], the sick-hearted was agitated and roiled.

Reciting this poem, in waves it flourished.

Çelebi presents his five-couplet versified digressions as natural results of his heart’s agony, but he does not name them gazel.

The six gazels are composed in a different meter from the şehrengiz itself.

All the above characteristics show the author’s intention to create a new twist on the fashionable şehrengiz texts of his period. Ishak Çelebi is distinguished among his rival şehrengiz writers in that each gazel that he composes in the form of a plea to his beloved disrupts the expected flow of the şehrengiz as a mere souvenir from a city in springtime and adds another function to it. Thus each gazel, calling for the beloved boys’ attention, raises the şehrengiz text above a mere descriptive list of beauties. Unlike other şehrengiz texts in which poets developed on the introductory section as the genre catches up, Ishak Çelebi’s is innovative on the main body, the list of beauties section.

Conclusion

In parallel to the poem by Mesih, with which the genre began, Ishak Çelebi’s ‘Şehrengiz of Üsküp’ reflects a moment of gazel writing in the Ottoman Empire when a group of poets regarded the beauty of boys as a reflection of otherworldly beauty. In that sense, the beauty of particular boys represents the fulfillment and manifestation of an ideal. Ishak Çelebi’s şehrengiz also points to the pretense about gazels being songs of the heart, as if they were not composed in advance, but burst spontaneously from the poet’s heart, just as the smoke of poets and their burned
hearts that set the spheres on fire with the sparks inside them. And yet these gazels also served a function in the context in which they appeared: to attract the attention of beautiful boys. That, finally, is the function of names in the poem: to call directly and forcefully upon the boy to grant the poet his attention.

Even if we do not dispose of any historical substantiation we can still imagine the impact of such a poem on the listeners when read in a party, and if any of them happened to be present, on the boys whose names were cited in the poem. In fact, there is evidence that şehrengiz poems did reach the beloveds they were dedicated to. As support we can cite a story about the biographer Aşık Çelebi, who himself wrote a şehrengiz about the beautiful boys of Bursa. Offended by the fact that he was not placed at the beginning of the list of beauties, one of the boys responded to the şehrengiz with a playful quatrain.27

In his şehrengiz, İshak Çelebi brings together mystical yearning and homocrosis in such a way that it taunts modern scholars’ perception and formulations of gender, forcing them to evade the issue. In order to dispel the trouble around the gender of the Ottoman poets’ beloved, it is necessary to overcome modernist reductionist understandings of homosexuality and to untie the intertwined opposites defining our understanding of gender. When it is evaluated as one knot within the tightly knitted social fabric of the Ottoman learned elite, which had a particular function and a particular context, Ishak Çelebi’s poem speaks to us with his own voice.

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