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MANUSCRIPT. ILLUSTRATED COMPENDIUM OF EROTIC  
TEXTS&NBSP;  
209 LEAVES

OTTOMAN EMPIRE; BETWEEN 1799 AND 1817

EACH LEAF: 32.2 X 20.5 CM

This manuscript belongs to a genre of erotic literature known in Turkish as *bahname* (from Arabic *bah*, sex, lust, libido). In the Ottoman Empire, the genre dates back as far as the fifteenth century, appearing mainly in the form of older texts translated from Persian and Arabic.

The main text of the manuscript is a Turkish translation of an Arabic erotic manual attributed to the Egyptian author al-Tifashi (d. 1253), who was a scholar of sexual hygiene and mineralogy.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it contains several shorter texts about the beauty and characteristics of men, women, and young boys, as well as a number of shorter humorous anecdotes with erotic content.<sup>2</sup>

The texts are accompanied by no less than eighty-five miniature

paintings on vellum, done by several different, anonymous artists. Some of the paintings accurately reflect the action outlined in the texts, while others amplify their erotic undertones considerably.

Looking beyond their explicitly sexual aspects, the miniatures of this manuscript are in many respects similar to other Ottoman paintings from the same period. The painstaking depictions of different costumes are reminiscent of numerous contemporary representations of both local and exotic men and women (see, for example, 172/2006 and 173/2006). Furthermore, the use of perspective in the rendition of landscapes and architecture as well as the use of shadow effects show that the artists drew inspiration from European art, a widespread trend around 1800 (see e.g. 27/2008).

”A Tavern Scene” (fol. 34r), which is shown here, is one of the manuscript’s most innocuous miniatures. It shows two Greek boys dressed as women dancing in a tavern in Istanbul’s Galata district. The guest shown seated at the table facing the viewer is interesting because he seems to reappear in several of the subsequent sex scenes (fol. 128r), as well as in the full-length portrait that concludes the manuscript (fol. 209a). The man’s distinctive turban identifies him as an Ottoman official, and it is possible that this is the manuscript’s unnamed patron.<sup>3</sup>

Fol. 10r, “The Recommended Method of Achieving Pregnancy”

This miniature accompanies a text about sexual reproduction. It explains that successful conception requires careful foreplay and a simultaneous orgasm. According to the text, this is because *‘pregnancy depends on the man’s and woman’s bodily fluids being mixed during a shared climax, or by the woman reaching climax first’*.

The *Bahname* genre often mixed its pornographic and humorous aspects with medical advice on pregnancy, contraception, impotence and low sex drive. Indeed, several of the well-known *bahname* works are believed to have been compiled by physicians.

Fol. 41v, “Scenes of Intercourse between European Men”

The men in these scenes can be identified from the notes written in red. The upper miniature shows a Polish man penetrating a German/Austrian, while the lower miniature depicts a Russian and a Dutchman.

The manuscript contains eleven other similar homoerotic miniatures featuring male archetypes from Europe and the Ottoman Empire (Spaniards, Greeks, Turks and Syrians, etc.). The text on the surrounding pages discusses the beauty and qualities of the different peoples. The illustrations seem to be inspired by the period’s non-erotic ‘costume albums’, which were popular with both locals and foreigners in Istanbul.

Fol. 57v, “Penis Comparisons/Well-Endowed Arabs”

The manuscript also contains several illustrated discussions of variations within female and male genitalia. The top miniature on this page thus shows six men displaying penises that vary in size and shape.

The lower miniature accompanies two brief, humorous anecdotes about particularly well-endowed Arabs. A man named Ibn al-Ghazz reportedly had a penis of such enormous size that camels would mistake it for a tree trunk and rub themselves against it.

Fol. 78v–79r, “Women with Children in the Hammam”

This double miniature takes the viewer into the women’s section of the hammam, a realm to which men were otherwise denied access.

The painting shows a group of women and a few children gathered around the central pool of the bath house. Some of the women are going about their ablutions or combing their hair; one woman is rubbing herself with a bath mitt, and one is shown smoking a long pipe while arranging another woman’s hair.

The accompanying text describes a day in the hammam, and while it mainly dwells on the beauty of women, it also recounts exchanges of insults and sexual gossip; some of the women even fight or masturbate.

Fol. 82v, “Locals Confront an Adulterous Woman”

This miniature accompanies a story about the wiles and cunning of women. A prostitute is in the company of a customer, when an angry mob led by the local imam congregates at her door. The crowd demands that she be banished from the city, but she invites the imam inside and convinces him that her client is merely a younger relative whom she has raised from childhood. After this, the woman and her client are free to conduct their business in peace.

Night scenes are rare in the Ottoman miniature tradition, and even more unusual is the naturalistic rendering of the lamplight casting shadows on the ground and the wall behind the assembly.

Fol. 115r, “A Widow Seduces a Blind Man Guarding her Husband’s Grave”

The manuscript also includes a version of an older Arabic story in which Caliph al-Mutadid’s ten maids compete to outdo each other with marvellous stories of the sexual appetites of women.

The fifth maid thus tells the tale of a young widow who hires a blind man to guard her husband’s grave. When one day she finds the guard asleep with an obvious erection, she is seized by lust and mounts him right in the middle of the burial chamber.

Fol. 116r, “The Woman and the Mule Driver”

Very few aspects of sexual life remain unaddressed in the manuscript, and thus it also contains several descriptions of zoophilia. This miniature accompanies the story of a woman who sees a young mule driver having sex with his mule. Aroused by the sight, the woman takes the mule driver as her secret lover.

The scene is part of the same story as the one set in a mausoleum (fol. 115r), and once again the intention is apparently to make the reader marvel at the sexual appetites of women.

Fol. 126v, “Chain Manoeuvre”

The manuscript contains several different tales of homosexuality. In one of these, the protagonist meets a young man in a palace garden. The youth initiates him into the joys of homoeroticism by introducing him to sixteen different positions, which are meticulously described and illustrated. At one point, the narrator is introduced to a group of the young man’s friends, and together they perform a complicated position involving ten participants: the *zincir sekişi* (chain manoeuvre).

In Ottoman erotic literature, a distinction is made between women, men and beardless youths, with the latter constituting what almost amounts to a separate gender until adulthood. According to the logic of this literature, it was not unmanly to have sex with a youth, as long as you assumed the active, penetrating role. By contrast, love and sex between adult men is a rather more marginalised topic in this literature.

However, this and several other miniatures in the present manuscript break away from the usual logic as they clearly depict adult, bearded men having sex with each other. In this miniature we even see the active-passive dichotomy being dissolved entirely.

Fol. 128r, “Courtiers Amusing Themselves”

This miniature is also part of the story of the sixteen sex positions (see fol. 126 verso). While the story is set in the Syrian city of Raqqa in the ninth century, the illustrations are unmistakably Ottoman. So-called ‘costume albums’ from the period make it possible to identify several of the men in this miniature as Ottoman officials and courtiers. Furthermore, the man in the blue robe appears to be manuscript’s presumed patron, who also appears in the tavern scene (fol. 34r) and in the final portrait (fol. 209r).

Fol. 140r, “The Womaniser and the Pederast”

This miniature serves as the opening illustration to the story of *Zenpare* (the lover of women) and *Gulampare* (the lover of male youths), who each try to convince the other of the superiority of their particular inclination. The two seducers are shown in the process of making advances to a veiled woman and a young man, respectively, and the scene contains a wealth of elaborate details such as facial expressions and body language.

Discussions about the relative benefits of having sex with either women or youths are known from older Arabic and Persian literature, for example, *The Arabian Nights* contains a verbal contest on the subject.[1]

[1] *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights*, translated by Malcolm C. Lyons, London 2008, vol. 2 pp. 381–391.

Fol. 159r, “The Woman and the Black Palace Slave”

This tale is of a famous musician in Cairo who is escorted to a prostitute by a black palace slave. However, the woman and the slave take a clear and sudden interest in each other, and in the meantime the musician hides so he can witness the act. His face can be glimpsed in the window.

Enslaved men of African descent were fixtures at many Islamic courts, and they are often mentioned in older Arabic literature. Several stories in *The Arabian Nights* thus revolve around the alleged virility of black men – often described with equal parts fascination and anxiety.

Fol. 184r, “Two Depictions of Sex between Women”

Sexual relations between women are only sparsely described in Ottoman erotic literature and illustrated with even less frequency. This manuscript contains a short chapter on lesbianism (*musahaqa*), accompanied by these two miniatures.

The upper painting shows two women with their lower bodies bared, locked in a reclining embrace. Below, two women are closely entwined in a kiss while one penetrates the other with a red strap-on penis.

Fol. 184v, “The Wealthy Woman who Preferred Young Boys”

This miniature accompanies the story of a rich woman who detested men. Instead, she engaged in congress with young boys, being in the habit of rubbing her genitals against their anus until she swooned from pleasure. A servant kept watch with his sword drawn, making sure that the boys did not try to penetrate the woman when she had fainted.

Fol. 201r, “The Judge and the Two Women”

Stories of judges presiding over cases involving two women have flourished in countless versions ever since the biblical tale of the Judgement of Solomon. This miniature accompanies a humorous story about two women teasing a notoriously libidinous judge.

One woman explains that she sold some linen to the other, having agreed that it was to be as thick as her hair. The other woman protests, claiming that the agreed thickness should correspond to her ankles. In a state of excitement, the judge responds that the women should be content with the thickness of his erect member, causing them to flee

laughing.

Fol. 209r, "Male Portrait"

The last painting of the manuscript is this full-length portrait of a standing man holding a bouquet of flowers. His facial features, attire and turban all suggest that this is the same man who appears in the tavern scene (fol. 34r) and in several of the erotic miniatures (fol. 128r). The portrait strengthens the presumption that the man is the original patron behind the work. His placement at the very back of the manuscript may suggest that he is looking back on the erotic adventures of his youth.

- <sup>1</sup> J. Ruska and O. Kahl: "al-Tifashi" in *Encyclopedia of Islam, New edition, Leiden 1960–2002, vol. 10, p. 476.*
- <sup>2</sup> Tülay Artan and Irvin Cemil Schick: "Ottomanizing-pornotopia: Changing visual codes in eighteenth-century Ottoman erotic miniatures" in Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (eds.): *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art, Farnham 2013, pp. 158 and 177.*
- <sup>3</sup> *A facsimile edition of the manuscript, including translations and several scholarly articles, is currently in preparation.*

Published in:

Sotheby's, London 4/4-1978, lot 120;

Marina Wallace, Martin Kemp, Joanne Bernstein: *Seduced: Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now*, Barbican Centre, London 2007, pp. 120-121;

Tülay Artan and Irvin Cemil Schick: "Ottomanizing-pornotopia: Changing visual codes in eighteenth-century Ottoman erotic miniatures" in Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (eds.): *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, Farnham 2013, pp. 178-179, figs. 7.8-7.9; Sotheby's, London 25/4-2018, lot 105;

Irvin Cemil Schick: "Between the abstraction of miniatures and the literalism of photography: Amateur erotica in early twentieth-century Turkey" in Pedram Khosronejad (ed.): *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia*, 5-6, 2017-2018/19, pp. 6, 8-9, figs. 7-8;