

TOWARD A MECLIS-CENTERED READING OF OTTOMAN POETRY

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Osmanlı Şiirini Meclis-merkezli Okumaya Doğru

Bu makalede halen üzerinde çalışmakta olduğumuz kitabın ana çerçevelerinden birine ait bazı ön tespitleri paylaşmaktayız. Bize göre, Osmanlı şiirin anlamının ve yapısının belirlenmesinde meclis'in oynadığı merkezi role yeterince önem verilmemektedir. Osmanlı şiiriyle ilgili şimdiye kadar olan değerlendirmelerimiz hep divan merkezli olarak gelişmektedir. Zira, Osmanlı şiirlerini öncelikli olarak divanlarda yer alsınlar diye yazılmış farzediyoruz. Oysa divan, bir şairin yeteneğinin kaydedilmesidir. Ve bu kayıtların kendi başlarına herhangi bir bağları yoktur (yani tarihsel değildirler). Bir divanda yer alan hemen hemen bütün şiirler (kasidelerin çoğu ve kaside tarzı şiirler bazı kıt'alar ve mersiyeleler dışında) yazıldıkları ortamlardan ve tarihsel zaman dizininden koparılarak oraya koyulmuşlardır. İşte bu koparma işlemi, bizi, şiirin biçimsel özellikleri, üslubu, diğer şiirlerle ve şairlerle ilişkisi, gelenekselleşmiş mazmunları ve onların tarihçeleri ve bunlara benzer konular üzerinde yoğunlaşmaya mecbur bırakır. Bu yüzden, çoğu kez şairlerin kurumuş kemiklerini araştırma takılıp kalırız ve bu kurumuş kemiklerin bir zamanlar nasıl bir bedeni taşıdığını ve nasıl bir hayata tanık olduğunu hiç düşünmeyiz.

Divanların şairlerin ustalıklarının kayıtlı olduğu ölümsüz metinler olması fikrinin ardında, şiir meclislerinin sonsuza kadar tekrarlanacağı ve bir şairin divanındaki herhangi bir şiirin, günün birinde, bir mecliste okunarak hayata döneceğine dair, şimdiye kadar pek sorgulamadığımız bir gerçeğin yattığına inanıyoruz. Osmanlı şiirini meclis-merkezli okuma önerimizin temelinde, Osmanlı şairlerinin bilinçaltında yatan ve meclisin sürekliliği inancıdır.

Meclis-merkezli okuma en azından şunları önermektedir: Osmanlı şiirlerinin çoğu bir meclis(te okunmak) için ya da bir meclis hedeflenerek yazılmıştır; Osmanlı şiirlerinin pek çoğu bir meclis hakkındadır; Osmanlı şiirinin en otantik okuması her zaman, belli bir dereceye kadar meclisi göz önünde bulundurur.

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İşte bizim meclis-merkezli yaklaşım dediğimiz şey, en genel düzeyde, birleştirmeyi, ayrıştırmayı, sistematik bir yolu uygulamayı ve edebiyat bilimi dünyasında halen bilinen yaklaşımları içermektedir. Bu yaklaşımlar iki genel sınıfa ayrılabilir:

1. Bağlamanın yeniden inşası ve Osmanlı şiirinin bu bağlamda okunması.
2. Şiiri bir anlamı olan, duygusal olarak güçlü, canlı bir obje olarak ele almak.

Aslında, sorun hala ortadadır: nasıl bir bilimsel metod bize, “meclis-merkezli yaklaşım”ı anlamlı (ve doğru olarak), elimizde bağlamıyla ilgili hiçbir belge bulunmayan bir şiire uygulamamızı sağlayabilir?

Biz, böyle bir metodolojinin, en azından şu adımları gerektirdiğini düşünmekteyiz:

- Bağlamları hakkında birincil kaynakları mevcut olan şiirleri tespit etmek ve o şiirleri bağlamları içinde incelemek,
- Bütün sosyal tabakalardaki ve gerçek hayattan meclislerle ilgili kanıtlar toplamak (örneğin: şiir meclisleri nerelerde toplanırdı, kimler katılırdı, neler konuşulurdu, belli intisab çevrelerinde kimler yer alıyordu, kim kime hamilik etmekteydi, gibi),
- Meclislerde yaşananlarla ilgili kanıtlar, bilgiler toplamak,
- Çeşitli meclis tipleri hakkında detaylı modellemeler yaratmak,
- Şiiri uygun modelleriyle ilişkileri bağlamında okumaya başlamak (bu, gerçek meclisin unsurlarıyla şiirin imgeleri ve söz dağarı arasındaki ilişkileri algılayışımızı dikkatli bir biçimde geliştirmemiz anlamına gelecektir).

Osmanlı şiirini okumanın tek bir yolu olduğunu kesinlikle söylemiyoruz. Hatta, onu okumanın ve anlamının en iyi yolu şudur da demiyoruz. Osmanlı şiirinin yapısal olarak kavranmadan ve tekniklerini bilmeden anlaşılır olabileceğini de düşünmüyoruz. Hatta, bu şiirlerin, kullanılan özel dil hakkında ayrıntılı ve derinlemesine bilgi olmadan anlaşılamayacağını da biliyoruz. Bununla birlikte bizim önerimiz, Osmanlı şiirinin Osmanlı toplum hayatında oynadığı roller ve yarattığı etkiler ile şiirin nasıl algılandığı ve nasıl kullanıldığı hangi ortamlarda tüketiliği hakkında fikir sahibi olmamızı sağlayacak bir yaklaşımı geliştirmektir.

Toward a Meclis-Centered Reading of Ottoman Poetry

The poet Mesihi , who was born in the Bosnian town of Priştine in 1470 and died in 1512, composed a *kaside* with an embedded love lyric or *gazel* from which we will look at just a few of the opening lines (the *nesib*). The poem was written to praise and beg a significant favor from the then *Defterdar* or Minister of Finance, Bedrettin Beg. Mesihi's poem to Bedrettin Beg begins like this:

[Mesihî: Der Sitâyîş-i Defterdâr Bedrüddîn Beg]ⁱ

*Meclis-i haş içre bir şeb bir nice ehl-i kemāl
‘Ayş iderdi vü yanardı qarşuda şem‘-i kemāl*

*Kimi iderdi kıyāmet-rūlaruñ zūlfın hesāb
Kimisi vaşl-ı cenān-ı yārı eylerdi hayāl*

*Gāh okınurken leb-i yār üstine şīrīn gāzel
Gāh şīrāne nāzar eylerken ol çeşm-i gāzāl*

*Her birine bir gāzel emr itdi ol sultān-ı hüsn
Ben daḥi ol emre bu şī‘r ile itdüm imtişāl*

*Hey ne lāzım ol ruḥ-ı ‘ālem-nümāda ḥaṭṭ u ḥāl
Cām-ı İskenderde ḥōd lāzım degül gerd-i melāl*

*Eşk-i gevher-bārumı zūlfüñ dökerse tañ degül
Ebr-i nīsāndan ‘aceb olmaya yağdurmak le ‘āl*

*Ey beni öldürmeg içün kaşduma bel bağlayan
Eyledüñ kaşd-ı garīb ü bağladuñ nāzik hayāl*

*Rūze-i hecrüñle çün kim beni kurbān eyledüñ
Bārī pişür cānum içün ni‘met-i ‘īd-i vişāl*

*Kabrde kılsam rakīb ocinden efgān dir gören
Havf-ı kāfirden zemīn içre ezān okır Bilāl*

*Ebr sanmañ ḥā ‘il-i ḥurşīdi siz kim bu güneş
Hālūme ağlamağa tutmuş yüzine destmāl*

*One night, in a private gathering, several of the excellent
Made merry and across from them burned a perfect candle*

*Some recounted the lovelocks on faces that would raise the dead
Some conjured images of union with the paradise of the beloved*

*Sometimes while reciting a sweet gazel about the beloved’s lip
Sometimes while that gazelle-eye was gazing lion-like bold*

*That monarch of beauty ordered that each one compose a gazel
And I, according to that command, did my part with this poem*

ⁱ Mesihî, *Divan*, edited by Mine Mengi, Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Publication, Ankara 1995, p. 56

*Hey, on that world-reflecting cheek, why the boy's beard and mole?
On the cup of Alexander, the dust of depression has no role*

*It's no surprise if your locks make my tear-jewels pour out
It's no wonder that pearls rain down from April's dark cloud*

*Oh you who girt your loins intending to slaughter me
You intended a strange thing, bound it to subtle imagery*

*Because you have sacrificed me with the fast of separation
For my spirit's sake, just cook up a gift for the holiday of union*

*If I cry out in the grave from the rival's vengeance, who hears it will say
Fearing the infidel, Belal, from underground, is calling us to pray*

*Don't think the halo around the sun is a cloud, because this sun
Has held a towel in before its face to weep for this wretched one*

Beginning with this brief example from Mesihi's *kaside*, which combines praise, the intimate gathering, and lyric love poetry, we will suggest that a comprehensive view of Ottoman poetry must take into account a variety of factors extrinsic to the poem itself, prominently including what we see as the central role of the *meclis*. In our view, the *meclis* not only provided a context for the performance of poetry but was a primary element in structuring poetic speech and in constituting its meaning.

Mesihi's poem begins with a *meclis*—the gathering of friends—in this case a *meclis-i has*, a gathering in the private home or garden of one of the elites. This gathering brings together a group of “the excellent”, which means people who possess some, most, or all of the following qualities: powerful position, extensive learning, poetic talent, exceptional wit and conversational abilities, physical beauty, (often) a relaxed attitude toward private indulgences in alcohol or recreational drugs, emotional sensitivity, and a feeling for the spirituality of love. This very select group is described as “making merry” which implies food, drink, poetry, music, and conversation in a setting where the participants can relax, let down their hair, and set aside the cares of the day and their public personalities. The focus of conversation (and attention) is an unidentified “candle of the gathering/monarch of beauty” who orchestrates the activities of the gathering—both passively (with his attractiveness) and actively (with a command).

Viewing this example in the abstract, we observe the following:

- the poem (Mesihi's *kaside*) is meant to be recited in a *meclis* (or at least to suggest a *meclis* in which the *memduh* is a prominent participant),
- the internal *meclis* (the *meclis* described in Mesihi's *kaside*) refers to poems (gazels) recited to the beloved (in the *meclis*),

- the poem commanded by the beloved (Mesihi's gazel) is an example of the kind of love poem that would have been recited in the internal meclis.

Because it is a kaside, the work of Mesihi's poem is to transfer the focus of intense (erotic) emotion aroused by the beloved and poetic descriptions of the beloved to the person of the memduh (Bedrettin) and, thereby, induce him to provide the poet with a lucrative gift. However, the obvious "occasionalness" of the kaside—it is intended to be recited to a specific person, for a specific purpose, most likely at a specific occasion—should not obscure the level of occasionalness implied by the role of gazel poetry in Mesihi's *nesib*. Simply put, the inference, which we take very seriously, is that most or all Ottoman poems were either composed to be recited at a particular meclis with particular participants or with the underlying assumption that they would, at some time, be recited at some meclis or another. The gazels mentioned in Mesihi's third couplet would likely fit the latter description—they could be gazels or couplets by famous poets or gazels composed by the participants for other occasions. The gazel that Mesihi composes on the spot is unarguably occasional in its fictional context.

We believe that there are several reasons why insufficient attention is paid to the central role of the meclis in determining the form and sense of Ottoman poetry. The foremost of these reasons is our tendency to see the *divan* as the primary site of a poem; that is, our tendency to assume that Ottoman poems were written *primarily* to be included in a *divan* (an assumption which is institutionalized in our calling this kind of poetry "*divan* poetry"). The problem with this assumption is that it fits very comfortably with our modern notions that poems belong primarily in books or print media and that it is in the nature of the best poems to be universal, timeless, self-contained unities unconstrained by attachments to particular contexts or occasions. We do not claim that Ottoman poets would disagree entirely with these notions. After all, this is what a *divan* is: the unattached (ahistorical) record of a poet's skill. It was an honor for a poet if his work was collected in a *divan*. However, except for some kasides and kaside-like poems (*mersiye*, etc.), nearly all poems in a *divan* are detached from occasions as well as from chronology. In the end, what this detachment does is to force us to focus on formal features, style, gestures toward other poems and poets, conventional tropes and their history, and the like. Thus, we often get stuck in studying the dried up bones of poems without taking into account what kind of flesh and life those bones might have supported. The consequences of this for the appreciation of Ottoman poetry as poetry are unfortunate. By foregrounding an ahistorical, context-less view of the poetry, we are left with nothing to study but technique, which, in turn, induces us (and audiences whom we influence) to see the poetry in general as a compendium of technical exercises and the poets themselves as obsessed with technique. This confuses our interest in poet's tools or craft and traces of our particular scholarly viewpoint with the reality of the poems themselves.

There is plenty of evidence that Ottoman poets, for the most part, did not view their poems as purely technical exercises or exemplars.ⁱⁱ Technique was important but it was important not so much for itself but as a tool for describing and evoking emotional states and the emotional content of certain situations. If one is attracted, delighted, or aroused by especially clever, original, insightful imagery or tropes or word-play, one is also led to experience more fully and satisfyingly the emotional content of the poem. Although Ottoman poets liked the idea that their poems could outlive them and thus confer on them a kind of immortality in the world, there is no evidence that they believed that their poems would live on solely as examples of skillful technique. The available evidence—the almost thousand year history of poems by Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Turkic predecessors, which were still referenced and recited with emotional effect in the gatherings/meclises of their day—was, to them, proof positive that their own worthy poems could also live on in this way. Behind the *idea* of a divan as the undying record of a poet's skill lies the unquestioned and universal belief that the meclis would go on forever and that any poem from a poet's divan would have the potential of returning to life in some future gathering. What we see as the Ottoman poets' subconscious belief in the permanence of the meclis—the meclis as itself “universal and timeless” is what ultimately grounds our argument for proposing a “meclis-centered” reading of Ottoman poetry.

A meclis-centered reading would imply (at least) the following:

- Most Ottoman poems were written for a meclis or with a meclis (either specific or general) in mind:
 - The poet comes to a meclis with a poem prepared for that occasion.
 - The poet extemporizes a poem or some part of a poem at the meclis.
 - The poet composes a poem that he imagines being recited at some future, unspecified meclis.
- Most Ottoman poems are in some way about a meclis:
 - The poem (or part of the poem) describes a meclis (as in the Mesihi example) or the setting of a meclis (the garden, the season, the time, etc.).
 - The poem describes or reproduces the conversation or activities of a meclis. [When Mesihi says, “some recounted love-locks...,” he is describing the conversation at a meclis. When he addresses or describes the beloved in his embedded gazel, he is reproducing an element of that conversation.ⁱⁱⁱ]
- The most authentic reading of an Ottoman poem always, at some level, has the meclis in mind. The “unity” or thematic wholeness of the poem is located in a communal

ii Certainly there were technical exercises but these are few relative to the total number of Ottoman poems.

iii See Walter G. Andrews, “Osmanlı Divan Şiirinin Toplumsal Ekolojisi”, *Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, Edited by Talat Sait Halman, Osman Horata, et.al. , TC Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Publication, vol.1, pp.319-333.

awareness of a generalized meclis [which is an abstraction from a variety of actual experiences].

Our view of what constitutes a meclis is expansive and inclusive. Because the record of meclises in written sources and painting is heavily weighted toward the royal meclis [meclis-i hāsu'l-hās] or the meclises of the most powerful elites [meclis-i has] there is a tendency to assume that these very formal (and relatively few) meclises were the models on which all other similar gatherings were based. However, if we take the more expansive view and define a meclis as any gathering of friends for conversation, companionship, and some combination of poetry, music, food, and drink, then it begins to seem more accurate to say that the elite meclises are secondary, formalized versions of a primary, wide-spread tradition of gatherings carried on at all levels of society.^{iv}

What then would we include under the heading of “meclis”? For example, in his sixteenth century biography of poets, *Stations of the Poets' Pilgrimage (Meşa'ir-i Şu'ara)*, 'Aşık Çelebi describes his friendship with the poet Celali as follows:

“...bu fakîr ile muşâhabete ve üns ü ülfete tenezzül iderlerdi. Seyr-i gülistânda ve deyr-i muğânda Eyyüb ve Kâğıd-hâne çemenlerinde Kalağa vü Hâsköy encümenlerinde Zâtî dükkânında ve Atmeydânı'nda bahâr sohbetlerinde ve hâzân cem'iyetlerinde gâh mahbûblar mecma'ı olan hammâmlar seyrinde ve gâh Dâvûd Paşa iskelesinde şuya oynayan sîm-endâmlar seyrinde gâh hân-kâhlarda vefâ semâ'ında ve gâh harâbâtlarda düblek semâ'ında hem-dem idük.”^v

At that time, he (Celali) condescended to conversation, intimacy, and sociability with this poor fellow. We accompanied one another in contemplating gardens, in the cell of the magian (wine merchant), in the meadows of Eyüp and Kağıthane, in the assemblies of Galata and Hasköy, in Zati's shop, in springtime conversations at the Hippodrome (At Meydanı)^{vi} and in autumn gatherings, sometimes watching the baths where the beloveds congregate and sometimes observing the silver-bodied [boys] playing in the water at the Davut Pasha pier, sometimes at Vefa dervish music^{vii} in the dervish lodges and sometimes at drum music^{viii} in taverns.

This little passage sums up a good cross-section of the kinds of places in which gatherings occurred:

- garden parties or tête-à-têtes; including seasonal picnics in the large open square of the Hippodrome (an open field before the building of the Blue Mosque);
- taverns serving wine;

^{iv} see, Fikret Yılmaz, “Boş vaktiniz var mı? veya 16. yüzyılda Anadolu'da şarap, eğlence ve suç,” *Tarih ve Toplum Yeni Yaklaşımlar*, Sayı 1, 241 (Bahar 2005): 11-49.

^v Aşık Çelebi, *Meşa'ir-i Şu'ara*, edited by G.M. Meredith-Owens, London, 1971, p. 63b.

^{vi} Before the Sultan Ahmet Mosque was built this was an open field where people held picnics.

^{vii} We are not sure what this is. The dervish lodge in the Vefa district was quite famous at this time.

^{viii} We are not sure about this either. It could just mean people dancing to drum music in actual ruins.

- natural parks;
- gatherings at the villas of the wealthy and powerful (in Galata or Hasköy);
- in the fortune-teller's shop of the legendary poet and mentor of poets, Zati near the Bayezit Mosque;
- at the baths
- and the seashore where the bodies of beautiful boys and young men could be contemplated;
- listening to music in the dervish lodges or to thrilling drum music in the taverns...

In the second half of the sixteenth century, coffeehouses were added to the list of popular gathering places. Coffeehouses sprang up everywhere. Because coffee was not specifically forbidden by Islam and was far cheaper than wine, coffeehouses began to compete with taverns as gathering places for informal *meclises*. Also, the low cost of a gathering at the coffeehouse meant that the circle of people who could afford to participate in a *meclis* widened to include people from the less affluent and less educated classes, merchants, artisans, and the like. Popular poets and elite poets now performed their work in the same place; cultural mixing and diffusion increased. There was, moreover, a spectacular growth at the same time in the keeping of "mecmu'as" or private journals containing bits of poetry, anecdotes, religious lore, historical tidbits and many other things that a good conversationalist should know—perhaps reflecting the need of non-elites to prepare themselves with material for *meclises* to which they now had access.

'Aşık Çelebi and his audiences would have understood quite well who would have attended such gatherings and what their content and purposes would have been. Each venue and each flavor of *meclis* had its own styles and types of love poetry with its own understanding of what or whom the beloved beauty—the "candle" of the *meclis*—represented. However, while this understanding may have been quite natural to sixteenth century Ottomans, it is not natural to us and it presents a huge problem to scholars of literature. The core of the problem is this: although, on relatively rare occasions, a tezkire or other source might re-attach a poem to the occasion of its recital, still, as we have already pointed out, the vast majority of poems come down to us without any reference to the context(s) in which or for which they were created (basically the problem of the divan as a source). As scholars, we are reluctant to speculate without compelling evidence and, in the case of the immediate contexts of individual Ottoman poems, direct evidence is most often entirely lacking. What then do we suggest as an acceptable scholarly solution?

What we call a "meclis-centered approach", at the most general level, involves combining, refining, and applying in a systematic way, approaches that are already known in the world of literary scholarship. These approaches can be abstracted into two general categories:

1. The reconstruction of context and readings of Ottoman poetry in relation to that context: This is the path pointed out by Mehmed Çavuşoğlu's pioneering essays in his *Divanlar Arasında*.^{ix} Our own works^x attempts to expand on Çavuşoğlu's insight and develop from it a more rigorous methodology and a more detailed picture of context while retaining a focus on the roles and impacts of poetry.

2. Treating the poem as a meaningful, emotionally powerful, living object: This is more or less the approach that, for example, underlies İskender Pala's popular presentations of Ottoman poems. It moves attention away from craft and technique and returns it to considerations of the ways in which the craft contributes to the creation of the beautiful, the sublime, the emotionally and spiritually uplifting.

The question remains, however: what kind of scholarly methodology would enable us to apply a "meclis-centered approach" meaningfully (and accurately) to an individual poem for which we have no direct evidence of context? Our suggestion is that such a methodology would require at least some of the following steps:

- Locating poems for which there does exist some direct evidence of context and studying them in relation to that context. This would mean paying renewed attention to stories about poems and their contexts.
- Collecting evidence about actual meclises at all social levels: for example, where they were, who attended them, who was in whose "circle", who patronized whom, what would those who attended various kinds of meclises have expected to happen.
- Collecting evidence for the activities of meclises.
 - Developing descriptions of the elements of cultured conversation.
 - Considering anecdotal materials and stories as potential sources for the content of meclis conversation. This would include such things as the "gossip" contained in the tezkires, anecdotes in the letaifnames, compendia of "moral tales" such as are found, for example, in Nev'izade Ata'i's mesnevis, etc.
 - Developing information about locations (gardens, *köşks*, mansions, dervish lodges, parks), food, music, drinking, drugs, etc. that might have been part of meclises.
 - Developing our understanding of eroticism and sexuality in Ottoman social contexts.
 - Increasing our understanding of the kind of social "networking" and group formation that went on in meclises.

^{ix} Mehmed Çavuşoğlu, *Divanlar Arasında*, Umran, Ankara 1981.

^x Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's voice, society's song : Ottoman lyric poetry*, Seattle : University of Washington Press, 1985; Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds : love and the beloved in early-modern Ottoman and European culture and society*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2005.

- Create detailed models for various types of meclises, for example: meclises held to celebrate and enjoy certain seasons (spring, autumn, winter), meclises in private homes, coffeehouse gatherings, drinking parties, etc.

- Begin reading the poetry in relation to appropriate models. This would mean carefully developing our understanding of relationships between the vocabulary and imagery of poetry and the material actuality of meclises. For example, one might read a "spring" poem by Baki in relation to what we know about "spring" meclises, in relation to what we know about the kinds of meclises that someone at Baki's social level would have attended, in relation to who might have been at a meclis attended by Baki, in relation to what we know about the kind of conversation and activities that Baki might have expected to encounter at a "spring" meclis and so on.

At this moment, such a reading would be highly speculative. In some cases, the information we would need to create a more accurate reading is available but scattered and not organized for this purpose. In some cases, the information has not yet been sufficiently developed. And in some cases, the information we need will only become apparent to us when we begin reading Ottoman poems with a "meclis-centered approach".

We do not intend to suggest that there is an "only" way to read Ottoman poems, or even that there is a "best" way. We cannot truly understand Ottoman poems without understanding their notions of structure and technique. We cannot understand these poems without a detailed and deep knowledge of the vocabulary the poets used or without appreciating their ideas of beauty and competence. What we *are* suggesting is the potential usefulness of an approach that takes into account the complex roles that poetry played in the life of Ottoman society and the impacts of Ottoman social (and political and economic) life on the way poetry was received and appreciated by its audiences.

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