Lovers in the Age of the Beloveds: Classical Ottoman Divan Literature and the Dialectical Tradition

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When we say, “God is love,” we are saying something very great and true. But it would be senseless to grasp this saying in a simple-minded way as a simple definition, without analyzing what love is.

Hegel

Introduction

The debate over the relationship between literature and philosophy has intensified in the past decade, with the growth of modern literary theory in the wake of deconstruction and an increasingly philosophical approach to the interpretation of the text. However, as this debate intensified in modern Western academia, there has been no large-scale application of philosophical analysis to literature, particularly Middle Eastern literatures. This chapter is an attempt to fill that gap by analyzing traditional archetypes of divan literature – ʿāšīk (lover), maʿṣūk (beloved), and rakīb (opponent) – to reveal the presence of a dialectical discourse in Ottoman love poems written between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In both style and
content divan poems display a comprehensive understanding of the post-
classical Islamic philosophical conception of dialectic and argumentation
theory, known as ādāb al-baḥth wa al-munāẓara. The focus on Ottoman
love poetry and Islamic argumentation theory in this paper aims to dem-
onstrate (a) how the love poetry that developed in Ottoman culture in the
fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is more dialectical in form and content
than Ottoman literary studies have recognized heretofore and (b) that
philosophy and literature are not fully distinct entities in Middle Eastern
literatures.

This short study focuses on the three main figures in Ottoman divan
poetry – ‘āşık (lover), ma’ṣūk (beloved), and rakīb (rival)2 – in order to
demonstrate the existence of a dialectical discourse in which love becomes
a competition between ʿāşık and rakīb for the ma’ṣūk, the object of love.3
Such a dialectical framework is helpful for identifying conceptual oppo-
sitions in love and the use of antithetical language, such as that between
ʿāşık and rakīb. Our concentration on love poems will also provide a useful
starting point for future research on the relationship between literature and
philosophy in Ottoman literary studies.

Debates on Philosophy and Literature

The relationship between philosophy and literature has long been con-
tested by philosophers and poets, going as far back as Plato.4 Over the past
decade, the debate over whether philosophy and literature are one and the
same or not has intensified.5 The attempt to clarify the relationship between
these two domains has become more urgent. For writers like Octavio Paz,
philosophy and poetry were entirely different modes of approaching real-
ity, while for others, like the analytic philosopher Richard Rorty, the tradi-
tional divisions between philosophy as the realm of “reason” and poetry as
the realm of “emotion” were problematic.6

In this context there has been an increased interest in literary theory,
especially in the era of a postmodernist and poststructuralist turn against
the modernist view of art as irrational and philosophy a strictly rational
realm.7 As a result of deconstructionist literary criticism, the concept of
“the text” has been expanded, summed up by Jacques Derrida’s famous
claim that “there is nothing outside the text.”8 Derrida pointed out that
modernist thinkers place philosophy above literature since they see philosophy as rational and not involved in the use of rhetorical tropes or metaphorical language. Derrida, by contrast, did not see any difference between philosophy and literature in this respect, and so he argued that literature can be used in philosophy to the same extent that philosophy can be categorized as literature.9

The result of these theoretical debates has been a broader application of literary theories to any kind of text, whether philosophical, historical, religious, or political, or the inverse: applying philosophical analysis to literary texts to show how philosophy can benefit from literature.10 Some scholars have focused on the dialectical nature of literature by highlighting specific examples of the role of contradictions (thesis and antithesis) in medieval and modern literature. James A. W. Rembert showed that the question-and-answer method, which he calls the “dialectical tradition,” is the one Jonathan Swift (d. 1745), for example, used in his works.11 Rembert compares Swift’s method of argument and reasoning to the Aristotelian model expressed in detail in Aristotle’s Topics.12

Recently, Ksana Blank, in Dostoevsky’s Dialectics and the Problem of Sin, analyzed the dialectical nature of Dostoevsky’s works, including Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, The Idiot, Notes from Underground, and “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man.”13 Blank borrows from ancient Greek, Chinese, and Christian dialectical traditions to show a dynamic aspect of Dostoevsky’s dialectics as a philosophy of compatible contradictions. These studies found the concept of truth in literature to be based not on logic, but on dialogue and contradiction, even though the authors were very well aware of Aristotelian logic and dialectic.

Dialectical Discourse in Ottoman Divan Love Poetry

However, these developments took place exclusively in the context of European and North American academic circles.14 In this respect, classical Ottoman literature has not been thoroughly examined, especially when compared with Western scholarship in the field to date.15 This chapter will use traditional archetypes of divan literature as “core samples,” namely, the ʿāşık (lover), the maʿşūk (beloved), and the rakīb (opponent), in order to show
dialectical forms in Ottoman love poems that have a clear philosophical underpinning.\textsuperscript{16} We will see how the divan poets consciously constructed a dialectical discourse through the extensive use of binary opposition.

In Islamic argumentation theory, the objective of dialectical discourse is to test the foundations of opposite points of view.\textsuperscript{17} According to this theory, the dialectic between the questioner (sā'il) and the respondent (mu'allil) occurs in order to find the truth (ṣavāb) in the argumentation and the real concern is to distinguish the strong (true) argument from the weak (false) one.\textsuperscript{18} There are two sides in argumentation, questioner and respondent, with one side defending a thesis while the other attacks it.\textsuperscript{19} In Ottoman divan poetry, likewise, there are two sides in love: the 'āşık and his opponent the rakīb. Both want to win the ma'şūk. The 'āşık makes his claim as a thesis – “I love this girl”\textsuperscript{20} – and the rakīb consistently challenges until the 'āşık gives up or is silenced so that the rakīb wins the beloved although the rakīb is not as ambitious as the 'āşık. Nineteenth-century dictionaries, such as Lügât-ı Nâcî and Kâmûs-u Türkî, define rakīb as someone who loves another person’s lover, or, an intruder who does not value the union of two hearts.\textsuperscript{21} In most cases, the rakīb is a male who chases someone else’s female lover instead of finding one of his own.

Ahmet Atillâ Şentürk, in his study Rakib'e Dair (On rakīb), mentions the great struggle and confusion over the role and meaning of the rakīb in the game of love. He says that until the sixteenth century, the role of rakīb in poetic texts was that of a protector or guardian of the girl against the pseudo-lovers (weak arguers).\textsuperscript{22} However, from the sixteenth century on, the perception of the old rakīb changes: as attested in divan poetry, the rakīb was now seen as the enemy of lovers (aḍâ’/a’dā) or the “other” (ghayr/aghyr).\textsuperscript{23} This change is accounted for in the rakīb’s behavior, as he begins to openly challenge the 'āşık by claiming proprietorship over the ma’şūk.

The following examples from Ottoman divan poetry reveal this tension between the three players in love:

\begin{quote}
Yâr içün aghyr ile merdâne ceng itsem gerek
İt gibi murdar rakib ölmezse yâr elden gider\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

For my love, to fight bravely against the enemy is a must
If the rakīb does not die like a dog, my lover will go [from my hands]
**Analysis of the Dialectical Discourse in Poems**

While early Greeks used dialectical discourse to explore the truth, divan poets used it to *declare* the truth, as evidenced by the frequent use of imperatives in their text. The truth is a foregone conclusion in the works of these poets: the ‘âşık deserves the girl.\(^{29}\) Albeit the ‘âşık does not question the logic of his entitlement to the beloved, he does not question why the beloved is still more attracted to the less pure persona depicted as the rakib.\(^{30}\) The poet is confident that the ma’şûk, is in fact attracted to him, and rakib is merely a well-utilized diversion. Poets often attempt to convince the reader that were there no rakib, the ‘âşık and the ma’şûk would live happily ever after. As such, the rakib was characterized as a mere obstacle for the absolute union of “true lovers.”\(^{31}\)
Since it is almost impossible to escape the threats posed by the rakīb, the only way to be relieved of that anxiety (rakīb) was to wait for his death. Necātī (d. 1509) thought that this was futile because “one dog [rakīb] will die, but there will be other dogs who come along soon.” The only way to get rid of this demon figure, the famous Ottoman poet Bākī (d. 1600) says, is to snuff him yourself instead of waiting for his death:

Ser-i kuyunda ger gavgâ-yı üşşâk olmasın dirsên
Rakib-i kâfiri öldür ne ceng ü ne cidâl olsun

If you want there to be no fighting among lovers
Kill the infidel rakīb so that there is no war and quarrel

In this sense, divan literature also attempts to understand the nature of love by seeing it as an open-ended question between the ‘āşık and the rakīb. The rakīb tries to infiltrate amorous space occupied by Leylā and Mecnûn, Hüsrev and Şirin, or Vâmîk and Azra. Dialectic in love is distinct in the sense that it could be called “speech between two opposing emotions.”

Two opposing emotions are created in the heart of the beloved (ma’şûk) by two real participants (‘āşık and rakīb) to test which one is truer. The rakīb always questions both the lover and the beloved, and his role is to push the ‘āşık to define the nature of ‘aşk (love), simply by token of his opposition. The point here is that the dialectic between the lover and his opponent is meant to distinguish strong, true love from weak, false love. This is akin to the tenets of Islamic argumentation theory, whose principal concern is to distinguish the strong (true) argument from the weak (false) one. In Persian poetry, among others, the words ṣaḥîh (true), saqīm (false), ḥaqq (truth), and bāṭil (falsity) are used to differentiate between true and false love. For rakīb, in the adâb al-baḥth wa al-munâẓara the following terms should be of interest: māni (Ar. mānî, “stopper/hinderer”), mudder’î (Ar. muddâ’î, “opponent/perpetrator”) and mu’âriz (Ar. mu’ârid, “opponent/nay-sayer”) were used. Ottoman poetry has been greatly influenced by Arabic and Persian poetry in terms of rhetorical terminology.

The dialectical relationship between ‘aşik, ma’şûk, and rakīb can also be described as a verbal battle against an opponent in which the poet makes the participants – the proponent of love (‘aşık) and the questioner

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of love (rakīb) – debate a thesis (love), answer objections (to the accusation of not loving), and offer evidences of their fealty. In fact, divan love poetry is more like a public debate than a convivial joinder among the participants. The term “Lover” in divan poetry highlights the real dilemma of whether the rakīb opposes the nonfigurative concepts of love and the figurative lover. As indicated, according to the Islamic ādāb al-baḥth wa al-munāẓara theory, the objective of argumentation is to find the truth even in the hands of one’s opponent. Does the rakīb want, then, to demonstrate the fallacy of the ‘āşık’s thesis (his love for the ma’şūk), or to demolish him and win the girl for himself? In other words, keeping in mind the terms of ādāb al-baḥth, is the rakīb trying to find the truth, or is he aiming at victory?

Although the answer is ambiguous, it makes one thing clear: dialectical discourse in divan poems refers to a philosophy of conflict rather than a reciprocal relationship between binary opposites, since the three archetypes in the game of love (‘āşık, ma’şūk, and rakīb) are not in a mutual relationship but instead opposed to each other. In this respect, there are two major antimonies that can be highlighted in divan love poetry, each containing a thesis and an antithesis. The first is the antimony of love, which cannot be attained by mere mortals like the ‘āşık. The first, begs the question as to why one would want to take such a path, peppered with incompatibility and pain and destined for unrequited love. The second is the antimony of truth: the ‘āşık is aware of the inequality that exists in the dynamics of this relationship, yet he genuinely feels that he knows how to love his beloved better than his opponent. The ‘āşık presents a resistance to the rakīb (the intervening villain), but not to the ma’şūk. The ‘āşık knows that the ma’şūk is happy with the rakīb, but justifies lying with the ma’şūk, and continues to place all blame on the rakīb. Although the ‘āşık questions himself, he never questions the authority of the ma’şūk: she has the final say.

In more illustrative terms, the ‘āşık is depicted as a helpless servant to the ma’şūk. The figure of the ma’şūk is likened to a sadomasochist who enjoys his pain. Therefore, reconciliation is never in the cards. If we look at the ‘āşık and the ma’şūk from a Hegelian dialectical perspective, the master (the ma’şūk) and the slave (the ‘āşık) remain so inter-dependent that coexistence becomes all but the only option. This in turn demands that the master be recognized by the servant; consequently the master becomes
the slave and the slave becomes the master (of the master). Furthermore, the choice between freedom and bondage is no choice at all as the slave consciously, if paradoxically, chooses bondage. The paradox in the lover’s pursuit of union seems to be that domination, separation, and servitude are necessary for personal growth, but the final goal of achieving unity, nay oneness, with the ma’sūk may not be possible.⁴⁰

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, Ottoman divan love poetry accommodates both literary and philosophical approaches to reading texts, validating the postmodernist view of the relationship between literature and philosophy. The tripartite nature of love (‘āşık–ma’şūk–rakīb) in divan love poems raises fundamental questions about the relationship between philosophy and literature as well. If philosophy revolves around truth, intellect, and the literal use of language, and the literature focuses on fiction, emotion, and metaphorical language, then how do we interpret the divan love poems, particularly the dialectical discourse that exists among the role players? The overlap of philosophy and literature in the Ottoman intellectual history displays hybrid forms of cultural production.

The dialectical discourse in classical Ottoman literature, suggested in this study, is based on the philosophical insights of Islamic dialectic and argumentation theory. It explains how the divan poets use this philosophical genre to create a plausible structure for the reader. This dialectical discourse analysis of ‘āşık, ma’şūk, and the rakīb can better accommodate the use of the dual languages of philosophy and literature than previous scholarship in this field has allowed. Although philosophy and literature seem to be distinct, both can be exemplified in the very same text. Such combinations may have the potential to achieve more than the sum of the two parts. Philosophical approaches can account for the power of literary works that are not overtly philosophical.

This chapter shows also that Ottoman divan poets developed a dialectical understanding of love in which love (‘aşk) creates and sustains differences between ‘āşık, ma’şūk, and rakīb. The main point in these poems is that love does not obliterate the differences, but uses them for ma’şūk’s benefit in the most effective way. In evaluating Ottoman divan love poetry and
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its philosophical foundations, the future research may benefit immensely from seeking answers in theoretically based comparative literature studies about the following two questions. The first question being how does Ottoman love poetry compare with the medieval European conception of *amour courtois* (courtly love) to discern what might constitute differences or similarities between those genres? And the second question the Hegelian master-slave dialectic: how does the treatment of dialectics in Hegel allow us to widen the field of literary formats in which we look for and develop philosophical concepts in classical Ottoman literature?

Notes


2. These are the Turkish pronunciations of the Arabic terms ʿāshiq, mašhūq, and raqīb, respectively.

3. This study will also examine some terms used in Arabic and Persian poetry, especially given that the latter influenced the Ottoman diwan literature. On the enemies of love in an Arabo-Andalusian context, see Patrizia Onesta, “Lauzinger-Wāshī-Index, Gardador-Custos: The ‘Enemies of Love’ in Provençal, Arabo-Andalusian, and Latin Poetry,” *Scripta Mediterranea* 19/20 (1998–9): 119–42.


6. For Paz’s thought on the relationship between philosophy and poetry, see Hugo Moreno, “Octavio Paz’s Poetic Reply to Hegel’s Philosophical Legacy,” in *Octavio Paz: Humanism and Critique*, ed. Oliver Kozlarek (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2009), 217–30. For Rorty, philosophy becomes a kind of literature, which means a philosophical text becomes a literary text – a text offering a particular philosopher’s worldview. Rorty developed his ideas in his two books: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For Rorty’s views on philosophy and literature, see Lothar Bredella, “Richard Rorty on Philosophy, Literature, and Hermeneutics,” in *Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Herbert Grabes, REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 13 (Tübingen: Verlag, 1997), 103–24. Recently, philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Peter J. McCormick, Bernard Harrison, and Richard Wollheim have made a turnaround with a more accommodating attitude toward literature, especially the novel, to seek answers for philosophical problems since philosophy was unable to tell the whole story.

7. An increasing interest was initiated in the wake of Rorty’s *The Linguistic Turn* (1967), which was largely influenced by the theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Later, in the 1970s, the broader disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, shaped by Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralism and the poststructuralism expounded by Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, recognized the importance of language as a structuring agent, further popularizing the notion of the linguistic turn. The power of language in historical discourse, particularly its rhetorical tropes and use of metaphors, has been clearly illustrated by Hayden White. Language has also become a central focus in the history of ideas to which Quentin Skinner’s work on recent intellectual history attests. For debates over the relationship between philosophy and literature (or the linguistic turn in philosophy that challenged the foundation of philosophy), see Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 125–202.


12. For example, in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, when Gulliver finishes his long discourse, his Majesty raises many doubts, queries, and objections. The nature of the king’s questions and comparison of accounts and subsequent answers serve to point out the many problems in Gulliver’s representation in the pursuit of finding the truth.


14. In the past decade, there have also been efforts to open new departments under the title “Philosophy and Literature” or “Program in Literature and Philosophy” in North American and European universities.

15. Even though the hierarchical relationships between the maşûk, aşık, and rakîb have been studied in the context of Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar’s famous “court metaphor” (*saray istiaresi*) concept by Neslihan Koç Keskin, her study mainly focuses on the impact of the political structure of the Ottoman state and not the philosophical analysis of the literature. See Neslihan Koç Keskin, “Maşûk, Aşık ve Rakip Arasındaki Hiyerarşik İlişkiler,” *Turkish Studies: International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* 5, no. 3 (2010): 400–20.

16. Up until now, there has not been a single study on the dialectical tradition in Ottoman literature. However, there have been two important studies that engage with different aspects of the maşûk and the rakîb. See Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloved: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and Matthias Kappler, “The Beloved and His Otherness: Reflections on ‘Ethnic’ and Religious Stereotypes in Ottoman Love Poetry,” in *Intercultural Aspects in and around Turkic Literatures*. 295

For an analysis of the archetype of the rakib, see Ahmet Atilla Şentürk, rakib'e Dair (İstanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1995) and Metin Akkuş, Nef 'î Divanı’nda Tipler ve Kişilikler (Erzurum: Atatürk Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, 1995).

17. On ādābü'l-bahs ve'l-münâzara in postclassical Islamic intellectual history within a broader context, see Mehmet Karabela, “Development of Dialectic and Argumentation Theory in Post-classical Islamic Intellectual History” (PhD diss., McGill University, 2011).

18. The influence of argumentation theory on the Ottoman legal system shows not only the existence of competing doctrines and opinions, but also the level and hierarchy of opinions in legal practice. There was a real contest regarding which doctrine (mezheb) or which answer (cevâb) to a question (mes'ele) was the strongest or the best. This was one of the reasons why Ottoman judges were required to pass their judgments according to “the soundest opinions of the Hanafi jurists (esahh-ı akvâl), never the weak ones.” Any judgment that had been based upon weak opinions in the Hanafi school of law was deemed invalid, meaning that the case in question could be reheard. See Ebussuud Efendi, “Ma'rûzât” in Osmanlı Kanunnameleri (İstanbul: Fey Vakfı, 1992), 4:39–50.


20. Although the gender of the maşük (beloved) is not clear in the divan love poetry, since the maşük is characterized sometimes as a female and sometimes as a male, I have chosen to present the maşük as female. The rationale for my choice is that poets, most of the time, provide female body figures as the idealized form of the maşük. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that the maşük lacks gender and is rather an idealized body form, which includes a slim waist, long hair, and plump lips. See Ömer Faruk Akün, “Divan Edebiyatı,” in TĐV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1988), 9:416–17 and Nevin Gümüş, “Yahya Nazım Divanında Sevgiliye Ait Güzellik Unsurları ile Aşık-Maşuk-Rakip Münasebeti,” Erciyes Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi 17 (1997): 231–48.

21. Cited in Şentürk, Rakîbê Dair, 1. The original definitions of rakîb in the two Ottoman dictionaries are as follows: (a) Lügat-ı Nâcî: “Diğerini men” ile kendi işini tervic etmeye çalışan, engel,” and (b) Kâmûs-u Türkî: “Diğerile aynı şeye tâlîb ve hâhiger olan, bir mahbûbeye dildâde olan aşıkların yekdiğerlerine nisbeten beheri.” For the Arabic definition of raqîb, see Edward William Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 3:1134.

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In some cases, the rakib was hired by the beloved's husband or the girl's parents for the duty of surveillance. This was an Arabic custom with roots in ancient Bedouin society; see Onesta, "Lauzinger-Wäshli-Index, Gardador-Custos," 129.

Şentürk, Rakibé Dair, 11–15.


Aşenseddinzade Hamdullah Hamdî (d. 1504), “Leyla ve Mecnun,” İstanbul Üniversitesi Library, MS Türkçesi Yazarlar 800, fols. 20a; cited in Şentürk, Rakibé Dair, 22.

Satan was seen as the rakib in divan literature due to his opposition to Adam, in the Fall narrative. It is worth mentioning here that the Muslim theologian and heresiographer Shahristani (d. 1153), in his Kitâb al-Milal wa al-Nihal (The book of religion and sects), portrays Satan as a skeptic questioner (sâ’il) asking questions of angels and God (depicted as mujib or “respondent”), providing the debate in argumentation (munâzarâ) format. See 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahristani, Kitâb al-Milal wa al-Nihal (Cairo: Matba‘at al-Azhâr, 1947), 12–17.

Aşenseddinzade, “Leyla ve Mecnun,” fols. 20a. Also cited in Şentürk, Rakibé Dair, 22.


For these examples, see Şentürk, “Klasik Osmanlı Edebiyatında Tipler,” 395–411.

Şentürk, Rakibé Dair, 20–4.


Ibid., Rakibé Dair, 78.

Cited in Şentürk, “Klasik Osmanlı Edebiyatında Tipler,” 384. The poet’s full name is Mahmud Abdülhâkim (1526–1600), and he came to be known as Sulṭân al-Shu‘ara’ or “Sultan of poets” in Ottoman literature.

Akkuş, Nefî Divanı’nda Tipler ve Kişilikler, 31.

In this respect, see Julie Scott Meisami’s study Medieval Persian Court Poetry (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 268–70. For some examples, see Şentürk, Rakibé Dair, 7–21 and Şentürk, “Klasik Osmanlı Edebiyatinda Tipler,” 388–96.


On the divan psychology of love, see Akün, “Divan Edebiyatı,” in TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi 9:415–16.

The master-slave relationship provoked philosophical commentary from Aristotle to Derrida, who questioned it in his Of Grammatology and The Politics of Language and (1977).
of Friendship. However, no single philosopher has explored the political, historical, and psychological implications of this basic human power struggle for recognition in more depth than Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1804).


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