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II. The Poet 'Azmizade Haleti and the Transformation of Ottoman Literature in the Seventeenth Century

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Conventional scholars have described the Ottoman Empire as being in a long period of gradual decline in the last decades of the sixteenth century. But a new generation of revisionist scholars have challenged this view and describe this time as the beginning of a long period of imperial crisis and change. According to these scholars, from the 1580s onward, the Ottomans witnessed a series of transformative problems that not only created changes in their full-fledged empire's political, military, and economic structures but also in various areas of social and cultural life. Based on this new perspective and on the so-called seventeenth-century Ottoman imperial crisis, this essay discusses some hitherto unexplored developments in the field of Ottoman literature. Focusing on the life and work of seventeenth-century Ottoman poet and scholar 'Azmizade Haleti Efendi (d. 1570–1631), a study of his writings demonstrates the transformation that was taking place within Ottoman society in the late 1500s.

CHANGE(S) IN POWER RELATIONS AND THE RISE OF HAREM EUNUCHS

The Ottomans had a well-established patrimonial system that governed almost all managerial activities until the mid-sixteenth century. This system reached its level of perfection in the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566), described as a time in which "one did not need to wonder about who was going to be the next

grand vizier."¹ This kind of a world encouraged an easy-going lifestyle in many ways as one would be able to easily predict his or her near future. Baki Tezcan refers to the subsequent era in which transformative structural changes took place as "the Second Empire."

[M]y suggestion [is] to call the period of circa 1580–1826 the Second Empire. If the political structures of the feudal kingdom and the patrimonial empire were to be represented by a pyramid at the apex of which stood the sultan, the Second Empire would best be symbolized by a spider web with the monarch at the center but not on top of anyone else.²

He continues by suggesting that "the Second Empire as a whole is marked by the gradual demilitarization of the upper ruling class, or its *civilization*—civil in the sense of being nonmilitary."³

Indeed, from the reign of Murad III (r. 1574–1595) onward, the Ottomans went through a period of change pertaining to court and dynastic politics, which in turn had critical repercussions on the intellectual and literary life of many parties. For instance, when the Ottoman dynasty stopped sending their princes to *sanjaks* (mostly in Anatolia) with the aim at training them in statecraft, all main political and cultural patronage networks shifted to the capital city of Istanbul, and a new center of power and patronage emerged together with a new Ottoman ruling class. Naturally a prince ascending the throne would bring many of his favorites to Istanbul. Politically speaking, the abandonment of *sanjaks* resulted in power relations being centered at the Topkapı Palace. When a new sultan came to the throne, he brought his favorites with him to the palace, which set them on a collision course with the old power holders.⁴ Hence factions emerged in the palace that sought to be closer to the sultan at the expense of other parties.

Two parties appeared to have benefited from these emerging new conditions: *valide* sultans⁵ (sultanas) and *darussaade agası* (chief eunuch of the imperial harem of the Ottoman Empire). Jane Hathaway confirmed this observation, pointing to the power vacuum being filled by the sultan's mother and the Chief Harem Eunuch. The *valide* sultans are well documented in various academic and non-academic works, but the effects of the Chief Harem Eunuch on Ottoman culture require some additional explanation. Hathaway describes this as a time of crisis in the empire and suggests that the inauguration of the office of the Eunuch was a reaction or adaptation to that crisis.

What is intriguing about the office of Chief Harem Eunuch is that it emerged and developed during the era of what used to be called "decline," which has now been recast as a period, beginning in the late sixteenth century and running through the seventeenth century, when the Ottoman Empire passed through a profound crisis to which it was forced to adapt. Where the palace was concerned, this crisis affected the manner in which the Ottoman dynasty reproduced itself and projected its authority. The evolution of the Chief Harem Eunuch's office is, I would argue, an integral part of the palace's adaptation to the crisis.⁶

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