**Czygan, Christine and Aynur, Hatice** (eds.). 2025. *Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 205 pages. ISBN 978-3-11-134154-5.

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The study of Ottoman *divān* poetry has long balanced its aesthetic complexity with its social and historical significance. *Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*, edited by Christiane Czygan and Hatice Aynur, emphasizes the latter, highlighting the genre's dynamism, subversive potential, and deep engagement with sociopolitical and spiritual currents. Stemming from a 2022 workshop, the volume brings together established and emerging scholars to explore the multifaceted concept of *ʿışḳ* across poets, genres, and contexts from the 15th to 18th centuries. 'If Islamic spirituality could be distilled into a single word, that word would undoubtedly be love.' This edited volume takes that insight as its point of departure. Its central goal is to examine the many layers of love *ʿışḳ* in early modern Ottoman poetry–not as a fixed trope, but as a vibrant and evolving force that engages with, mirrors, and at times challenges the sociopolitical, spiritual, and ontological structures of its era. The volume directly addresses a gap in the field: although *ʿışḳ* is a pervasive theme, it has received comparatively little attention in international scholarship, with foundational works such as Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı's *The Age of Beloveds* being rare exceptions. By bringing together both established and emerging scholars, the editors assemble a cohesive collection that truly 'challenges conventions' in its subject matter as well as in its methodological outlook.

The book is organized thematically into five sections–*Social Configurations, Ontological Configurations, Spiritual Configurations, Beyond Lyrical Conventions,* and *New Sources*–a structure that effectively leads the reader through the intricate layers of meaning woven into the poetic representations of love. To provide a comprehensive review, I will first summarize each chapter's focus and contribution before turning to an assessment of the volume's strengths and shortcomings.

## Social Configurations

In their foundational chapter, 'Love, Gender, and Self-Presentation in the World of Early Modern Ottoman Court Poetry,' Mehmet Kalpaklı and Walter G. Andrews explore how gender and audience shape selfhood in Ottoman court poetry. Through comparative close readings of *ġazels* by Necātī (d. 1509) and Miḥrī Ḫātūn (d. after 1512)–especially poems with parallel refrains such as *bu gice* ('tonight') and *geçen gice* ('last night')–they show how similar poetic conventions produce markedly different effects. Necātī's ostensibly

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occasional poems ultimately aim for universality, crafted for public, male-centered literary spaces and aligned with aspirations for lasting fame and patronage. Miḥrī's poems, by contrast, are more direct, narrative, and tied to specific private moments, often responding to or subtly subverting male poetic models. The chapter's key contribution is its clear demonstration of a distinct 'woman's voice' and 'harem court' aesthetic, challenging the long-standing view that female poets merely imitated men.

Christiane Czygan's chapter 'The Dual Impact of Madness in Sultan Süleyman's Third Divān (1554)' examines the paradox of Sultan Süleymān (d.1566)–writing as Muḥibbī–adopting the poetic persona of the love-maddened *mecnūn*, despite the political necessity of projecting mental stability. Combining historical analysis of Ottoman ideas about insanity with close readings from Muḥibbī's *Third Divān*, and situating the *mecnūn* motif within medical and mystical discourses, she uncovers a sharp divide between the sultan's political and poetic selves. In poetry, Muḥibbī could safely embrace 'madness' to fashion himself as the ideal lover, a move that ultimately reinforced his mystical image as the *insān-ı kāmil* (Perfect Man). Czygan thus demonstrates how poetry offered even the empire's ruler a protected space for controlled, transgressive self-expression.

## Ontological Configurations

Victoria Rowe Holbrook's wide-ranging chapter 'The Separation of Goodness and Beauty: Plato, Galip, Lacan' traces the philosophical genealogy of beauty, arguing that a decisive split occurred when Plato's *kalon*–the unity of beauty and goodness–was translated into Latin and divided into separate concepts. She contends that Arabic, Persian, and Turkish intellectual traditions preserved the original Platonic unity. Through a conceptual history that moves from Plato's *Symposium* to the Quran and hadith, and finally to Şeyḫ Ġālib's (d. 1799) *Ḥüsn ü ʿAşḳ*, she concludes with a critique of Jacques Lacan, whose redefinition of love she sees as a product of this historical rupture. Holbrook ultimately shows that Ġālib's work embodies an unbroken Islamic Platonic tradition in which beauty, love, and goodness remain inseparable, guiding the soul toward divine truth.

Fatih Altuğ's chapter 'Narratives of Devotion and Transformation: Procedural Dynamics of Love, Truth, and Subjectivity in Nergisī's Meşāḳḳ ul-ʿUşşāḳ and Nihālistān' redirects attention from poetry to prose by examining two story collections of the 17th-century writer Nergisī (d. 1635) to show how love functions as a transformative event that produces a new subjectivity. Drawing on Alain Badiou's concepts of the 'event,' 'fidelity,' and 'truth procedures,' Altuğ argues that love in Nergisī's narratives is not simply an emotion but a disruptive force that breaks apart the lover's former identity. The protagonist's steadfast fidelity to this event–despite social rejection and personal suffering–becomes the very process through which an 'amorous subject' is formed. The chapter stands out for its deft use of modern continental philosophy to reinterpret early modern Ottoman prose, reframing literary love as a disciplined, truth-generating practice.

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## Spiritual Configurations

Sadık Yazar's chapter 'On the Tidal State of Love: The Representation of Telvîn in Turkish Sufi Poetry' examines the Sufi concept of *telvīn*–the state of spiritual fluctuation that precedes the steadiness of *temkīn*–and its subtle expression in the poetry of Yūnus Emre (d. 1320?) and Eşrefoğlu Rūmī (d. 1469–1470?). Combining theoretical discussions of *telvīn* from classical Sufi manuals with close readings of selected poems, Yazar identifies the linguistic and thematic signals of this unstable spiritual condition. He shows that poets like Yūnus Emre evoke *telvīn* through oppositional phrases ('at one moment… at another') and recurring motifs of lost reason and waning patience, effectively dramatizing this unstable spiritual state.

Betül Sinan Nizam's chapter 'Displaying Competence through Love: A Typology of Lovers in Ḳaṣīdes with the Redif *'ışḳ*' examines the often-overlooked presence of *'ışḳ* in *ḳaṣīde*, a genre typically devoted to panegyric. She shows how mystic poets skillfully integrated themes of divine and passionate love into praise for patrons, creating a distinct typology of lovers within this formal structure. The chapter highlights the fluidity of Ottoman poetic genres and demonstrates how poets balanced worldly ambitions with spiritual ideals, revealing that *'ışḳ* was pervasive enough to shape even the most public and politically oriented poetry.

## Beyond Lyrical Conventions

Gülşah Taşkın's chapter 'Power is Speaking: What Does The Beloved Tell about Love?' challenges the conventional portrayal of the beloved as a silent, passive figure in Ottoman poetry. By analyzing poems where the beloved speaks directly, she examines the resulting changes in power dynamics and expressive possibilities. Taşkın shows that granting the beloved a voice not only disrupts a central *ġazel* convention but also allows the poetry to explore complex rulership dynamics, transgressive love, and more nuanced psychological depth.

Benedek Péri's chapter 'Love Poetry with or without Love? Classical Ottoman Amorous Gazels in the Early 16th Century' challenges the modern view that Ottoman poetry was primarily driven by emotional resonance, arguing instead that intellectual and rhetorical mastery were central. Drawing on historical biographical dictionaries and contemporary literary critiques, he shows how the interplay of Turkic and Persian influences highlights that poets were chiefly valued for their technical skill and erudition. Péri's findings recalibrate the field, emphasizing the early modern 'horizon of expectations,' where poetic excellence was judged not by emotion but by mastery of convention, intertextual skill, and linguistic virtuosity.

## New Sources

Hatice Aynur's chapter 'In the Quest for a Lyrical Persona: Love in Ṭaṭavlalı Maḥremī's 'Ġazels' presents a newly discovered copy of the *divān* of Ṭaṭavlalı Maḥremī (d.1535), a



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16th-century poet, introducing a previously overlooked voice to scholarship. Through careful textual analysis, she explores Maḥremī's treatment of the distinction between earthly and divine love and his unique rhetorical strategies. The chapter both recovers an important source and deepens our understanding of Ottoman poetic conventions, expanding the known literary canon.

Edith Gülçin Ambros's chapter 'Ottoman Catechism ('İlm-i Ḥāl) Goes Popular: Love, the Girl, and the Jew' studies and translates the 14th-century folktale *Kız Destānı*, analyzing it as a didactic narrative that supported Islamization in Anatolia. Combining historical and literary analysis, she treats the tale as a reflection of socioreligious change in rural society. Ambros broadens the volume's scope beyond elite literature, showing how themes like love and conversion circulated through popular culture.

## Evaluation of the Volume

*Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*, stemming from a 2022 workshop, opens with an introduction that masterfully frames the project. It traces the etymology and theological debates surrounding *'ışk* and outlines the volume's three guiding assumptions: that poetry engages with sociopolitical norms, that *'ışk* appears in unexpected forms, and that madness provides a critical lens for interpreting 16th-century poetry. This clear and sophisticated theoretical framing sets a high standard for the chapters that follow. The volume is not merely a collection of essays but a carefully curated, thematically structured dialogue. Its five sections–*Social, Ontological, Spiritual Configurations, Beyond Lyrical Conventions, and New Sources*–allow readers to trace how *'ışḳ* operates across courtly, mystical, and literary realms. The volume succeeds in transforming Ottoman love poetry into a dynamic field of social, political, and spiritual contestation.

The volume's first half is especially strong, with chapters by Kalpaklı and Andrews, Czygan, Holbrook, and Altuğ offering original, compelling arguments likely to influence future scholarship. Kalpaklı and Andrews' opening chapter is a masterful reading of Ottoman poetry in its social and performative context. Czygan compellingly shows Sultan Süleymān using the *mecnūn* persona to craft the 'perfect lover' (*insān-ı kāmil*), with her analysis of the 'chain' trope particularly striking. Altuğ's application of Badiou's philosophy to Nergisī's prose offers a refreshing theoretical lens.

However, the volume has notable shortcomings. Despite its focus on love, lovers, and beloveds, it surprisingly lacks critical engagement with the pervasive homoeroticism central to the classical ġazel tradition. Apart from the Kalpaklı and Andrews chapter, which examines gendered voice, the beloved –typically portrayed as a young male–is largely treated as an unexamined, almost invisible convention. This omission represents a missed opportunity to 'challenge conventions,' as promised by the editors, since it avoids engaging with the substantial scholarly discourse on homoerotic dynamics, a fundamental and complex aspect of Ottoman poetry. A more thorough interrogation of these dynamics would have enriched the volume's analysis of lovers, beloveds, and the intricate power relations embedded in the literary culture.

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The *Spiritual Configurations* section is notably weaker and less cohesive than preceding sections. Yazar's chapter on *telvīn* largely presents exposition of the Sufi concept rather than critical literary analysis. While it provides a competent survey of the theoretical background, it lacks the argument-driven, textually grounded approach that characterizes the strongest contributions in the volume, resulting in a dip in analytical rigor and disrupting the tone established in the Social and Ontological Configurations sections. Although the chapter offers valuable context for understanding mystical frameworks of love, it does not fully integrate this conceptual foundation into sustained literary or historical analysis. Similarly, the *New Sources* section only partially fulfills its promise. Aynur's study of the newly discovered *divān* of Ṭaṭavlalı Maḥremī is a strong piece of philological scholarship, clearly distinguishing between earthly and divine love and fitting seamlessly with the focus on high literary traditions. By contrast, Ambros's presentation of the folktale *Kız Destānı*, while offering useful insight into popular religious culture and Islamization in Anatolia, feels tangential to the volume's core focus on lyrical *ʿışḳ* in elite literature. Its inclusion seems appended rather than integral, undermining thematic cohesion and raising questions about the editorial rationale for what constitutes a relevant 'new source.' Taken together, these weaknesses–the uneven treatment of homoeroticism, the less critical and cohesive Spiritual Configurations section, and the partial fulfillment of the New Sources promise–highlight areas where the volume could have more fully realized its ambitious aims. While these issues do not negate the collection's substantial strengths, they underscore the limits of its analytical reach and the challenges of balancing thematic breadth with sustained critical depth. A minor limitation, acknowledged by the editors, is the volume's focus on Islamic traditions, leaving non-Islamic Ottoman literary interactions largely unexplored. Additionally, the sophisticated theoretical frameworks employed (e.g., Badiou, Lacan) may pose challenges for readers unfamiliar with contemporary critical theory.

*Challenging Conventions: Love, Lovers, and Beloveds in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry* is a significant, interdisciplinary contribution to Ottoman literary studies. Far from a collection of discrete essays, it forms a cohesive argument demonstrating that *ʿışḳ* was a central, dynamic, and versatile force in early modern Ottoman culture–socially, spiritually, and intellectually. Standout chapters by Kalpaklı and Andrews, Czygan, and Altuğ reveal love as a medium for gendered self-fashioning, political transgression, ontological exploration, and the forging of new subjectivities, while Nizam highlights its rhetorical sophistication. The volume's interdisciplinary synthesis, building on foundational works like *The Age of Beloveds*, shifts focus from the social history of literature to the intellectual and aesthetic history embedded within it. While chapters employing Badiou and Lacan may challenge readers unfamiliar with contemporary theory, and the focus on Islamic traditions leaves non-Islamic literary interactions underexplored, these reflect its defined scope rather than flaws. Ultimately, the book reinterprets Ottoman poetry, challenges conventions, and opens exciting new avenues for research, making it essential reading for scholars of literature, history, and mysticism.



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