

BOOK REVIEW

Kim, Sooyong: *The Last of an Age. The Making and Unmaking of a Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Poet.* London–New York: Routledge, 2018, 155 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4094-4099-4

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Ottoman literary history is a rather neglected field in Western scholarship on the Ottoman Empire. While dozens of volumes are published yearly on various aspects of Ottoman history in European languages, the number of books printed in the past few decades on Ottoman literature, a very important sphere of the cultural life of the empire, is very low. Sooyong Kim's book on Zāti, an acknowledged 16th century master of Ottoman verse, is thus a most welcome addition to the short list of monographs on the bustling Ottoman literary life.

Kim's book starts with a short Introduction (pp. 1–6), which outlines what to expect of the volume. It gives an overall description of the Ottoman literary tradition and defines Zāti's place in it. Kim tries to highlight Zāti's importance by saying that he 'composed at a time when there was as yet no established collection of models to which he had to adhere' (p. 4). Though Kim is right to assert that Zāti was one of the greatest poets of his age his views on the lack of models seems to be only partially correct. The Ottoman imperial literary tradition, established in the late 15th, early 16th centuries, was a derived literary system modelled on the classical Persian tradition. For Ottoman authors the two systems were undoubtedly part of the same tradition. Many Ottoman poets followed Persian models and compared their literary accomplishments to the oeuvre of Persian poets. According to Laṭīfī (d. 1582), a 16th century Ottoman literary critic, Aḥmet Paşa (d. 1496), one of the first acknowledged poets of the imperial Ottoman tradition, who was termed the Sultan of poets in his own age, 'carefully copied and scrupulously studied all the books and divans that were available in Persian. He imitated Persian lyrical pieces; he adapted their useful elements and applied their rhetorical figures' (Latīfī 2000: 155). Āşık Çelebī (d. 1572), another literary critic mentions in his anthology that Zāti, though he tried to deny it, translated lines from Persian authors and inserted them into his own poems ('Āşık Çelebī 2010: 1574).

The first chapter (pp. 7–26) titled *Contexts: The Court and Beyond* shows the historical, literary historical context of Zāti's poetry and provides the reader with a more detailed description of the

Ottoman literary scene in Zāti's age with subchapters on the social setting and its relationship to contemporary literary life, on the popularity of poetry and on the various ways of becoming a poet. The author very successfully summarizes all the key points the reader has to know in order to understand the settings Zāti worked in. However, a few remarks should be added to his description.

In the first subchapter (*The Court and Poetry*, pp. 7–11) Kim refers to earlier scholarly writings on the nature of classical literature termed 'divan edebiyatı' ('divan literature') in Turkish and rightly concludes that court patronage was a key factor in the establishment and development of the classical Ottoman literary tradition and the imperial Ottoman canon. It seems, however, that imperial patronage alone would not have been enough. Although works in Turkish were produced in Anatolia from the early 14th century onwards, they were scarce and were not considered high quality texts meeting the written and unwritten rules of classical literature forged in the Persian system. Aşık Çelebi thought that 'as far as the poetry of the land of Rûm is concerned poets preceding Şeyhî in mesnevî, Aḥmet Paşa in qasida and Necâtî in ghazal count as nothing.'¹ The well-known story about the Chaghatay Turkish gazels of the Timurid poet Mîr 'Alî-şîr Nevâyî (d. 1501) sent as gifts to Bâyezîd I (1481–1512) and how the Sultan instructed Aḥmet Paşa to imitate them (Kleinmichel 1999) also shows the role the imperial court played in shaping Ottoman literature and it also indicates the role of Timurid models in shaping Ottoman culture. The story also highlights the deep influence Nevâyî, the founder of another Turkish classical literary tradition, exerted on the development of the Ottoman system. He created model texts in Turkish in every important genre of classical literature and encouraged his contemporaries to choose Turkish as a literary medium instead of Persian. The sole purpose of his pamphlet titled *Muḥâkemet al-Luġateyn* was to convince his fellow poets of Turkish origin that Turkish is suitable for creating high quality literary texts. In this work he complained that young poets chose Persian because it was easier to write good poetry in Persian than in Turkish. For a long time the situation was more or less the same in Ottoman Anatolia and Kim is right to claim that 'Ottoman Turkish (...) did not attain the status of a recognized literary language until the sixteenth century hampered earlier by the dominant cultural prestige of Persian' (pp. 9–10). Nevâyî's (1996: 179) complaint that young poets chose a convenient way and started composing in Persian clearly shows why poets turned to Persian. Not only because it had a higher prestige than Turkish but also because it was easier to compose poetry in Persian. He does not elaborate on the topic but Turkish, a language lacking long vowels, is basically unfit for quantitative verse. Moreover, in the case of a literary system where it is a prerogative to follow the tradition, models are of utmost importance. Before the advent of Nevâyî, Turkish literature was of an inferior quality from the point of view of classical literary criticism and the canon was small. What Ottoman authors thus had to do was to discover how to compose quality texts in Ottoman Turkish. Nevâyî's example gave an impetus to this project and backed by mighty supporters in the power centres of the empire who sometimes also acted as poets, the phase of experimenting finally came to an end in the mid-16th century. The result was a Persianate classical literary system with distinct Ottoman features.

Kim is right to claim that the whole process was greatly helped by the expansion of the bureaucratic establishment (p. 15) as most people actively participating in the literary life were learned men who worked at different levels of the Ottoman establishment. Poetry became a popular pastime because, as Kim remarks, 'the ability to compose verse in that language [Ottoman Turkish]

¹ Şeyhî (d. after 1429), Aḥmet Paşa (d. 1496), Nejâtî (d. 1509). 'Aşık Çelebi 2010: 1575.



not only became a sign of refinement and learning but also served as a means of entry into institutions of power and therefore of indentifying with the Ottoman way' (p. 15). There were no set methods of how to become a poet. Kim suggests that it was essential for a poet to have 'at least some formal schooling, given the knowledge required for producing poetry in the high Islamicate tradition' (p. 20).

It should be added here that poetry could be practiced at different levels that required different background knowledge and skills. Laṭīfī (2000: 102–103) made a clear distinction between poets (*ṣā'ir/ṣu'arā*) and versifiers (*müteṣā'ir*). In his opinion a real poet was an independent author who was able to create a unique style. Versifiers were put into five categories according to their talents and ability, starting with those who committed plagiarism by simply replacing the original author's name with their own to the last group of versifiers who, through imitating the works of others, acquired some skill in poetry. The ways of how to start composing poetry thus might have varied according to the talent and aspirations of an aspiring author. Fuḫūlī (d. 1556), an acknowledged author of the 16th century, thought that a poem without knowledge is similar to a wall without a foundation (Kılınç 2017: 593: '*ilmsüz ṣi'ir esāssuz dīvār gibi olur*).

The 12th century Persian author Nizāmī 'Arūzī, on the other hand, stressed that no one can attain a high level in poetry 'unless in the prime of his life and the season of his youth he commits to memory 20,000 couplets of the poetry of the Ancients, keeps in view [as models] 10,000 verses of the works of the Moderns, and continually reads and remembers the dīvāns of the masters of his art, observing how they have acquitted themselves in the strait passes and delicate places of song, in order that thus the different styles and varieties of verse may become ingrained in his nature, and the defects and beauties of poetry may be inscribed on the tablet of his understanding' (Browne 1921: 32). A similar method must have been used by many Ottoman poets as the cases of illiterate poets like Enverī (d. 1547), an ink maker and fireworks expert, suggest.² As according to one of his contemporaries, Kınalızāde Ḥasan Çelebi (d. 1604), 'he didn't have a share in either reading or in writing, he never took a book or a pen in his hands and he never spread his beddings on the field of reading or writing' (Kınalızāde 2017: 214), Enverī must have heard and memorized a great number of verses and used this pool of elements to compose his own poems. This way he was able to produce poems that were characterised as being 'full of light and could enlighten the mirrors of the darkened hearts' (Bağdatlı 2018: 113).

The second chapter titled *A poet in Istanbul* (pp. 27–52) aims at giving an account of Zātī's life in the context of Istanbul, the heart of the empire's literary life. The four subchapters describe the capital as the cultural centre, the early career and the later life of Zātī as they are recorded in contemporary literary anthologies and a short subchapter addresses the question of literary patronage. Kim deals with all the issues with ease displaying great expertise. One minor point, however, needs further clarification.

In the paragraphs discussing the relationship of poetic invention and literary tradition he comes to the conclusion that '[w]hat constituted new within that context [i.e. the context of a rigid system with set poetic forms] was arbitrary at best.' Remarks scattered in literary anthologies, however, suggest that contemporary literary critics were well aware of the criteria determining the novelty of a poetic element. Laṭīfī (2000: 181), for example, speaking of Enverī, wrote that because he was talented he 'was able to find novel poetic images (*cedid hayaller*) and virgin poetic content (*bikr ma'nalar*)'. Aşık Çelebi (2010: 163) was of a similar opinion when he stressed that

² For these poets see Kurnaz and Tatçı 2001.



in spite of being uneducated his poems were ‘among the rarities of the world and the oddities mankind had ever produced’.

The third chapter focuses on Zāti’s oeuvre and tries to show through a series of sample texts in English translation how remarkable his poetic accomplishments were. It is a pity that the Turkish original of the lines quoted were not included. Though the analyses Kim provides his readers with are expertly done, some minor additions should be made here.

On page 61 Kim analyzes a ghazal featuring a young barber as the beloved and explains the whole poem by saying that it follows contemporary trends because attractive, unattached males ‘were not only recognized and eulogized in verse as beloveds, but also present at gatherings in the palace, the homes of elite and the lodges of dervishes’. All this is true but drinking parties with poetry read and music played, where young males served the guests, were held as early as the 11th century in the Ghaznavid period (Yarshater 1960) and kalender dervishes were known to have their *köçeks*, young attendants, much earlier. Using traditional imagery and poetic topoi, classical Persian and Turkish ghazals praising the beauties of the beloved depicted these young men still in a very schematic way. Then in the early 16th century a movement termed *vukū’-gūyī* (incidentalism) using ‘a more realistic depiction of love encounters’ started becoming popular in Iran (Losensky 1998: 82). Shafī’ī Kadhānī (1981: 147) summarizes the essence of this movement with the following words: ‘The entire aim and manifesto of the poets of this style is “We must once more draw poetry close to the experiences of daily life and turn our faces away from ‘universal love’, ‘universal beloved’ and everything that is absolute”’. In spite of the constant Safavid–Ottoman conflict the exchange of ideas did not stop and the appearance of everyday beloveds in Ottoman ghazals might perhaps be also attributed to the influence of the incidentalist style.

On pp. 62, Kim gives the analysis of two other ghazals belonging to the same group. Unfortunately, both poems are somewhat misinterpreted. Kim claims that the ghazals are about ‘the maker of mesir paste’. However, the beloved of both poems is a *ma’cūncī*, a craftsman preparing various electuaries, many of them mind altering drugs, as terms pertaining to cannabis use scattered in the text clearly show. The noun *esrār* (‘secrets’) is the word used to denote cannabis, *gubār* (‘powder’) refers to cannabis powder and the adjective part of the redif *hayrān* is the par excellence term for ‘cannabis intoxication.’³

The analysis of the two poems is closed with a paragraph describing Zāti’s ‘tendency to recycle images and conceits’ (p. 64). In this context it should be mentioned that the second ghazal analyzed by Kim has another twin poem (Ghazal no. 1494; Çavuşoğlu 1987: 316–317). The metre, the rhyme and the topic is the same, only the redif is different. Moreover, it shares many keywords and phrases with the other two. It should be added that recycling not only images or conceits but even full lines was a common practice and many poets included the slightly reshaped versions of the same hemistich in several poems.

The fourth chapter aims at mapping the network of influences that shaped Zāti’s poetry. Kim’s observations are important because they expertly initiate the reader to the world of Ottoman poetry. Most of Kim’s arguments and remarks hold true but as far as his comment on the influence Mīr ‘Alī-šīr Nevāyī exerted on Aḥmet Paşa in particular and on the development of Ottoman poetry in general appears to be a misunderstanding (p. 97). In an article published in 1999, Si-grid Kleinmichel’s comparative textual analysis very convincingly showed how deeply Nevāyī’s

³ For a detailed account on *hayrān* and other related words see Péri 2017.



ghazals influenced Aḥmet Paşa's poetry. Yusuf Çetindağ (2006) devoted a whole monograph to the topic of Nevāyī's textual influence on Ottoman poets. Many additional sources witness to the profound influence that Nevāyī's oeuvre exerted on Ottoman authors. Let it suffice to mention here the prose introduction of Celilī's (d. 1569) *divān* and Şāhī's (d. 1562) *Ferhād-nāme* lines praising Nevāyī. Celilī listed four 'ghazal creating nightingales of the fire inducing rose garden': Amīr Ḥusrev Dihlavī (d. 1325), 'Abd al-Raḥmān Cāmī (d. 1492), Nevāyī and Sultān Süleymān (Kazan 2018: 37–38). Nevāyī is characterized as the 'creator of texts in the Turkish language and the composer of sorrowful songs'. Şāhī (Özcan 2007: 374) praises Nevāyī with the following lines: *Bülbül-i nağme-sāz-ı bāğ-ı nevā / Ya'nī ey dīl Nevāyī-i dānā / Eyleyüp mülk-i nazma bast-ı kelām / Gevher-i 'aşka böyle verdi nīzām* ('Song composing nightingale of the garden of melodies / Ah, my heart, [he is] Nevāyī the wise / He spread his words in the kingdom of poetry / [And] thus he arranged the gems of love').

The last chapter is dedicated to Zātī's legacy. Kim describes him as an authority whose advice and judgement of poetical issues were much sought after during his lifetime but whose poetic status started fading away after his death because social changes, the growing importance of *medrese* graduates in shaping the literary life of the empire, led to the popularity of a new trend of poetry.

Sooyong Kim's book is well-written monograph on one of the leading Ottoman poets of his own age and it is hoped that the book will inspire scholars of Ottoman literary history to 'imitate' it and write well-researched biographies of the leading characters of Ottoman literature.

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