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MEDIEVAL AND
EARLY MODERN PERFORMANCE
IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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CLOWNS AT OTTOMAN FESTIVITIES

Özdemir Nutku

Dance and clownery were inseparable twins at the festive performances of the Ottomans. Both were secondary shows between the amusements and theatrical performances, or, we may even say that they were introductory pieces to drama performances. In other words, dance and clownery were transitional performances between acrobatic shows towards theatrical ones having a 'theme'. Based on festival books called the *surnames* and a wide range of travellers' accounts, we are able to form an understanding about different forms of dancing in the Ottoman world. We will focus here on four dance forms, mostly performed in the urban contexts — mimetic, erotic, skilled, and war dances — in which the clowns participated. They did not participate in the religious ones, called the *dervish* dances.¹ The clowns always appeared in the arena together with the dancers. These jesters imitated the dancers with amusing mimicry, and sometimes with obscene mockery. Occasionally, one of the chief clowns came to the fore and demonstrated his skill with a solo dance.

In most of the mimetic dances, the performers were wrapped in animal skins (as was also seen in Europe during the Middle Ages), wearing bear, camel, lion, leopard, dog, and deer hides. While these performers danced, the clowns attempted to tame these dancers in their animal disguises. The erotic dancers were either long haired young boys or gypsy girls. In this case, the jesters per-

¹ The so-called '*dervish* dances' referred to a structured ritual movement system performed by the Mevlevi religious order. *Sema*, the part where the dervishes whirled in ecstasy, called particularly the attention of European visitors, who interpreted this performance as the '*dervish* dancing'.

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