

B. Deniz Çalış-Kural,

**Şehrengiz, *Urban Rituals and Deviant Sufi Mysticism in Ottoman Istanbul*,**

Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014, xiii + 276 pp., ISBN 978-147-2427-09-0.

B. Deniz Çalış-Kural's *Şehrengiz, Urban Rituals and Deviant Sufi Mysticism in Ottoman Istanbul* is the first book-length study in English to focus on the *şehrengiz*, sometimes translated as "city thriller", a genre of Ottoman poetry that flourished between the early 16<sup>th</sup> and the early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and that presents poetic descriptions partly of Ottoman cities such as Istanbul, Edirne, and Bursa, but primarily of various beautiful shop boys who live and work in those cities. The book promises to show how "*şehrengiz* poems were talking about urban rituals performed in city spaces ... as a subtext for secret gatherings" (p. ix), specifically secret gatherings by members of the heterodox Melami-Bayrami Sufi sect, which was influenced by the thought of the philosopher and mystic Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240). From this basic premise, the author claims that, through *şehrengiz* poetry, "marginal groups ... emphasized the autonomy of the individual self and aimed at reconciling orthodox and heterodox worlds and thus their spaces and inhabitants in ideal spaces of Sufi imagination and real spaces of the city" (*ibid.*). This is a bold and provocative claim, but unfortunately it is one that the book as a whole fails to adequately support, as will be outlined below.

In Chapter 1, Çalış-Kural introduces the concepts and material that constitute the main arguments of the book. She explores the garden as a locus of power and dissent in the Ottoman Empire, stressing two different approaches: for the orthodox actors of the state, gardens were a site of authority reflecting the imperial presence and serving as a means of social control, while for heterodox and marginal Sufi groups, gardens and the gatherings held there were loci of individual enlightenment and liberation. She also points out how heterodox groups, particularly the Melami-Bayrami sect that is her focus, envisioned urban spaces in an analogous way, since the urban landscape was an open space more able than a garden to accommodate a focus on individual experience and a potential challenge to the orthodox social order. The author goes on to link urban spaces with the "creative imagination", a term coined by Henry Corbin to summarize Ibn 'Arabi's concept that imagination is the faculty that allows the heart to perceive Being (*i.e.*, the divine) in all things. In connection with this nexus of ideas, Çalış-Kural reads the *şehrengiz* genre as a realistic genre that was "reformist and challenging" (p. 10) because it was suffused

with Ibn ‘Arabi’s conceptual apparatus as filtered through adherents or advocates of the Melami-Bayrami sect which, according to the author, the authors of the *şehrengiz* poetic corpus were all affiliated with. The *şehrengiz* genre is thus said to represent an early instance of the emergence of self-consciousness and individuality within Ottoman lands. However, at no point throughout the study does the author provide any reliable empirical evidence that the *şehrengiz* poets were in fact affiliated with the Melami-Bayrami sect. While this is perhaps understandable given the rather secretive nature of the sect from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it nonetheless reduces the primary thesis of the book to no more than speculation.

Chapter 2 presents a *précis* of the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, focusing especially on how he strove to reconcile the manifest and non-manifest worlds, the physical and the metaphysical, through his conception of imagination and of the *barzakh*, whose literal meaning is “barrier” or “limit” but that Ibn ‘Arabi—who often described the *barzakh* as a garden or a pool—used to refer to a liminal locus that both divides the manifest from the non-manifest and brings them together. After an extended discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, the author turns to his reception in the Ottoman world, which she divides into two phases: (1) from the beginning of the Ottoman polity in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century through the conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II in 1453, and (2) from the conquest through the end of the so-called “Tulip Period” in 1730. The first period centers on four figures: on the one hand, Dawud al-Qaysari (d. c. 1350) and Molla Fenari (d. 1431), depicted as figures representing a central state—and by implication proto-orthodox—interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi; and on the other hand Shaykh Bedreddin (d. 1420) and Hacı Bayram Veli (d. 1429/30), depicted as representatives of a more provincial, peripheral, and heterodox interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi. In discussing the second period, Çaliş-Kural focuses on the deepening split between these orthodox and heterodox strands of interpretation and the increasing contrast between Sunni and Sufi, as well as on the emergence of the Melami-Bayrami sect as a heterodox and marginal Sufi group.

Chapter 3 moves on to discuss Ottoman gardens and garden parties, with the latter being read largely through the twin lenses of Walter G. Andrews’ seminal 1985 work *Poetry’s Voice, Society’s Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* and Victor Turner’s theory of ritual. Here, Çaliş-Kural focuses in particular on how lyric *gazels* formed an integral part of the ritual of Ottoman garden parties, with *gazel* poets adopting the role or persona of a heterodox mystic/lover (*rind*, a term fancifully but conveniently misinterpreted by the author as “a protest character, a dissident” [p. 75]) in opposition to the orthodox pietist figure of the *sufi* or *sofu*. In her

subsequent discussion of the garden as a space, the author expertly emphasizes how Ottoman gardens were richly arranged so as to trigger the imagination of those present, much as the garden party and the *gazels* recited there served as triggers for the imagination of participants and listeners. The chapter also examines how gardens served as interior, ideal, and private spaces set off from the exterior, real, and more public spaces around them.

Chapter 4—the longest chapter and in many ways the heart of the book—constitutes an extended consideration of the *şehrengiz* poetry that is the focus of Çalış-Kural's argument. The first part of the chapter features summaries and analyses of twelve different *şehrengiz* poems written between 1512 and the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, while the second half is devoted to a detailed examination of themes, settings, and characters. Overall, the author interprets the *şehrengiz* poems, with their descriptions of the urban space and of beautiful young shop boys, as the physical and spiritual journeys of individuals within the city. Moreover, she links these texts broadly not only to Sufi literature and other genres such as hagiography and travel literature, but also to the developing urban space of the Ottoman city and those who people it, particularly the guild members who are the objects of description in the *şehrengiz* poems.

While there is perhaps much to recommend certain aspects of such a reading, Çalış-Kural falters in her insistence on linking the poems so closely to both Ibn 'Arabi and the Melami-Bayrami sect. To any reader unfamiliar with these texts, this gives the impression that they are of a mystical bent, but this is emphatically not the case: on the contrary, they are resolutely worldly, and on occasion even profane, poems whose explicitly religious/mystical elements are confined to the largely stylized introductory and concluding material that these poems share with the entire *mesnevi* corpus of which they form a part. The bulk of the *şehrengiz* poems, however, consists almost entirely of descriptions of beautiful shop boys, a fact that the author scarcely mentions and never highlights. What is more, the strain to so directly connect the *şehrengiz* poetry to the thought of Ibn 'Arabi (and thereby to the Melami-Bayrami sect) emerges even on a syntactic level: for instance, the author speaks of how a description by the poet Mesihi (d. 1512) “recalls [Ibn] 'Arabi's description of the realm of imagination as a garden”, of how the same poet's mention of his “fluctuating heart” works “[a]s if recalling [Ibn] 'Arabi's reference to the ‘heart as place [sic] of constant fluctuation” (p. 112, emphases added), and of how the Janissary poet Yahya Bey's (d. 1582) descriptions of mystical love “are like a short summary of [Ibn] 'Arabi's doctrines” (p. 121, emphasis added). These

cannot constitute evidence for a link between the *şehrengiz* and Ibn ‘Arabi. In fact, it is inevitable that such passages will *remind* one of or *resemble* Ibn ‘Arabi, because his thought had a profound influence not simply on the Melami-Bayrami sect, but on all Sufi thought in the Ottoman Empire, and thus on much of the conceptual apparatus of Ottoman poetry, where it will be recalled (to give just one example) that the typical poetic persona adopted was that of the mystic/lover. Overall, this strain on the part of the author gives one the impression that she is herself carrying out a Sufistic reading of what are, at the end of the day, decidedly worldly texts.

The chapter also contains abundant discussion of other examples of literature and belles-lettres—such as narrative *mesnevis*, the seventeenth-century traveler Evliya Çelebi’s *Seyahatname*, and a wide variety of European travel literature—as well as on a variety of other areas, such as the Ottoman cartographic tradition and how it was used to depict an imperial conception of space. While Çalış-Kural’s examination of this material is quite interesting in its own right, she unfortunately does not succeed in making clear what connection it has or what insight it can bring to the *şehrengiz* poems that form the primary subject of the chapter. This lack of, or occasionally forced, connection is indeed one of the chapter’s major problems. For instance, in a section entitled “Participants of *Şehrengiz* Rituals: Poets and Guild Boys”, the shop boys whose descriptions form the bulk of the *şehrengiz* poetry are not discussed at all, but a good deal of space is spent on the poet Ca’fer Çelebi, who did not write a *şehrengiz*. His only connection to the argument is that Çalış-Kural considers (with no evidence) his *mesnevi* entitled *Hevesname* (The Book of Desire) to have had an influence on the *şehrengiz*, and also deems him “a protest character” (p. 154) who showed certain “dissident characteristics” (p. 149)—a notion that, even if it were true, is hardly enough to link him to the supposedly heterodox character of either the *şehrengiz* poems or the Melami-Bayrami sect.

Potentially more fruitful is the idea proposed in this chapter that the *şehrengiz* poems covertly inscribed a rivalry between the cities of Istanbul and Edirne, with the former envisioned as the orthodox imperial center and the latter as the more heterodox center of “anti-imperial tendencies” (p. 161). However, unfortunately, Çalış-Kural provides no examples from the *şehrengiz* poems themselves to illustrate this, and so it remains at the level of speculation. Nevertheless, the aspect of interurban rivalry—whether political or cultural—in the *şehrengiz* genre remains a key subject that deserves more detailed and intensive analysis.

In Chapter 5, Çalış-Kural turns to the so-called “Tulip Period” of 1718–1730, with the focus moving away from the *şehrengiz* to examine this later era’s

new rituals, new conceptions of urban space inspired partly by ambassadorial missions to western Europe, and new approaches to poetry exemplified by Nedim (d. 1730). Overall, this chapter presents a fine overview of how and why such “novelties” emerged when they did, and the author is particularly insightful about how the court and the public came to share space, to a certain extent, on the newly redesigned and relandscaped grounds of Kağthane in Istanbul. Again, however, there are certain flaws stemming from Çalış-Kural’s insistence on connecting the era’s novelties with what she terms the “open development of cultural attitudes illustrated by the [ş]ehrengiz poets” (p. 221), as she labors to show a continuum between the *şehrengiz* genre, the Tulip Period, Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and the Melami-Bayrami sect, and the emergence of a more “modern” individuality. This sometimes even results in awkward attempts to shoehorn in Ibn ‘Arabi-esque phraseology, again reminding one of a Sufistic reading of worldly texts; for example, in relation to the poet Nedim’s frequent depictions of real, as opposed to ideal, places, Çalış-Kural writes, “The real places of the city formed the ‘pool’ necessary for contemplation by the imaginative faculty” (p. 201).

Chapter 6, which serves as the book’s conclusion, attempts to tie all the loose threads together. Following some remarks on landscape as a concept that serves as a connective tissue between a society and its culture, with Ottoman landscape culture accordingly displaying a great diversity that reflects the celestial in the terrestrial, Çalış-Kural makes this pointed statement regarding how all of this links up with the *şehrengiz* poetic corpus: “The genre documented the rituals of marginal Sufi groups bearing deviant philosophies of Sufi mysticism, in the real spaces of different cities and in ideal spaces of the Sufi imagination” (p. 231). This opens a discussion on how the Ottoman orthodox tradition favored tightly controlled interior spaces like the garden, while the heterodox favored “an intermediary space called *barzakh*” (*ibid.*), which “is designated as a place for the attainment of knowledge” (p. 232). Through this reference to Ibn ‘Arabi, the author concludes that, with their enumeration of the Ottoman urban fabric, *şehrengiz* “rituals”—here roughly equating “ritual” and “genre”—led to a manner of expression whereby “[i]n different city spaces, each individual became a beloved one reflecting the divine qualities of God” (*ibid.*). While there is undoubtedly an element of truth to this, one wonders how unique this is to *şehrengiz* poetry: the very same could be said, for instance, of *gazels* (albeit in garden spaces) and even of panegyric *kasides*. The difference seems to lie in Çalış-Kural’s highly doubtful speculation that the *şehrengiz* registers an explicitly Melami-Bayrami “ritual” that

is heterodox and dissident by nature. Although, overall, the author's observations on the *gazel* and the *şehrengiz* as reflective, respectively, of garden and urban space are quite trenchant, the conclusions drawn therefrom—namely, that the *şehrengiz* “gave way to the production of new spatial practices, and in turn to a different understanding of space” (*ibid.*)—are far too, well, conclusive.

It should also be noted, without going into great detail, that for a book predicated on the reading of a genre of early modern Ottoman poetry, there is at times an apparent lack of understanding of certain fundamental poetic terminology. To give just one example, the phrase *ehl-i dil*—meaning “person/people of the heart” and referring to the poetic community, especially in their personas as mystics/lovers—is translated as “master of the tongue” (p. 73). Such misreadings are far too common in the rather slapdash translations of *şehrengiz* poetry peppered throughout the book. In a similar vein, the book could have used the eye of a good editor, particularly one conversant with the Ottoman and/or Islamicate scholarly context, as attested to by such frequent misspellings as *Baharriye* for *bahariyye*, *Ramazanniye* for *Ramazaniyye*, *Beyazid* for *Bayezid*, and *Schimmel* for (Annemarie) *Schimmel*, as well as such mistakes as referring to *Derin Terzioğlu*—whose doctoral dissertation is briefly mentioned in Chapter 1—as a male via the possessive pronoun “his” (p. 19).

Overall, as outlined in some detail above, Çalış-Kural's study is marred by its attempt to read the *şehrengiz* poetic corpus as the explicit expression of a heterodox Melami-Bayrami sensibility, an unfounded assertion that the author unfortunately does not, and cannot, support with reliable empirical evidence. As a result, the study has a very patchwork feel, with its many different approaches and interpretations failing to cohere into a convincing whole. It must be said that the author is on much firmer ground in her readings of landscape, architecture, and private vs. public space than in her interpretation of poetry, and one wishes that *this*—rather than the Ibn 'Arabi–Melami–*şehrengiz* triad—had served more as the focus of the book, which might also have allowed more for the inclusion of such other highly relevant texts as Latifi's (d. 1582) *Evsaf-ı İstanbul* (Description of Istanbul) or Abdurrahman Hibri's (d. 1658/59) *Enisül-müsamirin* (Companion of Evening Entertainments, a history and description of Edirne and its culture) in addition to the *şehrengiz* corpus. As such, the book can, at most, be recommended only for the insight it provides on Ottoman garden and urban landscape and space, but not for the speculations it makes regarding the *şehrengiz* corpus and the “deviant Sufi mysticism” of the title.

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