

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In fact, there are lengthy passages in etiquette books, advice manuals, and encyclopedic works on how to treat the *mahbûb* (the male beloved) and how to deal with boys with beautiful faces.<sup>3</sup> 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 *mahbûbs* was organized and reproduced itself for hundreds of years has been blurred by modern pre-conceptions about sexuality and love.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Abdülkadirioğlu 1988.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Banarlı 1971: 191: "Gazel kelimesi Arapça'dır. Mânâsı kadınlar için söylenen gazel ve âşikane şiir. [The term *gazel* is Arabic. It means amorous poetry sung for women].": 191.

<sup>3</sup> Cihan Okuyucu mentions such sources in his work on Ottoman Turkish poetry, but he claims that boy-love started in the Empire after the 17<sup>th</sup> century "related to the degeneration in social life" even if some of his source material belongs to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. See the section "Gender of beloved and social sources of boy-love" in Okuyucu 2004: 218-222, especially p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı's forthcoming book *Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Duke University Press) will reveal many texts concerning unexplored homoeroticism of Ottoman poetry.

<sup>5</sup> 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 Üsküp, 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-15<sup>th</sup> century, poets of Anatolia or *Rum* started singing their *gazels* in an unprecedentedly worldly voice.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Several other poets also employed their beloveds' names as *redifs* 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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Turkish literature occurred between nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectuals Muallim Nâci and Ali Kemâl, (Tarakçı 1994: 173-174). Also in his work on Ahmed Paşa, one of the fountainheads of 15<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Turkish *gazel*, Harun Tolasa 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 Tolasa assumes that for a male poet, a boy could not inspire sexual passion and that girls would otherwise be their natural objects of passion (Tolasa, 90). See footnote 1 and below for further examples of this morally based generalizing explanation.

<sup>6</sup> In a recent monograph Salih Özbaran has deftly explored the much debated topic of Ottoman/ *Rum* identity, see Özbaran 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See Mehmed II's *gazel* with the *redif* *Veyis*, 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*<sup>8</sup>, as well as a biographical note on the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Visâlî, which states that he composed a *gazel* sung after the names of each of his beloved ones.<sup>9</sup>

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 *şehrengiz*, which consists of listing the most beautiful boys of a particular city.<sup>10</sup>

İshak Çelebi was a renowned *müderriş* (professor), who in the course of his career taught at seven different *medreses* (colleges) in various cities of the Ottoman Empire, including his hometown Üsküp. He also worked as a judge in Damascus, where he died around 943 A. H. (1537-8).<sup>11</sup> Like many other *müderrişes* of his time, he was also a well regarded poet. İshak Çelebi's *dîvân* consists of 16 *kasîdes* (odes), and lyrical poems in different forms of poetry: 6 *musammats*, 2 *şehrengiz*, 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 *dîvân* addresses particular patrons, except for two eulogies 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 relic of a bygone era.<sup>12</sup> 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 Süleyman I (1520-66) until the 1530s, especially Me'âlî (d. 1535-6) and Gazâlî Mehmed (d. 1535), whose lives and poetry are usually evaluated in terms more

<sup>8</sup> Aynur 1999: 46

<sup>9</sup> Latîfî, 562: *Esâmî-i mehâbib için her isimde dinilmiş bir gaze... vardı*. For a preliminary look at the literary transformations in this period see Kuru 2000. The existence of such a tradition in Persian poetry is not known to me. Hasibe Mazioğlu presents two *gazels* by Hâfîz that mention male names in her masterly comparison of two great poets Hâfîz and Fuzulî, but Hâfîz does not employ these names as *redîfs* (Mazioğlu 1956: 242). It seems that the use of boys' names as *redîfs* in *gazel* is an Ottoman Turkish phenomenon that started around the fifteenth century. Of course this issue requires further elaboration.

<sup>10</sup> The *şehrengiz* genre has perplexed modern Turkish scholars during the last one hundred years. It became the focus of those who sought an originality in Ottoman Turkish literature that would free it from Persian and Arabic literary influence. But on the other hand, since the *şehrengiz* also clearly revealed the gender of Ottoman poets' beloved ones as male, it also created moral discontent among most of the scholars. Still, since the great Ottoman Turkish literary historian Agâh Sırrı Levend's work on the topic published in 1957, editions of many *şehrengiz* texts have appeared. These studies present transcribed *şehrengiz* texts without any commentary or interpretation. My own recent work focuses on the history, form, content of and the controversy evolving around the *şehrengiz* genre. For a list of *şehrengiz* texts and examples from those listing beautiful boys of Istanbul see Levend 1957, and for an incomplete list of published texts Aksoyak 1996.

<sup>11</sup> According to a couplet cited by all biographers of poets he went to Damascus in 1536. For this couplet see Üsküplü İshak Çelebi 1989: 7.

<sup>12</sup> This era, which I consider roughly as between 1450-1550 and which is marked by an interesting understanding of spiritual love that is today lost to us is the focus of my current work. – On İshak Çelebi's life see Mehmed Çavuşoğlu's introduction to the edition of İshak Çelebi's *divan*, Üsküplü İshak Çelebi 1989: 1-16.

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 15<sup>th</sup> and mid-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The practice apparently faded away in the following centuries.<sup>13</sup>

Biographical dictionaries of poets describe İshak Çelebi's lyric poetry using two terms: *küŕâde* (plain, enjoyable) and '*âŕîkâne* (amorous).<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> The following anecdote by the biographer 'Âŕîk 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, Ŗâh 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!'"<sup>16</sup> (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

<sup>13</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire. For whatever 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 Necipođlu 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Latîfî 2000: 172; Kınalızade Hasan Çelebi 1981: 160; 'Âlî 1994: 192. There is important work in Turkish on biographical works known as *tezkiiretü'ŕ-ŕu'arâ* genre in Ottoman literature. For an introductory article in English see Stewart-Robinson 1965.

<sup>15</sup> Contemporary critical vocabulary defining the Ottoman *gazel* is yet to be studied, but a set of terms is listed and evaluated by Dilçin 1986. In this article, Dilçin 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: *âŕîkâne* (amorous), *rindâne* (worldly), *ŕîhâne* (impertinent), *hakîmâne* (judicious) and *sofiyâne* (mystical) (Dilçin 1986: 140-144). As for terms like *tasannu'* and *küŕâde*, 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 16<sup>th</sup> century literary circles. A listing of those terms can be found in Tolasa 1983. For an evaluation of critical terms used by the 16<sup>th</sup> century biographer Latîfî compare Andrews 1975, in particular 117-131.

<sup>16</sup> Kılıç 1998: 139

combined.<sup>17</sup> In fact the *küşâde* (plain), or as his late sixteenth century biographer Kınalızâde 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 ‘*âşıkâne*’ suggested *gazels* that were sung for beautiful boys. The Ottoman historian Gelibolulu ‘Âlî (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*.<sup>18</sup> 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 *müderri*s 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. ‘Âlî 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 ‘Âlî defends İshak Çelebi, who is slighted by other biographers for being a *mahbûb-dost*, i.e. boy-lover. Clearly, ‘Âlî’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 ‘Âlî 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

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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 *shâhid-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 19<sup>th</sup> century, see footnote 4. However, when evaluated against its seeming opposites *mahbub-dostî*, *zen-dostî* or *zen-perestî* (worship, adoring of women), and inquired historically, they will deliver important clues about the prevalent gender system among the Ottoman learned elite.

erotic, since he adores real boys and calls them by their names. İshak 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 *redîfs*, and listing the beautiful boys of a city.

### *İshak Çelebi's Songs for His Beloved Ones in Üsküp*

As a matter of fact, one of the distinctive features of İshak Çelebi's *dîvân* are his two *şehrengiz*'s. 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 '*Şehrengîz-i İshak Çelebi*' in the *dîvân*, follows the general scheme of the genre that originated in the Ottoman poet Mesîhî's work on Edirne (ca. 1512). By contrast, the '*Şehrengîz-i mahbûbân-i vilâyet-i Üsküp*' stretches the boundaries of the genre in search of a fresh voice.

The initial section of İshak Çelebi's *şehrengiz* for Üsküp is unusually short – only 24 couplets – and thus gives the impression of having been hastily written.<sup>19</sup> In it, he describes the coming of spring (v. 1-13)<sup>20</sup> 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), Pîr 'Alî (vv. 49-60), Mustafa (vv. 61-72), Kılıçoğlu 'Ali Bâlî (vv. 73-84), and Kazancıoğlu Mustafâ (vv. 85-96). The *şehrengiz* ends with a 9-couplet conclusion (vv. 97-105), in which İshak 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 *Şehrengîz of Üsküp* does not look different from other *şehrengiz* texts. But İshak 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 *mesnevî* (paired) rhyme. These poems, composed in different patterns of the *aruz* meter, extol the beauty of the boys by using their names as *redîfs*.

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

<sup>19</sup> According to my ongoing research on the *şehrengiz* genre, the introduction is the most important section of the *şehrengiz*. For instance, İshak Çelebi's *şehrengiz* of Bursa has an introduction of 58 couplets length.

<sup>20</sup> The abbreviation 'v.' stands for verses. All other numbers in parantheses are page numbers in reference to Üsküplü İshak Çelebi 1989, if not specified otherwise.

*Mehemmed Bekir*<sup>21</sup>

- 30.1 *Hususa server-i huban Mehemmed  
K'eren vaslına bulur ömr-i sermed*
- 31.2 *Semend-i naza binse kılşa seyran  
İder aşıkların hak ile yeksan*
- 32.3 *Kamu dilberlerün serdefteridür  
Ya huri ya melek ya hod peridür*
- 33.4 *Ruhın arz eyledükce ol kamerveş  
Düşer aşıkları canına ateş*
- 34.5 *Söze gelse bulur dilmürdeler can  
Yağar san leblerinden Ab-ı Hayvan*
- 35.6 *Bekir derler lakab ol mehlikaya  
İrişür gün yüzinden pertev aya*
- 36.7 *Çü gördüm anı oldum mest ü şeyda  
Dilüme geldi pes bu şiir-i garra*

*Bekir*

- 37.1 *Olalı devlet ile hüsn iline şah Bekir  
Dilrübalar çağırur yarıcun Allâh Bekir*
- 38.2 *Mest olup cam-ı mey-i ışkun ile aşıklar  
Bezm-i gamda çağırur ah Bekir vah Bekir*
- 39.3 *Yoluna can viren aşüfte vü üftadelere  
Rahm idüp bir nazar it lutf ile geh gah Bekir*
- 40.4 *Kanı tali' ki seg-i kuyun ile hemdem olup  
Yüz süreydüm dün ü gün işigüne ah Bekir*
- 41.5 *Vadi-i firKate düşdi gam-ı ışkunla gönül  
Umaram ola hayalün 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.

<sup>21</sup> I am quoting from Üsküplü İshak Çelebi 1989, but replacing the alphabet used in this edition (see Üsküplü İshak 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 forelorn 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 (Mehemmed) 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 İshak 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 İshak Çelebi, who staggers 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' (*şiiir*, v. 36.7), İshak Çelebi explains each subsequent poem in this *şehrengiz* 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*: '*şi'r dile gelmek*' ('a poem starts singing'); '*şi'r okımak*' (to recite a poem, v. 43); '*şi'r inşa eylemek*' (to compose a poem, v. 55); '*şi'r terane kılmak*' (to sing a poem, v. 79); and, finally '*şi'r ile hali i'lam itmek*' (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 *şi'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 *şi'r*, which are incorporated in the larger *mesnevi* structure of the *şehrengiz*, do not con-

tain a poetical signature (*tahallus*) as would be the rule for *gazels*<sup>22</sup>. 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

All the above characteristics show the author's intention to create a new twist on the fashionable *şehrengiz* texts of his period. İshak 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, İshak Çelebi's is innovative on the main body, the list of beauties section.

## Conclusion

In parallel to the poem by Mesihî, with which the genre began,<sup>26</sup> İshak 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. İshak 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

<sup>22</sup> A similar intermingling of *gazel* and *mesnevi* elements can be found in *deh-nâmes* where after every ten sections with *mesnevi* rhyme there is a *gazel*. On this subject, see my article on the *deh-nâme* or 'ten letter' genre in Chagatai literature (Kuru 2004). However, in contrast to the *şehrengiz*, *gazels* in *deh-nâmes* address a messenger. This is generally the morning breeze, which is asked to deliver a message to the beloved one.

<sup>23</sup> It is a common feature to use lyrics as bursts of emotion in narrative poetry. See Dankoff 1984 for more examples.

<sup>24</sup> *Göricek haste-dil geldi huruşa / Bu şiiri okuyup başladı cuşa.*

<sup>25</sup> The *şehrengiz* has the metric pattern *Mefâ'ilün Mefâ'ilün Fe'ülün*. The meters employed in the *gazels* are as follows: *Fe'ilâtün Fe'ilâtün Fe'ilâtün Fe'ilün* (first *gazel*), *Mefâ'ilün Mefâ'ilün Mefâ'ilün Mefâ'ilün* (second *gazel*), *Mef'ülü Fâ'ilâtü Mefâ'ilü Fâ'ilün* (third and fourth *gazel*), *Fâ'ilâtün Fâ'ilâtün Fâ'ilâtün Fâ'ilün* (fifth and sixth *gazel*).

<sup>26</sup> See Gibb 1900-1909, vol. 2: 231-235) for a detailed description of this work.

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.<sup>27</sup>

In his *şehrengiz*, İshak Çelebi brings together mystical yearning and homoeroticism 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, İshak Çelebi's poem speaks to us with his own voice.

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<sup>27</sup> Kılıç 1998: 320.

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