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ARTICLE

Erotic Encounters: Beauty and Conversion in the Ottoman Frontier

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Abstract

This article focused on the erotic encounters between male characters in the Ottoman frontier epic of the Battalname that led to conversion to Islam. It argues that these moments of eroticism between two male warriors parallel other literary and cultural expressions wherein male-male eroticism was the norm. Romantic and erotic encounters in these frontier epics have focused on the much more limited cases of female-male interactions, obscuring the fact that these were more often the exception. While male-male eroticism has been largely studied for elite literary works, narratives considered to be expressions of folktale have been treated as if they belong to separate cultural worlds. I show that some of the language of eroticism and conversion had strong parallels between the two forms of cultural expression and thus highlight the normalized all-male space of eroticism both in the Ottoman frontier and in nascent Ottoman urban culture.

According to legend, a young Muslim boy named Cafer decided to visit an infidel king in his palace, located some distance from the city of Malatya in eastern Anatolia. The Christian king, Mihriyayil, had been responsible for killing Cafer's father, a Muslim general and warrior renowned for fighting against the "infidels." When Cafer arrived at the palace, he saw a garden with a throne in it. Placing his trust in God, he slept on the throne, where Mihriyayil's generals later discovered him. Surprised that anyone would have the courage to sleep on Mihriyayil's throne, they concluded the boy must be foreign and called the king to pass judgment on him. Instead of punishing Cafer, Mihriyayil admired the young man's beauty. After waking him up, Mihriyayil boasted of his wealth and valor to the boy and served him wine. But the boy, a good Muslim, made an excuse and refused to drink. "That cursed Mihriyayil looked at Cafer's face and saw how beautiful he was. Then desire came to him to kiss him on the cheek, so he got up, came down from the throne, and took Cafer by the hand. He brought him to a lonely corner of the garden."[1] Recognizing the Christian king's intention to seduce him, Cafer followed and slit Mihriyayil's throat in a secluded spot.

[1] Yorgos Dedes, ed., *Battalname: Introduction, English Translation, Turkish Transcription, Commentary and Facsimile*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 1996), 109–10. Yorgos Dedes edited *Battalname* together with an English translation, transcription, and the most complete study on this epic cycle until now. For all quotes here, I have followed Dedes's edition and translation together with the manuscript *Battalname*, Turc 338, Biblioteque Nationale, Paris.

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Later known as Battal, the same young boy grew to become a hero, who the Prophet Muhammad foresaw would conquer Constantinople in the name of Islam.[2] Throughout his life, Battal slew a good number of infidels, waging war against the Byzantine emperor in Rūm and expanding the faith of Islam into his territory. Among the Ottomans, Battal's legend came to symbolize war against the infidels of Rūm, and his life emerged as a prophetic allegory underscoring the Prophet's promise that, one day, a Muslim hero would conquer Constantinople. Battal's stories, known as the *Battalname* (Book of Battal), mainly circulated in oral form, likely in fragmented episodes, and were only compiled into manuscript form at the end of the 15th century. To our knowledge, the stories of Battal continued to circulate, sometimes as entertainment and sometimes in ritualized practices.[3]

Cafer/Battal's heroic image of the ideal Muslim frontier warrior led stories of his many battles to circulate in Rūm for centuries, a potent reminder of a Muslim hero's prowess. Mihriyayil's demise is not unique; many other Christians would die in the same manner at the hands of Cafer. Though Mihriyayil and likely most other figures in Cafer's story were fictional characters, these stories were popular in 15th-century Rūm. Most notably, the story of Cafer and Mihriyayil suggests that the hero's early victories were due neither to his military skill nor strength, but rather to his beauty. This feature had not been acquired by training or effort, but given by God. In turn, religious zeal turns Cafer into a determined hero who takes advantage of Mihriyayil's infatuation in order to destroy him. The means are not important, just the conquest.

In this article, I focus on the erotization of military encounters between Muslim and Christian heroes in the story of Sayyid Battal Ghazi, the *Battalname*, a major heroic cycle popular in 15th-century Rūm, in which the decisive element of victory or defeat was the desire of a Byzantine character (warrior, beloved, maiden) for the Muslim hero. To understand the significance of the erotic passages in the cycle, I use poetry as a means to situate the protagonist's interaction with other men in the larger culture of eroticism and love in 15th-century Rūm. I argue that the oral nature, discussed below, together with the story's entertainment value, preserved forms of eroticism that predated, informed, and adapted 15th and 16th-century expressions of love and desire in Rūm.

Stories of Conquest and Love in Ottoman Rum

As a result of his exploits, Sayyid Battal Ghazi became one of the main heroes of popular frontier narratives in Rūm.[4] In this and other related contemporary heroic tales, most episodes center on the conflict between Muslims and their Christian enemies. Though filled with supernatural elements and actions, these heroic stories primarily narrated battles, debates, and conversions in a way that reflected the realities of 15th-century Rūm, and in particular articulated predominant understandings of the Ottoman frontier. The most

[2] Battal first appears in the Arabic epic cycle *Sirat Amira Dhat al-Himma* (The Princess of Noble Ambition), albeit only as a secondary character. The epic relates the story of Fatima, a warrior princess, her son, and her friend. It takes place between the 8th to 9th centuries. For an introduction to the story and a recent translation into English, see Melanie Magidow, ed., *The Tale of Princess Fatima, Warrior Woman: The Arabic Epic of Dhat Al-Himma* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

[3] See, for instance, Battal's importance to Bektaşı dervishes and the Janissary corps in Zeynep Yürekli, *Architecture and Hagiography in the Ottoman Empire: The Politics of Bektashi Shrines in the Classical Age* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 39-46, 51–79. See also, Tijana Krstić, Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 59.

[4] Irene Melikoff, "Al-Baṭṭāl," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Brill, 1986), 1043–45; Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, "Battal Gazi," *Türkiye Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1992), 204–5.

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cited example of the overlap between historical and heroic narratives describes the fall of the Aydos Castle, a fortification situated northeast of Istanbul, near the Black Sea. The story is related in two of the most influential dynastic histories of the 15th century: Aşıkpaşazade's *History of the Ottoman Dynasty* (Tevarih-i al-i-Osman) and Mehmed Neşri's *Cosmorama* (Kitab-ı Cihannüma), an Ottoman chronicle sponsored by Bayezid II's court.[5]

In their attempts to produce an Ottoman dynastic historiography, 15th-century Ottoman chroniclers supplemented political and military chronology with popular stories. Oral narratives, tales, and anecdotes were central to shaping the first histories of the Ottoman dynastic past, which in turn shaped contemporary understandings of political structures and lineages.[6] For this reason, 19th and 20th-century Ottomanist scholars have used literary and epic narratives of conquest to explain, understand, and illustrate attitudes to conversion, holy war, and conquest.[7] Historians have argued that these narratives manifest the value system and preoccupations of early modern Ottomans, revealing their religious and moral ethos. When investigating the origins of the Ottoman Empire, Paul Wittek turned to the story of the Muslim conquest of the Aydos Castle, which had been incorporated into both historical narratives (*tevārih*) and epic cycles (*destān*) primarily collected from oral sources in the 15th century, in order to show that Ottoman expansion in the 14th and early 15th centuries was mainly fueled by a shared sentiment of religious war known as *ghāza* or jihad.[8] In the story, Muslim forces take the Aydos Castle with the aid of a Christian princess who had fallen in love with a Muslim hero.[9] In Wittek's interpretation, the story of the Aydos Castle provided an example of a common motif (i.e., the maiden story) that illustrated the fundamental importance of *ghāza* as the main reason for the Ottomans' rise and expansion.[10]

The story of the Aydos Castle was similar to an episode in the *Battalname* in which a Christian maiden also attempts to help the Muslim hero take her father's fortress. While in Aşıkpaşazade's version, the maiden's help is framed almost as God's intervention, Neşri's retelling of the story centers around the maiden's love for the Muslim hero. In the *Battalname*, the maiden is in love both with the hero and his religion, but in a turn of fate, the maiden's help ends in Battal's death. Wittek's analysis foregrounded the story of the

[5] Necdet Öztürk, ed., *Âşıkpaşazâde Tarihi* [Osmanlı Tarihi (1285–1502)] (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat. 2013), 46–50; Mehmed Neşri, *Kitâb-ı Cihan-Nümâ. Neşri Tarihi*, vol. 1, eds. Faik Reşit Unat and Mehmed A. Köymen (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1949) 139–43.

[6] Halil İnalcık, "How to Read 'Āshik Pasha-Zāde's History," in *Studies in Ottoman History in Honour of Professor V.L. Mélange*, eds. Colin Heywood and Colin Imber (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 139–56.

[7] See, for instance, Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, *Islam in Anatolia After the Turkish Invasion: (prolegomena)*, tr. Gary Leiser (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1993). More recently, Ahmet Karamustafa has explored the role of the epic of Sarı Saltuk in the process of Islamization of Anatolia and discussed the methodological challenges in reading epics as historical sources. Ahmet Karamustafa, "Islamisation through the lens of the *Saltuk-name*," in Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia, eds. A.C.S. Peacock, Bruno de Nicola and Sara Nur Yıldız (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 349–64.

[8] Paul Wittek first formulated his idea in *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1938), 54. He furthered supported his claims with an analysis of the story of the Aydos Castle in Paul Wittek, "The Taking of the Aydos Castle: A Ghazi Legend and Its Transformation," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 661–72. For a concise review of this debate, see Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 5–13. For a discussion of Ottoman sources in the 14th and 15th centuries and a re-assessment of this debate, see also Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 47–58; 62–90.

[9] For a recent discussion on Paul Wittek's interpretation of history, see İlker Evrim Binbaş, "Preface," in Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire. Studies in the History of Turkey, Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Colin Heywood (London: Routledge, 2012), xvii–xxx.

[10] William Hickman, "The Taking of the Aydos Castle: Further Considerations on a Chapter from Aşıkpaşazade," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99, no. 3 (1979): 399–407.

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Aydos Castle as an example of the epic/hagiographical accounts that made their way into the official histories of the Ottoman dynasty. Wittek and other historians aimed to explain the origins of the Ottoman Empire by finding historically corroborated information and filtering out narratives' fantastic and mythical elements. That said, even when discarded as historically unreliable, these stories demonstrated a popular and social imagination wherein a verisimilitude concerning military actions underscored a collective ethos geared towards holy war, or *ghāza*.[11] Later on, these and other early Ottoman narratives were carefully studied in order to parse historical fact from "fiction."[12]

This focus on historicity, which prioritized the capacity to illustrate Ottoman attitudes towards war and conquest, crowded out alternative historical analyses. But, as Cemal Kafadar has pointed out, these and other literary works constituted (and thus reveal) Rūm as integral to the Ottomans' mental world. The various episodes in the *Battalname* and other contemporary heroic cycles, such as the stories of the warriors Sarı Saltuk and Danişmend Gazi, capture moments of belief and disbelief, of war and friendship, which seem to have been taken from 15th-century Rūm—and as Kafadar points out, this story might have also represented dreams and aspirations of the stories' contemporary audiences. Moreover, these stories were part of popular forms of entertainment, merging the documentary and imaginative in order to gain their audiences' attention. As the work of Zeynep Aydoğan and Buket Kitapçı Bayrı has recently shown, many aspects of Ottoman culture were built into the stories, almost documenting the presence of spiritual and religious elements through the relation between the stories' protagonists, as well as more mundane and everyday interactions, such as contemporary foodways and practices of gift-giving.[13] Scholars have interpreted these interactions, mainly the encounters between Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman frontier, as either examples of inter-religious and cultural syncretism or influence, or deep inter-communal entanglements.

The overarching theme of the frontier underscored all aspects of these stories. As scholars have pointed out, the bellicose nature of interactions between Christians and Muslims was eroticized in stories such as the Aydos Castle. The elements of these interactions are gendered: the Muslim conquerors, their weapons, and their heroes represent the male/penetrative aspect of the story, while the maiden and castle are penetrated through conquest.[14] In 15th-century Ottoman frontier narratives, erotic encounters between men of different religious confessions underscored combative victory over the infidel. But these homoerotic encounters between believers and non-believers have largely gone

[11] Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*, 62–90; Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State*, 45–54. See also Kemal Silay's introduction to Taceddin İbraḥīm bin Hızr Aḥmedī, *History of the Kings of the Ottoman Lineage and Their Holy Raids against the Infidels*, ed. Kemal Silay (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), viii–xix.

[12] Colin Imber and other scholars have argued that these texts should be discarded as historical sources; Colin Imber, "The Ottoman Dynastic Myth," *Turcica: Revue D'études Turques* XIX (1987): 7–27. More recently, Dimitris Kastritsis has shown that it is possible to extract traces of original and more reliable historical sources that were incorporated into dynastic histories, such as Neşri's *Kitab-ı Cihanüma*, which contains a section quoted verbatim from an original source to reconstruct the Ottoman civil strife after 1402; Dimitris Kastritsis, "The Historical Epic Aḥvāl-i Sultan Meḥemmed (The Tales of Sultan Mehmed) in the Context of Early Ottoman Historiography," in *Writing History at the Ottoman Court: Editing the Past, Fashioning the Future*, eds. Emine Fetvacı and Erdem Çipa (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1–22.

[13] Buket Kitapçı Bayrı, *Warriors, Martyrs, and Dervishes: Moving Frontiers, Shifting Identities in the Land of Rome (13th-15th Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Zeynep Aydoğan, *Forging Paths of Continuity: Borderline Miracles in the Early Menākıbnāme Literature 13th-15th Centuries* (Rethymno, Greece: The Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Foundation of Research and Technology-Hellas, 2024).

[14] Hickman argues that in one version of the story, the romantic aspect correlates to a mystical meaning common to contemporary folk narratives; see Hickman, "The Taking of the Aydos Castle," 405.

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unmentioned in the scholarship.[15] Instead, discussion of homoerotic and homosocial practices among the Ottomans has almost exclusively focused on court poetry detailing elite men within urban settings.[16] The erotization of male-male encounters is hardly surprising, as the theme of young non-Muslim boys as the ideal beloved in contemporary poetry constituted a formal norm. While these narratives consistently feature erotic motifs, the erotization of conquest was not completely novel in Ottoman narratives and poetry. But the stark division in the scholarship between high culture and folk literature often distinguishes between the two literary worlds, poetry and epic prose, making it possible to overlook the thematic similarities between these forms. In Ottoman lyric poetry, just as in the *Battalname*, the body of young infidel men and the temptations they generate emerge as a site of conquest and as the driving force for spiritual victory over the material self, both central to the believer's religious practice.[17] As I show in this article, religious struggle and spiritual realization were expressed through the erotic interactions between males of different faiths, found both in poetry and frontier narratives.

The discussion of Ottoman lyric poetry's erotic aspects has been limited to elite palace cultures or mystical expressions and conceptualized in opposition to folk and popular narratives. İpek Hüner has recently argued that prose narratives centering women provide an alternative vision of imperial gender relations, even if framed through the eyes of male writers. As Hüner points out, scholars overlooked these works given their customary categorization as folk stories, despite evidence suggesting that they circulated among elites as well as other sectors of Ottoman society. Hüner rightly argues that these stories should not be taken at face value, but she also recognizes that they offered alternative versions of love and gender relations to those depicted in Ottoman lyric poetry. As a result, Hüner concludes that depictions of gender should be considered together with the genre of the texts we study. While Hüner's insight offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of Ottoman literary forms and gender dynamics, overemphasizing distinctions between genre —particularly between love poetry and frontier epics—can elide important parallels.[18] In fact, one could easily argue that frontier epics enjoyed a similar or greater place among Ottoman society, as a source of both entertainment and inspiration, as poetry and other genres did. Historians have often distinguished between lyric poetry's more metaphorical and allegorical nature, in contrast to prose narratives—folk stories, histories, anecdotes, and hagiographical accounts—that provided a verisimilitude capable of better revealing the cultural milieu within which they were produced. Early iterations of this dichotomy derive from an interpretative divide that emerged from the formation of a national Turkish literary history and canon. But while prose narratives detailed social interactions with greater regularity than poetry, it is also true that certain archetypical roles, such as the lover and the

[15] See, for instance, Bayrı's recent analysis of the *Battalname* and other epic cycles. Bayrı discusses the moments in which Muslims (men) have erotic or romantic encounters with Christians (women), but the stories of Battal's youth are completely absent. See Bayrı, *Warriors, Martyrs, and Dervishes*, 62–66, especially chapter 1. See also Yürekli, *Architecture and Hagiography in the Ottoman Empire*, 53–54.

[16] Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı's study of love and homosociality in the early modern Mediterranean world is the most important example; Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Also see Selim Kuru, "Naming the Beloved in Ottoman Turkish Gazel: The Case of İshak Çelebi (D. 1537/8)," in *Ghazal as World Literature II. From a Literary Genre to a Great Tradition. The Ottoman Gazel in Context*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth et al. (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag Würzburg, 2006), 163–73.

[17] See, for instance, the famous poems written by Mehmed II on Istanbul, which focused on the infidel who resists the conqueror's conquest.

[18] İpek Hüner, "Gendered Narratives of Ottoman Prose Fiction: The 'Wiles of Women' Stories," in *Routledge Handbook on Turkish Literature*, eds. Didem Havlioğlu and Zeynep Uysal (London: Routledge, 2023), 160–68.

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beloved, the king and the beggar, the courtier and his rivals, or the believer and God, traveled between the genres with frequency.

The Beloved in the *Battalname*

Epic cycles such as the *Battalname*, together with hagiographic accounts of local Muslim saints and Sufis, were central to the spiritual and emotional literacy of Rūm. This feature of epic cycles has informed the current discussion of popular Ottoman religiosity. For instance, Tijana Krstić highlights stories from Islamic hagiographies as examples of religious narratives circulating in Ottoman Anatolia within a larger context of contested narratives of conversion, devotion, and piety.[19] These narratives, Krstić argues, point to a complex dynamic of "conflicting interests and initiatives represented by diverse groups of agents."[20] Multiple narratives of conversion, which may appear as examples of religious syncretism at first instance, are in fact the voices of contesting social agents competing to establish authoritative forms of piety and devotion. Thus, Krstić's analysis sees hagiographies in dialogue with other narrative forms, from religious manuals (*ʿilm-i ḥāl*) to martyrologies.

When analyzing Anatolian hagiographies, Krstić identifies three common tropes in the *Saltukname* (Book of Saltuk) and *Battalname*'s conversion narratives: the Christian warrior, the Christian maiden, and the Christian priest.[21] In Krstić's characterization, the Muslim hero, oftentimes a saint, "duels with the flower of Christian knighthood," and after the Muslim hero's overwhelming victory, the Christian warrior, "awed by the saint's extraordinary military prowess, convert[s] to Islam."[22] These narratives, suggests Krstić, point to an interpretative community producing a new language of religious expression and identity. For this reason, heroic cycles, just as hagiographies and catechisms, focused on Christian-Muslim struggles, the cult of saints, and successful stories of converts. This focus, however, has relegated other themes to the background. One good example is the story of Cafer/Battal and Mihriyayil cited at the beginning of this article. In this case, desire led to conversion instead of the awe produced by military prowess. Indeed, stories about conversion in the *Battalname* often feature the defeat or surrender of a Byzantine hero or military commander, who loses his senses when confronted by male Muslim beauty at the decisive moment. Just like Mihriyayil, the king's brother succumbs to temptation and lowers his guard when seeing Cafer's prepossessing features.

On his way to meet Mihriyayil, Cafer encounters a cavalryman, Shamasp, who turns out to be Mihriyayil's brother, one of the most skilled infidel warriors. "Who are you, where are you coming from, and where are you going in this neck of the woods?" asks Shamasp. Cafer answers with a lie in order to conceal his identity:

> "I come from Chin, my father's name was Qanatos Zerkera, and I am very fond of martial arts." When the infidel took a closer look, he saw that he was a handsome young man, his **face resembling a full moon**, with **sweet eyelashes**, [black] **moles** that covered his cheeks, and a [small round] **mouth like an inkwell** whose **teeth were like pearls**. So as soon as the infidel saw him, he lost his mind....[23]

[19] Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions*, especially chapters 1 and 2.

[20] Ibid., 72.

[21] The story of the Christian maiden has already been discussed extensively. See Wittek, "The Taking of the Aydos Castle"; Hickman, "The Taking of the Aydos, Castle"; Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam*, 64–68.

[22] Ibid., 54.

[23] Dedes, *Battalname*, 108. The original is as follows: "*Hāy ne kişisin gelişun ḳandandur bu yaña ḳanda gidersin didi Caʿfar eyitdi atama Ḳanāṭos-i żerkera eydürler Çindenem silāḥşorlıġa heves ḳıldum didi çün bu gebr naẓar ḳıldı gördikim bu* ***maḥbūb ayuñ on dördine beñzer*** *bir* ***şirin kirpük****lü* ***beñ****ler yüzin ṭoldurmış* ***aġız ḫoḳḳı****ya beñzer* ***dişleri dürr dāne****ye beñzer*

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Just as with Mihriyayil's defeat, Cafer subdues his infidel enemy thanks to his beauty instead of his military skill or strength. Both Mihriyayil and Shamasp's deviant intentions frame this erotic encounter. The illicit intent to seduce a young and impressionable boy ends in their demise. But while their intentions may underscore the moral deviance of infidels, the erotic play between the hero and his enemies makes Cafer's victory possible. Indeed, Cafer leads both men on while still keeping true to his faith: he serves wine but does not drink it, he shows admiration but evades the kiss, he walks into a secluded place with the king but takes the infidel's life. Although Cafer does not acknowledge his beauty's effect on others, he continually derives advantage from it. Mihriyayil and Shahmasp's demise is not unique; many other Byzantines would die in the same manner at the hands of Cafer. Importantly, this is also not the only form in which Cafer's beauty determines the outcome of a battle.

When Cafer meets Rabiʿ b. Qaysar, the son of Caesar, "a handsome young boy, a real darling," it is Cafer this time who recognizes in the infidel's beauty the potential to become a believer.[24] Rabiʿ recognizes the truth of Islam, led by God, and converts on the spot. Not only is conversion at stake here, but Rabiʿ also betrays his father and renounces his previous life, becoming a zealous and loyal companion to Cafer. Later in the story, Cafer meets another Christian warrior, Ahmar.[25] Ahmar has been sent to kill Cafer, but after battling him for a long time, Cafer wins over the Christian army. After Ahmar retreats, Cafer follows him. Ahmar meets a maiden, who remains anonymous. The maiden had been waiting for Ahmar, but Ahmar, despite interacting with her, seems absent-minded. Ahmar seems struck by Cafer's beauty, repeating several times what a "handsome and well-mannered" young man Cafer is, drinking in his honor and praising his "bravery and handsomeness."[26] Cafer accepts this praise as a sign of Ahmar's inner good, and instead of killing him, as Cafer had done to many others, he comes down to Ahmar and tells him to convert. In what is a highly erotic scene, Ahmar challenges Cafer to a wrestling match. Whoever wins should convert to the other's faith. The story slows down again, describing Ahmar's loose pants, the holding of each other's belts, Cafer maneuvering and sitting on Ahmar's chest, immobilizing him. Ahmar then converts to Islam. A symptom of Ahmar's importance to the narrative centers on his renaming Cafer as Battal.

In contrast to Mihriyayil and Shahmasp and the other "wretches" Cafer kills, Rabiʿ and Ahmar are beautiful youths whose appreciation for Cafer's beauty also foreshadows their future conversion.[27] This division is constant in the cycle. Those described as brutish and displeasing, regardless of their appreciation for Cafer's beauty, are intoxicated and die, while those possessing a beautiful aspect before the encounter with Cafer find in his beauty a reason to convert to Islam. A character's inner moral features are mirrored in their exterior.

The language in all these episodes is detailed and meticulous. The *Battalname* covers an incredibly large set of events and the main hero's deeds are many. The narrative pacing can, at times, lead only to the most relevant events of a long campaign being noted. However,

hemānkim gördi gebrüñ hayātı gitdi eydür ya oġlan...." For the original manuscript, see *Battalname*, Turc 338, Biblioteque Nationale, Paris, f. 12a. Transcription and emphasis mine. As I discuss below, the *Battalname* uses language that resembles the tropes used in contemporary lyric poetry. The words in bold represent some examples of these language of love.

[24] Ibid., 116.

[25] Ibid., 120–25

[26] Ibid., 121–22.

[27] Recently, Mert Şen has provided an interesting and detailed typology of conversion in the *Battalname*, identifying the moments of coercion, force, or willingness to convert. Şen identifies Battal as a driving force behind the conversion, but does not mention the role of beauty or the eroticism implicit in some of the interactions. That said, Şen's typology offers a roadmap to understanding the meaning of conversion among contemporary audiences. Mert Şen, "Conversion and Ghazi-King Identity in the 1436-7 Anonymous Battalname" (MA diss., Sabancı University, 2020).

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when Cafer/Battal encounters Byzantine heroes, the narrative slows and provides greater detail. In the Ottoman version, the language suddenly changes from a focus on events, places, and actions to a description of physical details. In the two examples mentioned above, Cafer/Battal is identified as a beauty/beloved with a face that looks like a full moon (*maḥbūb ayuñ on dördine beñzer*). Cafer's depiction more closely approximates the full moon-face beloved of lyrical poetry than the military hero of the cycle. His eyebrows are sweet, his eyelashes black, and his teeth pear-like, while his cheeks reveal beauty marks. The story is thus strengthened by conventional metaphors, tropes, and images. Similarly, the language offers a detailed description of the Byzantine hero's intoxication and drunkenness: "As soon as he saw him, he lost his mind" (*hemānkim gördi gebrüñ hayātı gitdi*). It is important to clarify that, by detailed descriptions, I refer to a chain of adjectives that qualify a single noun, giving important and thorough information about a single element in a sentence. This change of language and style is worth considering, as it contrasts with other episodes in the cycle during which places and people are barely described or not described at all. Adding detail changes the narrative velocity and requires authorial effort and care absent in other elements of the story. These changes may have had to do with the aim of entertaining when telling the story, slowing down in moments of tension or intrigue, but also may point, simultaneously, to the actions that the story's many audiences found meaningful and relevant.

Common Spaces, Parallel Interactions

Elite lyric poetry and frontier epics belonged to different social spaces, yet we have indications that they converged in their depictions of young men as dangerous and erotic figures who occupied a space at the intersection of faith and infidelity. The epic cycle of Battal was popular among the Janissary corps, many of whom were educated in the palace and thus would have been familiar with the culture of court poetry.[28] Last but not least, the other major epic cycle of 15th-century Ottoman Anatolia, the *Saltukname*, was put into written form on the order of Cem Sultan after he listened to the hero's story during his stay in Edirne.[29] The prince himself regularly attended meetings in which the story of Saltuk was recited and wrote accomplished lyrical poetry. The other major hero of contemporary epics, Saltuk was presented as heir to Battal's fight against the infidel.[30] I cite the shared language and audiences here because it gives us a sense of how these genres circulated and informed each other. While scholars have mostly focused on studying them separately, within their specific genres, these narratives, as well as histories and poetry, were all part of the entertainment of the age. In the pages that follow, I attempt to use poetry as a means to situate Battal's interaction within the larger culture of eroticism and love in 15th-century Rūm. Indeed, these erotic encounters seem to resonate and partly spring from contemporary preoccupations with belief, disbelief, and trust, but they also shared preoccupations with spaces of commonality and contradiction, often captured through erotic interactions.

A Poetic Reading of Battal's Erotic Encounters

The moon in its various forms has an important place in the Ottoman poetic imagery. The rounded shape of the full moon often invoked the beautiful face of the beloved. In the dark of night, the moon shines, but its light is not hers, for it is a reflection of the sun's brightness.

[28] Yürekli, *Architecture and Hagiography in the Ottoman Empire*, 51–79; Dedes, *Battalname*, 23.

[29] Ebü'lHayr Rum, *Ṣaltuḳ-Nāme: The Legend of Ṣarı Ṣaltuḳ, ed. Fahir İz, 9 vols*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 616a-b.

[30] Bayrı, *Warrior, Martyrs, Dervishes*, 96–157.

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Who, however, could stare directly at the sun and not be blinded? The moon, thus, is where the sunshine can be appreciated, albeit only in its reflection. Similarly, the face of the beloved reflects a beauty that is not his own, but a reflection of God's overwhelming beauty. Divine light flows from the face of the beloved and reaches the believer, generating an awe that does not blind, for otherwise, who is able to directly face God's beauty but the Prophet Muhammad? When Battal is described as a beloved (*maḥbūb*) whose face resembles the moon on its fourteenth day (i.e., a full moon, *maḥbūb ayuñ on dördine beñzer)*, the reflection of a divine beauty is implied. In effect, a divine light has been made manifest in his beauty or, in the 15th-century words of Ottoman Mihri Hatun (d. after 1512): "I saw [divine] light flow from his beauty, manifest" (*Nūr aḳar gördüm cemālinden egerçi ẓāhirā*).[31]

Beauty hurts, for it is unreachable. The glance of the beloved functions as its weapon by leaving its viewer in agony. The eyebrow is a bow, and the eyelashes arrows. A glance shoots an arrow directly to the heart. The eyes burn, kill, intoxicate. They engage in fights and spill blood. Together with the eyelashes, eyebrows, and side-glance (*gamze*), the eyes are the source of trouble (*pür-belā*). The beloved's eyes resemble a soldier (*leşker*) armed for battle. They hurt the beloved with the pain of separation (*ġam-ı firāḳ*) and leave him longing for union.

Bellicose terms often predominated in 15th-century poetic language: eyelashes are arrows and brows are bows, a side glance can slash a lover's heart like dagger, the dark curls of the beloved resemble chains with hooks that parade their lovers' hearts. These similes, metaphors, and conventions in Ottoman and Islamicate poetry derived from Qur'anic themes, cosmology, nature, and epic stories, which were expected to be known by both poet and reader. The presence of this familiar poetic imagery in the *Battalname* speaks to converging arenas wherein new literary and religious languages were being forged. Similar to Krstić's argument for other genres, poetic composition in this period promoted a particular form of devotion and argued for it. Many poems criticize the path of the devotee, advocate renunciation of worldly affairs, and defend the path of love as a form to reach God.

The scenes in which Battal converts mighty Christian warriors with the sword of his gaze not the edge of his sword—scenes neglected until now in the historiography—demonstrate how poetic imagery promoted certain forms of confessionalization. The constant depiction of an epic warrior in terms more often evoking a young beloved, alongside the role his beauty plays in conversion and victory, highlights the ways male-male interactions have been understudied in the *Battalname*, as well as the interrelation between literary genres in the Ottoman Empire at large. Nisayi (d. ca. 1550-1560) for instance, addresses these issues in a verse:

Ṣanma ey zāhid bizi rāh-ı selāmet beklerüz
Bir belā-keş 'āşiḳuz kūy-ı melāmet beklerüz

Oh *zahid* (devotee), do not believe we are waiting for the safe path to salvation
We are tormented lovers, we haunt the place of blame.[32]

As Kristić suggests, these works spread at a time of increased attention to belief and concern with the "truthfulness" of pious acts. While the role of beauty and love in these stories has

[31] Quoted in *Walter G. Andrews, Mehmet Kalpaklı, and Nejaat Black, Ottoman Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006), 49. For the entire couplet see below. When quoting from this anthology, I have only slightly modified Walter Andrews et al.'s English translations.

[32] Andrews, Kalpaklı, and Black, *Ottoman Lyric Poetry*, 82.

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not attracted much scholarly attention, conventional phrases—such as those used to describe Cafer's beauty—share direct affinities with Ottoman lyrical poetry. On how many occasions does a poem praise the intoxicating beauty of a moon-faced *maḥbūb*? How many times do we encounter a lover drunk by the gaze of a young boy who is unaware of his own beauty? And more important, on how many occasions is this beauty just a witness to the beauty of God? Young men, sometimes ruthless, sometimes pious, such as the prophet Yusuf, could attribute their successes to the unilateral and inexplicable love of God; a love that manifested itself in their physical beauty. Battal's beauty seems to be just another example of the dictum: God is beautiful and loves beauty (*Allāh jamīl wa yuḥibbu al-jamāl*). For God, beauty and love are part of the same equation in the Ottoman imaginary.

The imagery and motifs present in *mesnevis*, *gazels*, *kasides*, alongside other examples of lyrical and mystical poetry, have been carefully analyzed from a philosophical and literary perspective. However, epic cycles such as the *Battalname*, *Saltukname*, or even *Dede Korkut* have primarily been seen as examples of popular culture that in some way or another found their way into manuscript form and were miraculously preserved to our delight and surprise.

One reading of the lexicon of love present across lyric poetry and epic cycles underscores the stories' oral nature, while also allowing us to recognize shared conventions surrounding belief and faith that underlined beauty and the response it elicits. Epic stories' conversion narratives reveal an Ottoman society in which poetic composition and the apprehension of beauty were common activities across disparate levels of society. Stories of conversion and conquest in the *Battalname* may not always describe historical events accurately, but they represent an important part of a larger world of cultural production and consumption in 15th-century Rūm. Reading these stories as complementing and dialoguing with different forms of media and entertainment, such as poetry, while paying attention to the amalgam of historical moments allowed by the constant reinvention and adaptation of oral stories, points to a shared language of love, trust, and faith in which 15th-century audiences found meaning.

Places of Possibility for Eroticism

In *Islamicate Sexualities*, Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi suggest that avoiding terms such as "homosexual" for certain sexual practices in the past does recognize a necessary historicity, but using alternatives, such as "same-sex relations," poses a similar problem, as such terms highlight or assume that social interactions were first and foremost defined by sex.[33] The difference between both choices (homosexual or male-male interactions) might be that, by using "male-male encounters," one can recognize naturalized "male-dominated" public spaces. While the Ottomans might not have thought of this in the contemporary terms of sex and gender, they did reserve some spaces for men alone. In particular, public spheres of social action were the prerogative of men and interactions could have an erotic undertone. Female presence in those spaces happened, but often they were considered transgressions or anomalies. Indeed, some Ottoman scholars made sense of such transgressions in terms of danger. In their article about marriage, Layla Kayhan Elbirlik and Selim S. Kuru discuss marriage in a satirical and even pornographic didactic text, *Dafi'ul-Ġumum ve Rafiu'ul-Hümum* (The Repeller of Sorrows and Remover of Anxieties, before 1513) by Mevlana Gazali (d. 1535, a.k.a. Deli Birader).[34] This text, written in elegant prose and

[33] Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), vii–xvi.

[34] Leyla Kayhan Elbirlik and Selim S. Kuru, "An Uncanny Discourser on Sex and Marriage from the Early Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," in *Crafting History: Essays on the Ottoman World and Beyond in Honor of Cemal*

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presented to the Ottoman prince Korkut (d. 1513), discusses the pros and cons of marriage, which required constant interaction with women. According to the text, spending too much time with women threatened to make men effeminate. Elbirlik and Kuru contrast Gazali's satirical discussion with that of Kınalızade (d. 1578), an Ottoman jurist and intellectual who wrote a serious treatise on marriage. In his work, Kınalızade lamented that, throughout his lifetime, he had perceived an inversion of marriage roles, with women becoming the masters and men the servants. This change occurred, Kınalızade believed, due to men's excessive contact with women. Similar warnings exist in other texts, as Kuru points out when discussing male anxieties among Ottoman poets in 16th-century Istanbul.[35] Excessive contact with women's bodies makes men effeminate. This might seem counterintuitive to us, but it is clear that Ottoman writers—including Kınalızade and Gazali—were worried about the invasion of masculine spaces, as women had begun to take over practices traditionally reserved for men.

These debates reveal crucial aspects of Battal's story. In his youth, Battal develops his heroic prowess in an all-male space. His beauty and erotic body—attributes highlighting his heroism and God's love for him—appeared only in all-male domains, such as war and state affairs. In all these descriptions, women were accessories: his mother, who opposed his military expeditions, and a servant of the Greek general, who quickly disappeared when Battal entered the scene. In later parts of the epic, a woman, the daughter of a Byzantine commander, falls in love with Battal and opens the gates of a castle. This Battal is at the end of his life: a veteran and old hero, waging war against another Byzantine castle. The young woman sees Battal in a dream and falls in love, surrendering the castle. To do this, she throws a rock at Battal that contains instructions to surround the castle at a specific time and confessing her desire to open the castle doors. Her initial dream encounter lacks eroticism. Instead, the symbolism behind the conquest constitutes the tale's erotic connotations. In the text, Battal barely interacts with the woman before he dies, and the description of her love pales in comparison to the intense description of young Battal interacting with Greek generals and warriors.

This reinforces the understanding that discursive forms of eroticism occurred mostly in all-male spaces. Such depictions were not exclusive to court poetry. In fact, it is likely that poetry helped make these spaces of eroticism possible with a language of love that traversed genres. The stories discussed here highlight a few things for future consideration. In the stories discussed above, the Byzantines, both the general and the woman, are prone to stratagems and betrayal, even against their own kin and God. These stories also propose an alternative approach to the questions of women's place and role in the erotic world of the Ottomans, pushed to the margins, absent agency or power. I am not implying that women were indeed always in the margins or that they possessed no power. In fact, much scholarship has shown how women participated in social dynamics, how they had power, and how they were an integral part of the social, economic, political, and intellectual world of the Ottomans.[36] However, narratives often de-centered women when describing social action. Perhaps more importantly, women were not at the center of all Ottoman erotic imaginations. In fact, women's participation in social and public practices were often

Kafadar, eds. Rachel Goshgarian, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, and Ali Yaycioğlu (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023), 193–216.

[35] Selim S. Kuru, "Istanbul: A City of Men," in *Companion of Early Modern Istanbul*, eds. Çiğdem Kafesçioğlu and Shirine Hamadeh (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 27–52.

[36] See, for instance, the work of Didem Havlıoğlu, *Mihrî Hatun: Performance, Gender-Bending, and Subversion in Ottoman Intellectual History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017); Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lucienne Thys-Senocak, *Ottoman Women Builders: The Architectural Patronage of Hadice Turhan Sultan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

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described in terms of the danger associated with breaching boundaries. But as Kuru's work has highlighted in recent years, much of the scholarship on genre and sexuality has attempted to rescue women's role and presence, often at the expense of men's stories. This does not imply that we marginalize men, but rather that we take men's experience for granted as the natural standard. On the flip side, scholars have also presumed that eroticism and erotic imagination naturally occur between men and women, and that eroticism between males constitutes an anomaly requiring specialized terms such as "homoerotic" or "homosocial." Instead, women-centered narratives were the anomaly when it came to eroticism and imagination. Both the epics, which emphasize the all-male space of conquest, victory, and eroticism, and the warnings about marriage explored by Elbirlik and Kuru highlight that tensions around the limits imposed on male-female interactions as formative for both men and women, often reflecting male writer's anxieties, in Kuru's words, about their own masculinity and role in the social and public spheres.

Eros as Struggle and Victory

In contrast with the epics, erotic encounters take on a personal turn in elite poetry. The tension produced between an older, well-educated male lover who performs the act of admiring the beloved's youth and beauty is inverted. In this case, the lover is the Muslim. The Muslim recognizes the physical beauty of the beloved, yet his beauty is ambiguous and misleading. It is this ambiguity that gives the erotic encounter its spiritual power, as it produces a liminal space for the poet wherein the tension created by the erotic is a means of embarking into a reflective spiritual state. Ahmed Paşa (d. 1496), fifteenth-century poet and vezir, expresses this liminal space and ambiguity in the following couplet:

Didüm ḳaddüñ dil-ü-dīni müselmānlar gibi ṭoġru
Ḫaṭ-ı tersā gibi ne içündür ol zülf-i dū-tāh egri

Your body, I said,
  Is upright like a Muslim,
    True in faith and fervor.
Then why those double lovelocks,
  Twisted, like unbeliever's scripts.[37]

The interaction here is also uni-directional. The struggle happens all within the poet's spiritual consciousness or his poetic persona. Nevertheless, the poet brings conversion and forms of devotion to the realm of beauty and desire. This figure of the beautiful Christian boy is common in the poetic imagery of the 15th and 16th centuries. In another poem, Ahmed Paşa accuses the beloved of simply pretending to become a true believer,

Zülfin gidermiş ol ***sanem kafirligin*** *komaz henüz*
  Zünnarını kesmiş *veli dahi* ***müselman*** *olmamış*

That **idol** has covered his hair, but not abandoned his **infidel** ways
  He has **cut the priest belt** around his delicate waist, but not yet become a **Muslim**.[38]

Nūr *aḳar gördüm* ***cemāli****nden egerçi ẓāhirā*
  Kendüsi beñzer ***müselmān****a libāsı* ***kāferī***

[37] Andrews, "Starting Over Again," 21.
[38] Quoted in Andrews, Kalpaklı, and Black, Ottoman Lyric Poetry, 35.

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Similarly, Ottoman poetess Mihri Hatun (d. 1509) writes:

I saw [divine] **light** flow from his **beauty**, manifest
He appeared to be a **Muslim**, his dress was of an **infidel**.[39]

In the verses quoted here, Muslim and believer, lover and beloved, parallel yet invert the examples in the *Battalname.* The tension in the encounters described in these poems derives from the use of contradicting elements, which I have highlighted in the quotes. The lover here sees the beauty of God in the beloved but questions its truthfulness. The light of the beloved's beauty is contrasted with the darkness of the Christian garment (likely here a reference to a priest's clothes). In this sense, beauty is contradictory; it is a reflection of God, directly linked to His favor, and consequently correlated to faith and morals. On the other hand, physical beauty is also deceptive and thus renders uncertain the conversion of the young Christian boy. His hair is a trap. The idol, the Christian priest, the young boy, and the "contested" nature of religious conversion in 15th-century Anatolia appear in these two couplets articulated within the poet's struggle as a believer.

The dynamics of eroticism function almost in opposite terms in the story of Cafer and contemporary lyrical poetry. In Battal's youth, beauty and desire are the necessary elements of conversion. The encounter's sexual element is limited to deviations proper to infidels, while Cafer remains ignorant and clueless of the danger incurred by his beauty. Yet, desire triumphs over vice, and the military hero converts only to become a faithful companion of Battal. In this way, a martial struggle is demilitarized and bloodshed avoided through the effects of a private erotic encounter. In lyric poetry, the erotic makes exactly the inverse, and beauty is explained in terms of metaphorically militarizing a beautiful body's various elements. The struggle is not comprised within the domain of social action but inner reflection, represented by the danger posed by beauty already incorporated into the public space of the Ottoman world and removed from the frontier. While the roles of believer and beloved are inverted to those in the heroic cycle in lyric poetry, the conflict in the believer derives from a similar preoccupation: the relationship between beauty and good, deceit, temptation, and lack of faith.

In Ottoman lyric poetry, love—even in its earthly form—was considered a manifestation of God. The beloved's beauty became a medium through which to appreciate God's creation, similar to what we see in the *Battalname.* Beauty intoxicated the beloved, allowing him to eradicate the self and surrender to God. Love burns, and erases the lover. Union with the beloved means death—or, in other words, self-sacrifice. Walter Andrews interpreted this poetic economy as the overwhelming presence of an ethic of self-sacrifice in Ottoman lyrical poetry, which he believed was part of the larger Ottoman culture.[40] Michael Meeker reached a similar conclusion when reading another major compilation of oral stories contemporary to the *Battalname*, the *Book of Dede Korkut.* According to Meeker, a self-sacrificial ethic informs the stories in *Dede Korkut*, at least as they exist in the Ottoman version, which in turn parallels the ethic behind the Ottoman institutions of the 15th and 16th centuries.[41] Without taking this ethic at face value, one could argue that the characters in the *Battalname* are constantly self-sacrificing. The Byzantine heroes of the cycle, one by one, surrender to the physical manifestation of God's beauty, sacrificing themselves either through death, conversion, or betrayal. A philosophical and literary approach allows us to better understand male-male interactions in the *Battalname* through

[39] Quoted in Andrews, Kalpaklı, and Black, Ottoman Lyric Poetry, 49.

[40] Walter G. Andrews, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1985); Andrews and Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds*; Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, "Ottoman Love: Preface to a Theory of Emotional Ecology," in *A History of Emotions 1200-1800*, ed. Jonas Lilequist (London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2012), 21–47.

[41] Michael Meeker, "The Dede Korkut Ethic," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 3 (1992): 395–417.

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an analysis of intoxication, beauty, love, and death. Beauty and love successfully articulated stories of conversion and defeat in both the poems and epic cycles of the time, which presented both prescriptive and descriptive images of social interactions in 15th-century Rūm, from the beauty of young men to an ethic of self-sacrifice, from doubt about others' conversions to the limits of the appreciation of others' beauty and its dangers.

Orality and Multiple Sexualities

The stories found in the *Battalname* shifted over time. While Battal first appeared in the Arabic epic cycle *Sirat Amira Dhat al-Himma* (The Princess of Noble Ambition), albeit only as a secondary character, Battal became the main character of his own heroic cycle in Rūm.[42] Battal's stories were first reproduced orally and then collected in manuscript form in the 15th century.[43] These stories initially circulated orally as a form of entertainment and, while technically set sometime in the 8th century, characters, landscapes, conflicts, plot, and places took on the form of contemporary locations and mores. Like the *Battalname*, other major epic and hagiographical cycles of the time—including the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the *Danişmendname* (Book of Danişmend), and the *Saltukname*—were also rendered into manuscript form in the 14th and the 15th centuries.[44]

The cycle's oral nature meant greater fluidity across each telling, allowing performers to select details likely to compel their particular audience.[45] While the exact motivations for the initial manuscripts remain unclear, they likely facilitated telling the stories in a public setting.[46]

[42] The epic relates the story of Fatima (a warrior princess), her son, and her friend between the 8th and 9th centuries. See Magidow, *The Tale of Princess Fatima*.

[43] The cycle I analyzed is one Ottoman version. The stories of Battal were put into written form on different occasions and did not all correspond. The earliest available manuscript is dated AH 840 (1436/1437). Yorgos Dedes's translation, for instance, is based on this manuscript, although the translation consolidates elements from different manuscripts; Dedes, *Battalname*, 85–98.

[44] The exact date of the *Danişmendname*'s composition is debated. According to Gelibolulu Mustafa `Ali's *Mirkatü'l-cihâd*, Izzaeddin Keykavus II (d. 1279) commissioned Ibn Ala (d. ?) to compile the *Danişmendname* from the oral traditions of *menakib* (epic stories) of frontier warriors or *gazis.* However, Osman Turan believes that the *Danişmendname* was composed at the order of Izzaeddin Keykavus I (d. 1220). Halil Yınanç argues that the *Danişmendname* should not be dated before the 14th century. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, "Danişmendname," *Türkiye Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), 478–80. For the *Saltukname*'s written version, we know that Prince Cem commanded the composition of this work while he was in Edirne during Fatih Mehmet's campaign against Uzun Hasan in 1473. Prince Cem visited the tomb of Sari Saltuk and listened to the epic from the dervishes of the place. After this, Ebü'l-Hayr Rumi was appointed to collect the stories of Saltuk. With this purpose, Ebü'l-Hayr Rumi spent seven years wandering in Anatolia and Rumelia. If we follow this, given the date of Cem's visit to the saint's tomb, it is likely the work was finished in 1480. Şükrü Haluk Akalın, "Ebülhayr Rumi," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1994), 360–62. For the original text see Ebü'l Hayr Rum, *Şaltuḳ-Nāme*, 616a–b.

[45] According to Yorgos Dedes, who translated the *Battalname* into English, the cycle's main stories are the same across all available manuscripts, although some lacunas and gaps exist, which may indicate that the manuscripts were copies of more than one archetype-text. Moreover, while there are differences in the texts, Dedes believes that most of the variants introduce no semantic changes or affect the plot. Dedes, *Battalname*, 85

[46] The manuscript is divided into thematic sections and *meclīs* (pl. *mecālis*). The *meclīs* division is a common feature of many texts of this period and may point to oral reproduction. Other texts, such as the *Danişmendname*, use the word *meclīs* (gathering, party) to refer to the different sections in which the work is composed. In *Danişmendname*'s case, for instance, each *meclīs* corresponds to a thematic division, thus the use of the word *meclīs* is similar to those of *bāb* or *fasıl* and does not necessarily refer to the oral reproduction of the text. In the case of the *Battalname*, however, the *meclīs* is not a thematic unit. In fact, the *mecālis* do not coincide with the thematic headings of the stories that constitute the cycle, rendered in Persian. In the medieval Arabic Middle East, texts that were used in gatherings for public oral recitation or reading had two divisions: one was thematic and the other divided the text into sections for reading. This coincides with the *Battalname*'s thematic and non-thematic subdivisions. Furthermore, the oldest manuscript has empty spaces meant for miniatures never completed. Some texts used miniatures as scenery props for their audience; it is not possible to determine if this was the case for this manuscript.

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The manuscript could have served different purposes, such as a text employed by a storyteller as support for its oral reproduction or a manuscript produced under palace patronage, as was the case for the *Ṣaltukname*. These possible uses of the manuscript also suggest the social contexts in which these narratives existed: oral recitation in recreational contexts; court interest in reproducing, listening, and preserving these narratives; and attempts to use these narratives as forms of expressing and contending for an authoritative understanding of Islam. More importantly, these multiple and not necessarily mutually exclusive motives for producing manuscripts highlighted the limits and possibilities of their use as historical sources. My interest here, in this sense, is not to establish an authoritative reading of the text as much as point out the interconnections with other forms of oral communication and entertainment, some of which existed within the same mental space as these epics, namely poetry and other forms of mystical and spiritual expression. The stories of love, conquest, and eroticism in all these narratives normalized male-male erotic encounters for audiences far greater than those familiar with elite culture and imported Persian lyric models. In fact, I suggest that these and other stories and expressions of love and eroticism both underscore all-male spaces wherein martial superiority, beauty, deceit, and inspiration were possible, and hint at male-male erotic interactions (in similar spaces) that had grown less and less common in the 15th century, or at least were being redefined and sometimes challenged.

The examples discussed here, whether products of elite culture or orally circulating epic cycles that incorporated different sectors of Ottoman society, produced shared cultural spaces in which self-sacrifice (as a product of love) came to be esteemed. A language of love expressed a tension between external and internal signs of faith and trust, good and evil. But together with a preoccupation with the truthfulness of converts, peers, infidels, and lovers, there was discussion of cultural and social spaces, often depicted in stories and poetry in erotic terms. The tension inherent in erotic encounters between two male participants was not an anomaly, but rather the necessary condition of distinctly male spaces in which certain social activities occurred. The anomaly was not the appreciation of male beauty, nor the implicit eroticism, but rather the surrendering to temptation, the deceit, that for the lover in poetry meant losing one's heart in the beloved's hair, and in the epic cycles meant having one's throat slit.

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