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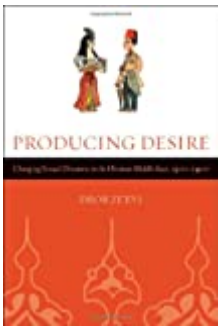

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Dror Ze'evi on the Sexual Discourses of the Early Modern Ottoman World

According to one tradition, the Prophet Muhammad once ordered a handsome youth from the tribe of 'Abd Qays to sit behind him, so that he (the Prophet) would be unable to look at him. Explaining his action, the Prophet supposedly said that David's rebellion against God was caused by gazing–presumably an allusion to the biblical story of David becoming enamored with Bathsheba. The tradition was considered to be of doubtful authenticity by most pre-modern Islamic scholars, but was nevertheless often cited in homiletic writings that warn believers of letting their eyes graze the tempting beauty of women and beardless teenage boys.

This story is the starting point of Dror Ze'evi's timely and enthralling study of sexual discourses in the pre-modern Ottoman world. Ze'evi notes how alien the story may seem to modern readers in both the Western and the Islamic world. It flies in the face of a number of modern assumptions: it suggests that even prophets may experience temptation and that this temptation may equally be caused by handsome beardless male youths as by beautiful women. Understanding the cultural context within which the story made sense requires exploring some of the very different assumptions about sex, desire, and personality in the pre-modern Middle East. And this Ze'evi proceeds to do. His work is a study of some of the main sexual discourses or "scripts" that are evinced in various genres of native texts like medicine, law, homily, dream interpretation, and shadow play, as well as in Western travel accounts.

Chapter 1 of Ze'evi's book is a discussion of pre-modern Ottoman medical and physiognomic discourse touching on the subject of sex and gender. Ze'evi rightly points out that even though Western medical ideas were beginning to infiltrate the Islamic Middle East in the early modern period, the native medical tradition remained on the whole committed to a Galenic-humoral paradigm. According to this paradigm, sexual lust is a natural bodily function, one that should not be repressed outright. Instead, it should be governed by regulating both quality and quantity of sexual activity, with due attention to the peculiar needs corresponding to one's own individual balance of bodily humors. Influenced by the work of Thomas W. Laquer on the history of Western conceptions of gender, Ze'evi argues that the difference be-

tween men and women tended to be seen in terms, not of an absolute binary opposition, but of a "woman-as-an-imperfect-man" model. Women were seen as undeveloped males–a view that may not be politically correct by today's standards, but which did mean that women's sexual desire and their active contribution to procreation tended to be acknowledged. The effeminate man, the masculine woman and the hermaphrodite were mapped onto a continuum between the normal man and woman. This, Ze'evi suggests, may have meant that the difference between having intercourse with members of the same sex and with members of the opposite sex did not seem as stark as it tends to in cultures operating with the modern, "two-sex" model. In the nineteenth century, however, this native medical paradigm was challenged by the wholesale introduction of modern Western medicine. Humoral medicine and the "imperfect man" model were discarded, and–significantly–the new medical paradigm showed a marked reluctance to deal with matters sexual. Since much of the older medical paradigm had been assimilated into Islamic religious discourse in previous centuries, the result was a confusion and incoherence resulting from the coexistence of incompatible models in the realms of medical and religious discourse.

In chapter 2, Ze'evi examines the legal and religious discourse on sex and sexual misdemeanors. Islamic religious law dealt at length with prohibited sexual acts, and it outlined in detail the often severe punishments that applied in such cases. However, conviction was rendered difficult by the requirement that four appropriate witnesses (adult male Muslims of good repute) testify to having seen the genital contact. Furthermore, the punishment for same-sex intercourse was "in most cases left undetermined" (p. 55). In general, Ze'evi asserts, Islamic legal discussions had more of the character of an ongoing conversation between specialists, rather than a closed collection of positive legal injunctions. By comparison, the state-promulgated Kanun was such a collection of legal injunctions. It named and defined various crimes and stipulated appropriate penalties for each. These penalties tended to be less severe than those discussed in the Islamic legal tradition. At the same time, however, the strict conditions for testimony in Islamic law were absent in the Kanun, which permitted both torture and conviction on the basis of circumstantial evidence. In the nineteenth century, legal codes heavily influenced by Western mores and laws were introduced. Differentiation on the basis of freedom/slavery or religion disappeared from the legal codes. At the same time, the codes seem to reveal a heightened sensitivity to abuse of minors and to the responsibility of parents and guardians of children. As in the case of medicine, modernity in law also meant a noticeable reticence in discussing matters sexual: references to sexual misdemeanors became much less common and much less direct.

In chapter 3, Ze'evi discusses what he calls the "morality wars" of the seventeenth century. According to Ze'evi, this war pitted Sufi aesthetics and antinomianism, which often extolled homoerotic attraction and integrated it into its rituals, against "orthodox" misgivings and apprehensions about such ideas and practices. Sufi valorization of homoerotic attraction was rooted in the mystical and quasi-pantheist theories of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), which deemed human beauty to be a manifestation of divine beauty. With the increasing institutionalization of Sufism in the late medieval and early modern centuries, such theories came to be inscribed in rituals like *sama'* (music sessions). The proliferation of such practices led to a counter-proliferation of condemnatory writings by more orthodox religious scholars. Matters came to a head with the emergence of the violently puritan Kadizadeli movement in the seventeenth century, which launched a campaign against such Sufi practices. The movement's radical and violent practices alienated it from many mainstream religious scholars, and it lost impetus by the end of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the effect of the head-on collision between antinomian Sufism and reinvigorated puritanism was the "taming of Sufi love" (p. 93). Henceforth, Sufis became more circumspect and cautious and eager to present themselves in a light more acceptable to the orthodox. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local elites increasingly came to see Sufism as a vestige of backwardness and superstition, and its activities were often repressed by state authorities. In particular, earlier mystics' expressions of homoeroticism tended to be ignored, explained away, or condemned by local writers increasingly wedded to a Western-Victorian "heteronormalized" sexual discourse. Once again, a previously open discourse on erotic attachment and passionate love in the Middle East was silenced by modernity.

Chapter 4 deals with the pre-modern Islamic literature on dream interpretation. Ze'evi rejects the view, expressed by Gustav von Grunebaum in his contribution to *The Dream in Human Societies* (1966), that dreams were invariably deemed messages from the beyond in pre-modern Islamic belief. Islamic dream interpretation, Ze'evi counters, was much more complex and multifaceted than such a view suggests. In support of this argument, Ze'evi presents the careful and sophisticated

methodological reflections of 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731), author of one of the most influential premodern works on dream interpretation. This is followed by a lengthy and fascinating discussion of the interpretation of sexual dreams by the second-century Greek author Artemidorus (whose *Oneirocritica* was translated into Arabic) and by later Islamic dream interpreters like Nabulusi. Ze'evi argues that this comparison reveals the disappearance of "nature" as a normative term in the later Islamic development of the Greek science of oneiromancy. Having various dreams involving incest, homoeroticism, and the like were not stigmatized in any way. Ze'evi suggests that this is linked to the noticeable fact that sexual dreams were almost always given a nonsexual interpretation (in stark contrast to post-Freudian dream analysis): "Sexual elements in dreams were not disguised at the latent level, because there was no need to distort or censor them at the manifest level" (p. 123). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet again, a veil of silence descended on a discursive script that had hitherto referred openly to sex. The handbook of Nabulusi remains popular, but modern editions (and translations into Turkish) are usually bowdlerized.

In chapter 5, Ze'evi turns his attention to the shadow plays that were especially popular in the Turkish-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire. This genre offers a rare insight into non-elite representations of sex. Such representations stand in marked contrast to those of other discourses, and display clear parallels to the Renaissance comic and carnivalesque discourses discussed by Bakhtin. The satire of the shadow play had a leveling effect, deflating religious-moral pretensions and presenting humans–regardless of social status or gender–as motivated primarily by greed and lust, yet somehow endearing. One noticeable feature of the shadow play is the relative marginality of homoeroticism, which features so prominently in religious homilies, mystical poetry, and elite belles-lettres. The protagonists of shadow plays are, to be sure, often portrayed as sexually omnivorous, but "heterosexual" pursuits and affairs tend to occupy center stage in this particular genre. It is difficult to ascertain, however, just how far back this particular feature of shadow plays dates, as the extant scripts are recent, clearly bearing the marks of the modernization and bowdlerization that the genre underwent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In chapter 6, Ze'evi discusses representations of sex in Western travel literature. Western travelers of the sixteenth century, Ze'evi notes, were often free of later travelers' hostility to Ottoman sexual mores. On the contrary, they were often awed by the military might of the Ottomans, and noted with admiration the virtuous seclusion of native women. Beginning in the seventeenth century, however, Western travelers, exuding a new sense of superiority, increasingly expressed disdain for the local treatment of women, the tolerance of pederastic attraction, and the bawdiness of the shadow plays. This change would seem to reflect both the relative military weakening of the Ottomans as well as changing cultural attitudes in the West. From the nineteenth century onward, political and intellectual elites in the Ottoman Empire became increasingly aware of, and sensitive to, this Western condemnation. Many local intellectuals–even non-Muslims like Jurji Zaydan–went on the counteroffensive, noting the degradation and immorality that they claimed to witness during their own trips to the West. Just as Western travelers defined themselves in relation to the "other" that they described and constructed, so Easterners began increasingly to define themselves in opposition to the "extreme freedom" that they claimed prevailed in the West. This counter-discourse, Ze'evi brilliantly observes, resulted in a steadily narrower conception of what was legitimately part of the indigenous culture of the Middle East. Open displays of homoeroticism and ecstatic Sufi rituals were just two cultural features that were silenced as a result.

Ze'evi's book is an impressive and informative study of a field that it only just beginning to be the subject of scholarly exploration. It is based on original research using primary sources, many as yet untapped, and is admirably abreast of more theoretical work on the history of sexuality and popular culture by the likes of Foucault, Bakhtin and Laquer. In particular, Ze'evi's discussion of dream interpretation, shadow plays, and travel literature offers sophisticated and unprecedented insights. His is also an ambitious work, delving into fields that are often treated by different specialists: law, medicine, Sufism, dream interpretation, popular culture and travel literature. As is perhaps unavoidable in a work of such scope, there are a few points with which it is possible to disagree:

(1) Ze'evi's statement that *ubnah*, the "disease" that led males to desire to be the passive partners in anal intercourse, was not discussed by the medical literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is inaccurate (p. 39). Discussions of *ubnah* appear in the work of Dawud al-Antaki (d. 1599) and in the medical compilations of 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani (d. 1565) and Ahmad al-Qalyubi (d. 1658). Even some of the literature canvassed by Ze'evi, such as *Ghayat al-itqan* by Salih

Efendi ibn Sallum (d. 1680), feature references to *hakkat al-maq'adah*, which may well be an oblique reference to the "disease."[1]

(2) Ze'evi's claim that the punishment for sodomy between males was "in most cases left undetermined" by religious jurists is also inaccurate (p. 55). His conclusions about the position of Islamic religious law are weakened by the fact that he has sampled just a handful of texts spanning very different regions and centuries, devoting little attention to their relative authoritativeness. The statement just quoted flies in the face of the conclusions of C. Pellat's article "Liwat" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* and those of Arno Schmitt in his article "Liwat im Fiqh."[2] I have also reached very different conclusions in my own investigation of the issue in my *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, published last year. Ze'evi's statement that the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) expressed the view that repentance should obviate punishment must also be mistaken. I have never encountered such a view in the legal literature, Hanbali or non-Hanbali. Unfortunately, it is not possible to check the reference that Ze'evi provides for this assertion: Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' Fatawa Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn Taymiyya* ed. by 'Abd al-Rahman Muhammad ibn Qasim, since Ze'evi provides only a page number, not specifying one of the 37 volumes of which this work consists. The more general view expressed by Ze'evi, that Islamic jurisprudence was an ongoing and tentative discussion amongst specialists and not a body of positive injunctions, is also, to my mind, one-sided. To be sure, some points of detail were always left open and no consensus developed even within a particular legal school. The Hanafi school of law, for example, agreed that sodomy between men (*liwat*) was not to be punished as fornication (*zina*), but no consensus seems to have developed on appropriate alternative punishments, a judgment that was usually left to the discretion of the presiding judge. However, other schools were clear on the punishment, even when acknowledging previous disagreements on the issue. The later Hanbali jurist Muhammad al-Saffarini (d. 1774), for example, acknowledged the disagreements among previous jurists of his school, ranging from those (like Ibn Taymiyya) who unconditionally advocated death by stoning to those who favored either whipping or stoning depending on the perpetrator's marital status. Nevertheless, he declared unequivocally that the latter view was the standard verdict of the Hanbali jurists of his day.[3]

(3) Ze'evi's discussion of the confrontation between Sufism and "orthodoxy" in the seventeenth century suffers, to my mind, from an unhelpful notion of "orthodoxy." Contemporary witnesses of the Kadizadeli movement like Katip Celebi (d. 1657) and Naima (d. 1702), as well as modern historians such as Madeleine Zilfi, note that the movement represented a minority opinion within the class of religious scholars (*ulema*). Indeed, Ze'evi appears to agree with this assessment, correctly noting that most religious scholars of the time had some Sufi affiliations. Why does he then characterize the Kadizadelis as "orthodox?" Surely, as historians we are bound to use concepts such as "orthodox" and "antinomian" in accordance with the standards of the period we are studying. One of the most prominent and influential jurists of the Ottoman period, the Egyptian Shafi'i scholar Ibn Hajar al-Haytami (d. 1566) condemned the puritan and anti-mystical scholar Ibn Taymiyya as a heretic and at the same time praised Ibn 'Arabi as a saint.[4] When a Turkish Kadizadeli scholar caused a riot in Cairo in the early eighteenth century, leading Egyptian representatives of the three major Sunni schools of law as well as contemporary historians who described the episode roundly condemned his ideas.[5] Ze'evi does not discuss some of the lengthiest and most explicit defenses of the mystical practices of listening to music and contemplating the beauty of handsome youths, which were penned by 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731), Hanafi mufti of Damascus and one of the most prominent religious scholars of his time (in particular, see his *Idah al-dalalat fi sama' al-alat* and *Ghayat al-matlub fi mahabbat al-mahbub*, both edited in recent years). In light of such evidence, it is misleading for historians to suggest that "orthodoxy" had the same meaning in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire as it does in modern Saudi Arabia.

(4) I am not convinced that the confrontation between Sufism and "orthodoxy" in the seventeenth century resulted in a "taming" of Sufi ideas and practices. The claim is in accordance with a view, influential but still quite controversial, that eighteenth-century Sufism tended to be more restrained and less "pantheistic" than that of previous centuries. The evidential basis for this claim is unclear to me. How exactly would one demonstrate that "Sufi orders injected new ideas and new concepts into their rituals, minimizing the role of gazing at young beardless youths in their ceremonies to a vague poetic ideal, couching Ibn 'Arabi's concepts in carefully worded devotional texts, and tightening control over the *dhikr* ceremony" (p. 95)? Ze'evi is, to be fair, merely adopting the view of some historians of eighteenth-century Islam, but the kind of careful comparisons of Sufi ideas and

practices in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries that ought to underlie such statements are simply nonexistent. In the Arabic-speaking provinces, two of the most prominent exponents of the practices in question were 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731) and 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Aydarusi (d. 1778), well-known religious scholars and influential mystics of the eighteenth century. Sixteenth-century Arabic mystics such as 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani (d. 1565), Muhammad ibn Abi'l-Hasan al-Bakri (d. 1585), and 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Munawi (d. 1622) were, by comparison, much more skeptical of such theories and practices. I have recently presented evidence suggesting that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sufism, at least in the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire, was more rather than less bold in its espousal of the theories of Ibn 'Arabi than it had been in the sixteenth.[6] Ze'evi has, understandably, little patience with notions of an unchanging Islamic Orient, and his criticisms of the ahistorical lucubrations of Abdelwahab Bouhdiba and Gustav von Grunebaum are perfectly justified. However, dissatisfaction with notions of an unchanging Orient has led some historians, including those on whom Ze'evi relies, to construct more eventful narratives that, unfortunately, are based on flimsy evidence.

(5) Ze'evi's statement that the concept of "nature" as an evaluative category disappeared in later Arabic-Islamic dream interpretation may be true, but he suggests that this point has general applicability–in other words that the evaluative use of the term "natural" (*tabi'i*) disappeared from Arabic-Islamic discourse as such. He states, for example, that "Nabulusi and his audience do not seem to be aware of any natural order of things sexual in the universe" (p. 121). This is, I believe, incorrect. The use of "nature" as an evaluative category applicable to sexual behavior is still very much in evidence in early modern Arabic-Islamic discourse, and indeed Nabulusi himself resorted to such usage in other contexts, for example when he defended the view that gazing at handsome youths is permissible, whereas gazing at women is not. I supply several examples of such usage in my *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, which appeared while Ze'evi's book was in press.

(6) One genre that is conspicuous by its absence from Ze'evi's book is belles lettres. Of course, there are limits to the amount of material that a scholar can be expected to cover, and there is a dearth of scholarly investigations of the topic of sex and love in Ottoman belles lettres on which Ze'evi could have relied. However, one fact is curious. Ze'evi gives a convincing account of why he did not make use of court archives, which are, after all, usually silent on the topic of sexual transgressions. However, he did not feel a similar need to justify his decision to forego using the evidence found in belles lettres. Much if not most of the love poetry of the age, Arabic as well as Turkish, is "homoerotic" or pederastic in tone, much to the embarrassment of prudish literary historians, both Western and Eastern. It is unfortunate that historians tend to consider such evidence to be out of bounds, and leave investigation of it to literary critics who are only incidentally occupied with historical interpretation. It is also unfortunate that Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli's path-breaking book on sixteenth-century Ottoman conceptions of sex and love, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (2005), which is based in large part on poetry and biographies of poets, appeared too late for Ze'evi to take it into account. The intensely homoerotic nature of the poetry of, for example, Nedim (d. 1730) in Istanbul, 'Abdullah al-Shabrawi (d. 1758) in Cairo, and Muhammad Sa'id ibn al-Samman (d. 1759) in Damascus are very relevant for any study of attitudes to sex and love in the early modern Middle East. Furthermore, these particular examples show that the effects of the puritan Kadizadeli movement of the preceding century can easily be overestimated.

I do not wish to end my review on a negative note. Ze'evi has produced a learned and original monograph that treads new ground, and that provides a sophisticated discussion of fascinating and often as yet unused evidence. I have expressed my disagreement on a number of points, but–to repeat–such disagreements are perhaps inevitable in a work of such scope. I would urge readers interested in Ottoman and Middle Eastern history, and in the history of sexuality, to read Ze'evi's book. Like the present reviewer, they may disagree with this or that point of detail, but they will, again like the present reviewer, emerge much the wiser from the reading.

Notes

[1]. See MS Add 3532, fol.127r, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, England.

[2]. Pellat, "Liwat," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2002); Schmitt, "Liwat im Fiqh," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, vol. 4 (2001/2).

[3]. See Muhammad al-Saffarini, *Qar' al-siyat fi qam' ahl al-liwat*, MS, Arabic 4907: fol.15v: "*wa hiya al-mufta biha al-'an 'inda al-ashab*," Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland.

[4]. See his *al-Fatawa al-hadithiyya* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1970), 114-115.

[5]. See R. Peters, "The Battered Dervishes of Bab Zuwayla," in *Eighteenth-Century Revival and Reform in Islam*, ed. N. Levtzion and J. Voll (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

[6]. See my "Opening the Gate of Verification," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006): 263-281.

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