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Homoeroticism in the Early Ottoman Empire

Grant Rosinko

“In our time, the popularity of beardless youths, smooth-cheeked boys, and well-behaved lads, whose sweet beauty is apparent, exceeds the popularity [women] possessed of beauty and loveliness...Furthermore, smooth-cheeked lads are loving friends and companions to their masters both on campaign and at home. But, from that perspective, those moon faces of the female gender are neither constant friends nor close companions.”

— Ottoman Poet Mustafa ‘Ali on Etiquette¹

European travel accounts of the Ottoman Empire from the eighteenth century often remark on the moral depravity of sexual practices, especially of what is termed as “sodomy.” The observant English traveler Adolphus Slade, a naval officer who often wrote well informed, balanced and even empathetic accounts remarked with disgust “boys fetch a much higher price than girls for evident reasons: in the East, unhappily, they are also subservient to pleasure.”² These narratives painted the Ottomans as sexually perverse creating the image of a morally deprived east. In the words of a U.S. naval officer Walter Colton, “The Turk’s morality flows from a different source.”³ By the time these encounters were taking place, Ottoman and European sexuality had greatly diverged, as is seen in the shock and condemnation expressed by European travelers. However, it appears that it was not the Ottomans whose sexual practices diverged, so much as it was the Europeans. Homoerotic

¹ Andrews, Walter G., and Mehmet Kalpakli. *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the beloved in early-modern ottoman and european culture and society* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2005), 137-138

² Ze’evi, Dror. *Producing Desire: changing sexual discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 156.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

behavior in the Ottoman Empire that European travelers found so shocking was in close continuity with a Greco-Roman past.

Schick argues that Ottoman society was divided into a three-gender system that. In this system, there were men, women, and boys.⁴ Each gender had a socially acceptable role to play in a sexual relationship, and deviation from this was a source of criticism and condemnation. Men were thought to be at the top of the structure, and were always cast in the role of the active partner, and expected to be the penetrator in all sexual encounters. In the words of an Ottoman poet, “The art of liwat [the active partner in a homoerotic relationship] is the way of masculinity.”⁵ In one of Gazali’s most famous works, his portrayal of men in the role of penetrator in all sexual encounters, with both women and boys garnered no small praise from other poets, as well as the wealthy upper class from whom he was attempting to attain sponsorship.⁶ The categories in his work are “how to enjoy the company of girls,” “masturbation, nocturnal emissions and bestiality,” “the passive homosexuals” and “the pimps.”⁷ These categories list sexual objects for the enjoyment of men, including women, boys, girls, passive men, and animals. In his exposition, it is clear that only two of those categories were illicit and taboo, and those were passive men and animals. This created a system where the man was given the expectation of being the penetrator and was allowed to exert this right on all other people, aside from other fully-grown men.

In both Roman and Ottoman culture, the gender role of the boy was to be the passive partner for a man. The acceptable time for this type of relationship seemed to start around the

⁴ Schick, Irvin C. "What Ottoman erotica teaches us about sexual pluralism." *Aeon*.

⁵ El-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago And London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 21.

⁶ Kuru, Selim S. “A Sixteenth Century Scholar Deli Birader and his *Dafu'u l-gumun ve rafi'u'l-humum*” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2000), 10, 12, 15.

⁷ Kuru, Selim S. "Sex in the Text: Deli Birader's *Dai u 'l-gumun ve Rafi'u 'l-humun* and the Ottoman Literary Canon" *Middle Eastern Literatures* 10, no. 2 (August 2007): 157-174.

transition from childhood to youth, and end when physical maturity stopped, which was marked by the growing of a beard in Ottoman culture, or a moustache in Roman culture.⁸ Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiyah is quoted as having said "I was beardless for twenty years, fully bearded for twenty years, I plucked grey hairs from it for twenty years, and dyed it for twenty years." Even the scholar Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi celebrated his beard growth at age fourteen which indicates that there was an association with the development of facial hair as a marker for transitions in life, most importantly the transition from boyhood into being a man.⁹ The transition from the social and sexual role of this third gender as the boy was marked by biological features, most importantly, the lack of a beard. It was then the growth of the beard that indicated the transition of the boy into his new gender and social role as a man.

Fighting against this natural biological transition between the genders was seen as taboo in both Roman and Ottoman culture. Seneca wrote of his disgust for the men who removed the beards of their favorite boys and the term "exoletus" was used to denote those who had overgrown the acceptable age for this relationship to take place.¹⁰ In Turkish there was a similar word, "natif" literally meaning "plucked" which indicated the same idea. Yusuf al-Shirbini wrote that "if his beard starts to grow, and he enjoys being effeminate or – God forbid – he has ubnah, he will constantly shave his beard and beautify himself for the libertine."¹¹ Once the beard was grown, the boy had become a man, and as a man, it was no longer acceptable for him to be the passive partner. His gender role had changed, and attempting to maintain this past role was socially unacceptable.

Just as the transition from boyhood to manhood was indicated by a physical process, namely the growth of a beard, the desire for a man to stay in this previous role as a passive

⁸ Airés, Philippe, and André Béjin. *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*. Translated by Anthony Forster (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 32. Also referenced by El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 31.

⁹ El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 31.

¹⁰ Philippe, *Western Sexuality*, 32.

¹¹ Ibid.

partner was seen as a sickness or a physical ailment. The Ottoman medical tradition was to characterize males who desired to be anally penetrated as “ubnah” or afflicted with a disease and it followed a similar Greek tradition.¹² In language of abuse against the participants in a homoerotic relationship, “luti” was always used to imply moral deficiency in the active partner. On the other hand, ubnah, was always used for the passive partner, and denoted an effeminate man, who often suffered from other physical ailments, such as a cough, dried lips a languid look and the desire to be penetrated.¹³ One cause of ubnah was thought to be the imbalance of male and female sperm at conception, which resulted in the erogenous zone of the male being closer to his anus than it was for other males.¹⁴ Gazali also wrote that the sperm of young boys was so powerful, that if it ever entered a man it would cause a worm in his anus which desired more sperm and thus would cause an itch that can only be satisfied by being penetrated, a concept which is very similar to ubnah.¹⁵ Just in the language, there is already a clear difference between the two participants in a homoerotic relationship: there was the man who was expected be active, and if he were to be criticized, it was condemned from a perspective of morality which is indicative of his different societal and gender role as a man. The active partner was morally irresponsible, a defect in character in choice. The other role was the boy who was expected to be passive, and if there was criticism to this role, it centered around the passive partner having outgrown his role, thus indicating a biological sickness or ubnah. This shows the subordinate nature of this role, as seen by it being mostly absolved of moral condemnation.

Common tropes in both the Greco-Roman world and the Ottoman Empire reinforced this idea and played on the concept of who is penetrating whom in these relationships. A Greek poet wrote of Athens as “a city of gapers” connecting the passive partner with a social

¹² El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*, 38.

¹⁵ Kuru, *Sex in the Text*, 163.

role of inferiority or social shame.¹⁶ Al-Khawarizmi makes a similar insult against his opponent saying “He feigns to profess ‘the divine Promise and Eternity’ then goes away by himself to put many a penis in his ass.”¹⁷ This insult style shows an implicit belief in society that the line of acceptability in sex was not drawn on the basis of the sex of the partner, but on a role defined by age. These insults play off not the act of being penetrated itself, but off the expectation that the one being penetrated was too old for his role. In an interesting twist, a poet who joked about his own role as being a passive partner had this verse penned about him “[He] was the most active sodomite that there could be and the furthest from what he accused himself of.”¹⁸ The use of the word “accuse” instead of “joke” in relation to him calling himself a catamite implies that this role was only seen in relation to being an insult because he was older than the acceptable age and had grown his beard. It is also interesting to note that while he was “accused” of being a sodomite, he was in reality “furthest from what he accused himself of,” the furthest thing being an active partner. The idea that the farthest thing to be imagined from a man who was a passive partner was a man who was an active partner shows an implicit assumption that homoeroticism itself was defined based on the age of the participants relative to their role, rather than the act itself. This is the space in which the boy finds his gender role, after childhood and before manhood.

Another feature of Ottoman homoeroticism was that it was often juxtaposed with the love of women. This was based off what appears to be a simple comparison between two separate genders both of which were fit to be sexual objects for men. Sex with boys was often justified and praised in contrast with the danger and sometimes even immorality which was associated with women and owed in part to a very Greco-Roman heritage. In *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*, the author cautioned his readers through story about the

¹⁶ Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (N.p.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 121.

¹⁷ Babayan, Kathryn, and Afsaneh Najmabadi, eds. *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008), 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

dangers of women. In this story, Bahloul lamented the fact that he had taken two wives saying “I’ve taken two wives, poor fool that I am.”¹⁹ From the outset of this story it exhorts the reader to be cautious in taking multiple wives, because he found himself “nightly...put to the test by two ravenous wolves.”²⁰ This seems to be the reflection of a deeper medical belief about sexuality, found in Greece with Galenic medicine, where men were thought to have a limited quantity of sexual energy, which if exhausted could lead to impotence and disease.²¹ In this theory, the act of sex was not reciprocal, and male energy was siphoned by the female through the imbalance of body heat. Since women were believed to have more of this sexual energy than men, it was important for a man to preserve his energy otherwise he risked becoming impotent and therefore having his masculinity undermined.²² In the context of the story, Bahloul expressed this medical understanding of how having multiple wives can be detrimental to a man’s health by comparing his two wives to “ravenous wolves” who would drain his sexual energy each night by their inherently larger sexual appetites, echoing the warning of Hesiod who said “women are horniest, but men most debilitated.”²³

Greek literature cast the woman as the cause of many of mankind’s problems. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, the first woman, Pandora, was responsible for scattering sufferings, labor, and sickness all over the earth. Hesiod plainly states that “She devised miserable cares for human beings” implying an intentional act by women to cause misery on earth.²⁴ In the Ottoman story, Bahloul concluded his lament by offering similar advice to “live as a bachelor, without trouble and strife, but if that is something that cannot be done, then from that awful regiment, take only one!”²⁵ Although hyperbolized, it seems that the

¹⁹ Ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi, Muhammad. *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*. Translated by Jim Colville (London And New York: Kegan Paul International, 1999), 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ Skinner, *Sexuality*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵ Al-Nafzawi, *The Perfumed Garden*, 11.

problem posed to Bahloul was not simply having too many wives, but having a wife at all. In a very Greco-Roman fashion, the woman was a source of misery in the life of men. This poem implies that the danger presented by women was seen as real and present even with only one wife. Women were still seen in a role of being trouble makers and causing misery for men. Another Ottoman poet said “When someone asked a wise man if it would be good to marry, he responded, ‘If it is your desire to go from being a complete person to being a fragmented one, then by all means marry.’”²⁶

This Greco-Roman fear of women’s ability to exhaust and drain men of their potency became one of the foundational tropes in the comparison of boys and women. It served as a source of moral justification for why a beloved male was sometimes argued to be more desirable and acceptable than a female, in a framework where both are implied to be a valid sexual partner for a man. There was a belief that simply through the act of admiring the beauty of a woman one would become effeminate, and that instead it was better to admire male beauty. The poet Gazali framed a debate between men who chased boys, and men who chased women, describing the womanizers as wearing “their feminine little robes” and being weakened by cowering in a “dark cave”, a reference to the vagina.²⁷ Their physical strength and appearance from dress is affected negatively by their pursuit of women. On the other hand, the lovers of boys are described as “their arms are powerful, they make a magnificent show, and their movements are manly.”²⁸ The fear of women is now being put in contrast with a praise of male beauty.

This is also seen in *The Thousand and One Nights* and the story of Maimunah and Dahnash. In this story, the female jinn, Maimunah, is portrayed as more powerful and intelligent than the male jinn, Dahnash. A conflict arose between them when they saw a girl

²⁶ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 133.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

and a boy who were identical in every way “except for their middle parts.” Maimunah favored the boy as more attractive, where Dahnash favored the girl.²⁹ In this story, the role reversal of having a more powerful female jinn, Maimunah, is contingent on her praise of the masculine character in the story. In praising a boy, Maimunah assumes the social role of a man, being the more powerful and intelligent character as compared to her counterpart who advocates the beauty of the girl and is characterized as less powerful, less intelligent and is placed in a role of deference and submission even though he is a man. The idea here is that one will take on the same characteristics as the object of admiration, so the admiration of women would make a man more effeminate and weaker, whereas the praise of male beauty would be able to make even a woman more powerful. The story also made a universal point that “you must be a fool or blind not to know...that, if there is equality between a male and a female, the male bears off the prize.”³⁰ The lesson being conveyed is that even for a man, the beauty that is to be most admired is in another man, even when in comparison to an equally beautiful woman. The love of woman is placed in one category, which echoes the Greco-Roman belief it is possibly dangerous, and undermining of a man’s masculinity and virility, and the praise of male beauty is presented as the better choice. The contrast of men who praise boys versus men who praise women is a common theme in Ottoman literature, and this dynamic shows an implicit belief that both boys and women can be acceptable objects for men to praise, with a slight moral edge given to boys. This emphasizes their distinct roles in society, and how they are viewed as two separate categories to be compared so that men can decide which best suits his sexual desires.

The previously discussed tale by Gazali took this belief a step beyond simply praising appearances, and instead praised homoerotic affairs with males as more morally acceptable

²⁹ Babayan, *Islamicate Sexualities*, 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

than affairs with females. In his story, conflict between lovers of boys and lovers of women escalated until the lovers of boys chased the womanizers down with the intent to kill them. Ultimately Satan had to intervene to prevent some of his followers from being killed. Not only does this again demonstrate how the lovers of women take the weaker role in being unable to defend themselves by the more powerful lovers of boys, but the intervention of Satan seems to imply that sex with women outside of marriage is more morally damaging to society than sex with boys.³¹ The intervention of Satan into the story seems to be commentary on the moral superiority of affairs with boys as opposed to women. Although both sides are cast as immoral by their association to Satan and how he mediated their discussion, at the end of the day, the undermining of the societal value of masculinity through the love of women makes the womanizers more morally corrupting to society in this story and thus merits Satan's protection. The biographer of the poet Azizi Misri said of him "He was a lover of women, but then only God is without fault."³² He then criticizes his work for the same reason, saying "Given it has the peculiarity of not describing beloved boys and taking that failing into account, it is still worthy of praise."³³ These authors make a clear point that an adulterous sexual relationship with a boy is less morally corrupting to society than an affair with a woman, and even go as far to criticize authors who have a personal preference for only women. Although they may not have represented the entirety of society, it is clear that among the Ottoman elite, there was a common school of thought which not only saw both women and boys as acceptable sexual partners, but differentiated them into separate categories, praising boys as being both morally better and more attractive.

Homoerotic behavior in Greece and the Ottoman Empire both had the undertone of a rite of passage, or transition from boyhood into manhood demonstrated in these sexual

³¹ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 137.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

relationships. In ancient Greece, some of the oldest records that mention male homoerotic relationships treated it as a rite of passage into society and the sexual gratification of the active partner appeared to be secondary, or altogether unimportant. The passage of boyhood into adulthood in Crete involved a ritual of abduction where a lover announced to the boy's relatives that he was going to abduct him.³⁴ The boy then had to hide until he was found. The pair then would go into the wilderness for two months, and when they returned, the boy was given ritual gifts symbolizing his entrance into adulthood and was also given the chance to recount his relations with the lover.³⁵ This rite indicates that some of the oldest homoerotic practices in Greece stemmed from the linking of the older generation to the younger through the bond of a sexual relationship. Although there is some debate as to whether the initiation process was the origin of this type of pederastic relationship, both ancient Greece and Rome continued to have an undertone of training a boy for his role in the adult world, even when this relationship had become overtly sexual in nature.

This idea that sex and the transmission of a role across generations through the same act is seen in the treatment of bodily fluid. This has been a tradition observed even by modern anthropologists in the southwestern Pacific region, where semen is viewed as the physical medium that masculinity is passed between generations.³⁶ Similarly, in the early twentieth century, a Sufi master described the process of training a disciple. He wrote how the first task of the master was to destroy the disciple's ego, by placing him in female roles, in grinding flour and washing clothes.³⁷ The power of the master was thought to be passed to the disciple through contact with garments, possession, and even bodily contact which included spitting into the disciple's mouth.³⁸ Although this example was drawn from a

³⁴ Skinner, *Sexuality*, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷ Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

more modern time period, it seems to still hold traditions that recall earlier Sufi practices that were popular during the relevant period in the Ottoman Empire.

A similar style of initiation in the Cretan ritual can be seen in Ottoman society through Nev'izade 'Atayi's mesnevi poem, *Heft han*. During this period, there was a problem of "beardless youth" who were unattached to a household or an occupation.³⁹ The fourth story focuses on two young men, Tayyib and Tahir, who find themselves in a similar situation. After finishing their education, both their parents had passed away, and they were left to "roam Galata drinking and making merry."⁴⁰ They soon found themselves destitute. After being rescued from a shipwreck by some Italian naval vessels, two higher ranking Italian men take notice of the boys, and put them to work in their houses gardens, a very symbolic location of love within Ottoman literature at the time. In the story, their rescue and subsequent employment is characterized with an undertone of romance. Initially, Tayyib just works in the garden doing simple tasks for his patron, Sir John. This tending to the garden is symbolic of Tayyib tending to his own feelings of love for his patron and eventually Sir John takes notice of the lovesick Tayyib. With the ritual in Crete, the lover is expected to hunt down the boy who had hidden himself. However, in hiding, there was always the expectation that he will be found, and this finding would initiate the process that was to bring him into manhood. Similarly, Tayyib conceals his love, with the expectation of his lover would eventually notice his love and bring him into a patronage relationship which will eventually usher him into the world of manhood. With the recognition of Tayyib's love by Sir John, he was incorporated into a social circle and given gifts to match his new status, just as the boy in the Cretan ritual was given gifts to signify his newfound manhood upon returning from the wilderness. This rite of passage and incorporation into society indicates that this role of boys

³⁹ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

as sexual partners was a temporary time, between childhood and manhood, where he became sexually available, but this ended with both his biological maturity with the growth of the beard and his integration into society.

Legal tradition also suggests the notion of a third gender by treating affairs with boys in the same manner as affairs with women. There was a large debate in the religious schools of thought around the act of “liwat” or what came to be understood as anal sex, sometimes specifically in a homoerotic context but also sometimes between a man and a woman. The debate centered on whether it should be seen as hadd, an offense against God, which would place it in the same category as “zina” meaning any sex with a female outside of the permitted four wives.⁴¹ Although Ottoman secular law used religious shari’a law as a source, Suleyman’s kanunname created a secular law which played off of the difficulty of meeting the requirements in shari’a law to convict someone of a hadd offense, allowing for a separate secular code to take effect in nearly every case.⁴² Under this kanunname and later sultanic codes, zina and liwat were recast as identical crimes which faced a relatively minor penalty. Under Suleyman’s kanunname in both adultery and same sex intercourse, all perpetrators in the act were expected to pay the same monetary fine.⁴³ Legally, the only acceptable type of sex was to happen within the confines of the permitted four wives in marriage. However, stepping outside of marriage, the equating between sex with boys and women under secular law seems to indicate that these two acts were considered the same.

This also raises the question that if there was indeed a third gender present in elite Ottoman society, how could it have developed or flourished if it was illegal? The answer appears to be that there was an understanding that as long as affairs were not too public, that they were acceptable, at least among the elite. When looking into actual cases, it appears that

⁴¹ Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*, 50-56.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60-65.

⁴³ Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*, 65-66.

zina was often punished more severely than liwat.⁴⁴ There are also relatively few cases of liwat that were actually tried. In the cases that were, it was affairs that were too public or crossed a political line, and did not attempt to be discrete. In the case of al-Nasiar, a high ranking Mamluk official who was having a homoerotic relationship, he was punished first with a fine, and then by exile. In both cases, the charges brought against him were more because of how public his affairs were and how immediately his committal of a second affair was.⁴⁵ Although this took place in Mamluk-controlled Cairo, it illustrates a case of punishment for being in blatant and repeat violation of the law as the primary cause.

If an ample attempt was made to carry these affairs out in private, no fuss was made.⁴⁶ There was a case of a woman who opened up a brothel, after having been expelled from another city for doing the same thing. She was married to a janissary who was away. There was more than ample evidence to convict her of running a brothel again, and committing zina. Instead, she was fined because the other women in the brothel were not wearing veils, and held until the return of her husband.⁴⁷ Even in a case of a woman who had no male protector, seemingly an easy target to apply the law in full force, there was a hesitance to apply any condemnation to her sexual practices, instead she was fined for having women interacting with men without a veil. It seems that the ultimate reason for her punishment was offending community morality by being too visible. The ruling says that these women were interacting without veils, which caused gossip that threatened the moral climate of the community.⁴⁸ In another case, Zeyd, a man of learning who was betrothed to a woman named Hind. The question presented to the Ebu's-su'ud is whether it is legal for Hind to be given to a man named Bekr instead. The decision is that "It is unworthy of a Muslim that

⁴⁴ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 80.

⁴⁵ Babayan, *Islamicate Sexualities*, 214.

⁴⁶ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

they should prefer anyone to a man of learning.”⁴⁹ The follow up question was what if Hind is given to Bekr instead of Zeyd because Zeyd is too poor? The ruling is the same, “Zeyd’s learning is better than Amr’s worldly goods. He should prefer learning.”⁵⁰ It was completely legal to give Hind to Bekr by the letter of the law, however the legal ruling demonstrated an implicit assumption in Ottoman society, that law was not supposed to apply to all people the same way. For the elite, it seems that there was a measure of leeway where if they were not in blatant and repeated violations of these laws, they were free to carry on conducting affairs with women and boys alike. The actual legal condemnation of zina and liwat went largely unenforced and would have had little impact on the actual functioning of a third gender.

It is hard to tell the extent to which these beliefs stretched into society because there is often very little evidence left outside of art and literature which represents the elite’s perspective. One way to try and examine the extent of homoeroticism is to speculate on its causes, which seems to indicate that it was most prevalent in the upper class. In both Greece and the Ottoman Empire, there was a popular trope that imagined places where men and boys interacted which caused this behavior. Aristophanes wrote how boys in the gymnasium must be careful to cover themselves and never to oil himself below the navel to avoid attracting the attention of older men. Likewise, in Ottoman society, popular imaginations often envisioned locations such as bath houses to have this homoerotic undertone, and this was even reflected in an entire genre of sometimes erotic cityscape poetry which featured these locations.⁵¹ In an Athenian critique of Cretan and Spartan homoeroticism, they blamed the agoge system. This system was aimed at producing elite troops for warfare, and involved separating young males away from society for thirteen years for military training.⁵² The brunt of the Athenian accusation was that it was this isolation from women that caused sexual relations between

⁴⁹ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 287.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵¹ Samar, Habib, ed. *Islam and Homosexuality* (Vol. 1. Santa Barbra: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 39.

⁵² Skinner, *Sexuality*, 64.

men. A similar military system existed under the Ottomans. Murad I created the Janissaries by taking non-Muslim boys as slaves during early childhood and isolated them into barracks where they trained for many years.⁵³ Selim Kuru proposed that some of the conflicting language over homoerotic behavior was actually created along a social division between the military elite, who would only have had access to boys in the barracks versus bureaucratic elite who had easier access to women.⁵⁴ In Gazali's poems, he also stated that boys are one of the best objects of sexual desire, because they are easily tempted by coins and already inhabited the same areas in society.⁵⁵ It appears that both Greek and Ottoman societies had institutions that separated men into their own isolated category. In this space it was both implied at the time, and even by some modern scholars that it was these spaces that fostered homoerotic relations. Locations such as bathhouses were often frequented by the elite, and the Janissary corps was one of the primary methods of recruitment into the Ottoman bureaucracy. This, coupled with a more direct line of connection to Greco-Roman culture, could in part indicate that homoerotic behavior and this third gender role for boys existed mostly among the elite in Ottoman society. However, the Janissaries were selected from a diverse spectrum from the population so if it did in fact contribute to this trend, it likely helped disperse it through a broad range of people which even extended into the lower classes.

Some modern scholars also argue that homoerotic behavior was caused by accessibility issues that mostly affected the elite of society, either by preventing physical access to women, as in the army, or the ability to have a public courtship and thus depriving them of some type of emotional or cultural need. One theory proposed by Ze'evi as well as by Andrews and Kalpakli is that in Islamic culture at the time, it was taboo to reference the

⁵³ Itzkowitz, Norman. *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 21.

⁵⁴ Kuru, *Sex in the Text*, 163.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

beauty of woman. For a woman to be singled out for erotic interests during this time was an insult to her, and to her family, who's duty it was to protect her virginity.⁵⁶ So from this perspective, the constraints of religion in society necessitated creating a new group which could be the object of romantic interest, which suggests a lack of ability to court women as a primary cause. Khaled El-Rouayheb criticizes the hypothesis of physical accessibility, demonstrating that there was widespread access to prostitutes in most major cities in the Islamic world during this time period. He argues that gender segregation and arranged marriages did not make women any less sexually available. Instead, these barriers served more to block courtship, instead proposing that homoerotic literature and behavior filled a gap in courtship rather than sex itself.⁵⁷ In both hypotheses there appears to be a set of factors that impacted mostly the elite, suggesting that it would be more prevalent in the higher classes of society.

Regardless of the actual causes of this behavior, it also seems to have been a mark of elite culture in the Ottoman Empire. Even writers at the time appear to be conscious of the connection between elite culture and homoeroticism. The seventeenth century philosopher Mulla Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi explicitly makes this connection in his work. He claims that God created desire between men and women simply for the perpetuation of the species, and this was therefore seen in all mankind, but the mark of an educated and refined society is the pederastic attraction between men and boys, because this would ensure that learning, art, and civilization would be transmitted from generation to generation.⁵⁸ Even within Ottoman thought there was a tendency to associate homoeroticism with the elite which indicates that this was likely where it was most common.

⁵⁶ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 43-44. Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 8.

⁵⁷ El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

The other major social group which seem to have exhibited this third gender were the Sufis, who at the time were vying to be the most popular branch of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, and used homoeroticism as a gateway to the divine. During this time, Jami was a scholar and writer of Sufi literature and often wrote in the defense of the famous Sufi master, Ibn Arabi. It was said of him that “he continually witnessed the beauty of the Real in its metaphorical manifestations” and “insistently trod the path of external, metaphorical love, this being the bridge to the Real.”⁵⁹ The fundamental way to experience the divine according to Ibn Arabi and Jami was to connect with the divine through beauty, and love. In Sufism, there were devotees of *shahid-bazi*, or the admiration of handsome, beardless boys who were seen as witnesses to the beauty of the divine.⁶⁰ Allegedly, Jami entered the Sufi path through a dream where he was advised to cure the pain of separation from his lover by taking God as his beloved. When asked later in his life if he would abandon this love of young men, he responded by asking if his questioner would give up bread and water.⁶¹

This *shahid-bazi* tradition in Sufism also idealized youth who were “smooth cheeked, just like a bare rock and a bare patch of ground where no vegetation grows” as being the subjects who can be gazed upon to impel a connection to God.⁶² This idea of gazing on beardless youth began to increase in popularity among many Sufi orders. One such Egyptian order used the term “*bidayat*” to denote especially handsome young novices who were permitted to be alone with higher ranking members to be touched.⁶³ These practices were justified because “all beauty is the beauty of God” which another scholar, Mustafa al-Bakri,

⁵⁹ Algar, Hamid. "Jami and Ibn 'Arabi: Khatam al-Shu'ara' and Khatam al-Awliya." *Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 3 (2012): 138-58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Hamid, Jami and ibn 'Arabi, 142.

⁶³ El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 37.

advocated was best accomplished through gazing at boys rather than women in order to adhere to Islamic law.⁶⁴

This practice led to an association between Sufi orders and homoeroticism. In 1638, the same time that the Kadizadeli were becoming very popular, the Meccan judge Ahmad al-Murshidi said of the Sufis “they have outdone the people of Lot by adding the beating of drums to fornication” which is an explicit accusation of more than just gazing, but of actual homoerotic intercourse.⁶⁵ In principle no sexual relationships were supposed to take place, however it seems these boundaries were broken down during ritual dances known as Sama, where physical boundaries which were in place were often disregarded.⁶⁶ Just as in the elite practices, Sufi rituals focused on a male beloved who embodied this idea of a third gender, a beardless boy who was used for beauty and pleasure that took on the role in the Sufi context of being a way of interacting with the divine. The addition of many branches of Sufism to the list of parts of Ottoman culture which exhibited this third gender shows that it was integrated into religious practices. Sufism was also a very popular religion with common people being one of the largest religious groups, and in contention to be the dominant form of Islam within the Empire at this time, so there was likely dispersal into common culture from this group as well.

In the mid sixteenth, early seventeenth century a controversy over the permissibility of homoeroticism came to the forefront of society as a subsection of critiques levied against Sufis and Ottoman elites for immorality. Studying this wave of criticism reveals certain areas of society which were clearly not influenced by, or at least unaccepting of homoeroticism and this third gender. This wave of criticism shows that there was an upwardly mobile class within society which was increasingly being integrated into Ottoman bureaucracy which

⁶⁴ El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*, 37.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ze’evi, *Producing Desire*, 82-83.

opposed homoeroticism, at least on the grounds of the legal inequality it represented by its selective enforcement. It also demonstrates that there was a large moralizing movement which viewed homoeroticism, along with other practices such as music, alcohol, and adultery as unacceptable behavior among the elite. In the early sixteen hundreds, a new religious movement began gaining popularity among the lower classes in society. These Kadizadeli took a moralizing tone, and advocated that everyone should be treated equally. This attacked the privileged position that the elite enjoyed under Ottoman law, and the blind eye turned to their practice of homoeroticism and zina, as well as other practices such as music and alcohol.⁶⁷ In a description from one his *Counsel for Sultans* Mustafa Ali cites one of the factors leading to Ottoman ruin at this time was “the hypocritical parasites, the preachers of our time, who attack God’s servants with all kinds of slander and gloating and abuse and insult them by way of interfering with their acts and words” by “attracting thousands upon thousands of simpleminded commoners to their gatherings.”⁶⁸ This is a defense of an upper class elite against a new perceived threat from a moralizing religious movement gaining widespread support.

During the same time, if not slightly earlier, the Ottoman bureaucracy divided into three distinct branches which created a need for increasingly specialized bureaucrats.⁶⁹ This new demand caused an increase in upward social mobility for moderately well-off families who could afford to educate their sons. This meant as opposed to earlier times, there was an increase in diversity in high level administration in both Istanbul and other major cities. The Kadizadeli movement also created a change in the religious hierarchy by using their

⁶⁷ Zilfi, Madeline C. "The Kadizadeli: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (October 1996): 251-69. Jstor.

⁶⁸ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 88.

⁶⁹ Atcil, Abdurrahman. "The Route to the Top in the Ottoman *ilmiye* Hierarchy of the Sixteenth Century." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 72 (2009): 489-512. Jstor.

popularity to pressure the elite.⁷⁰ These two new sources that increasingly fed into the high-ranking elite in the Ottoman Empire often reflected the new found moralizing populism of the lower classes, in the case of the Kadizadeli, and the belief that undermined elite privilege and special status under the law, in favor of an approach that treated everyone equally.

In this context, it is interesting to return to the story of Tayyib and Tahir, the two boys who developed a relationship of patronage with two Christian men from the Italian nobility. After they are incorporated into their patron's social circle, a homoerotic relationship blossoms between both couples, who were "observed by an evil, trouble making wag tongue who made general gossip of it."⁷¹ This came to the town's police official who was "a vengeful wretch, a raving infidel ... a mighty blight upon the earth" and arrested the four with the intent to execute them.⁷² However, because of the intervention of a crowd, they are instead sentenced to work as slaves on a galley, which is eventually captured by the Ottoman navy. After the miraculous conversion of Sir John and his companion to Islam, the four of them live happily ever after in Istanbul.

This story was written in the early seventeenth century at the time of this increasingly moral language, and upward social mobility. There was a strong language used to portray the police officer who was intolerant of this relationship as a "vengeful wretch," an infidel, a "blight upon the earth" and the closest thing the story had to an antagonist. His "believing love a crime," cast him as a raving infidel lunatic who did not understand love, in contrast to the wiser culture of Istanbul which embraced this love under Islam. In painting the sides in this way, the Kadizadeli and the new class of upwardly socially mobile bureaucrats who also tended to condemn these relationships fell into the same category as the police officer. They are cast as not truly understanding Ottoman culture, or Islam, and are instead compared to a

⁷⁰ Zilfi, *The Kadizadelis*, 265.

⁷¹ Andrews, *The Age of Beloveds*, 61.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 61.

foreign Christian culture which was not as sophisticated. The Ottoman elite understood themselves to be under attack, and countered by asserting that homoerotic behavior was, in fact, more in line with Islamic tradition, more consistent with a sophisticated culture and truer to the nature of love itself.

Ultimately, Sufism lost the battle to become the dominant form of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, and the elite were pressured to keep their affairs more discretely, but this did not mean the end of homoerotic practices. A strong culture continued to exist among the Sufi orders and the elite of society far into the future so that when European travelers came to visit well into the nineteenth century they could remark as Colton had, how the Ottomans must have drawn such “morality...from a different source.”⁷³

⁷³ Ze'evi, *Producing Desire*, 158.

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