



MEDIEVAL WOMEN, POETRY AND MIHRI HATUN

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Abstract

Medieval women's writing indicates that there is a close link between culture and women's writing in the Middle Ages. Medieval women lived in a culture which systematically excluded women from the literary world. As a result there are very few women writers in medieval literature. As a response to this cultural exclusion, English medieval women writers, for instance, consider their gender as an obstacle to becoming a writer and express anxiety about their association with literature as authors. Women's anxiety about their position as writers is closely linked with the culture which others women as secondary to men and excludes them from the intellectual world. Because of the inequality of genders, women also are denied the kind of education available to men. Limited access to education is an important factor to jeopardise women's aspirations of becoming writers. The need to justify their position as writers is an attempt to offset the cultural impositions that define women as limited and not suitable for the literary world. Mihri Hatun, one of the two medieval Ottoman women poets, points to cultural norms that ostracise women as writers and create conditions to subject women to the dominant norms of the male tradition. In medieval Ottoman society women were considered to be inferior to men as they lacked reason and they were denied the right to formal education on the same basis. However, women develop strategies to claim their place in the literary tradition. Mihri Hatun is one of the few exceptional women who received private education and thus managed to access the literary tradition otherwise closed to women. This paper reads Mihri Hatun's strategies of development as a poet as subversive of the dominant values and norms. Mihri Hatun does not share the anxiety of women as poets; on the contrary, as a medieval Ottoman woman poet she develops and inscribes her poetic identity in her work. An examination of Mihri Hatun's life and poetry reveals that Mihri Hatun conforms to male conventions by using a male lover in her love poems, but her poetry also claims recognition for women as poets. As such Mihri Hatun's poetry helps us to chart the relationship between women and poetry in medieval Ottoman literature. Mihri Hatun as a woman poet bears testimony to the limitations, expectations and frustrations of a woman who wanted to be recognised as a poet in the Medieval Ottoman society. Her story also illustrates the shift in woman's place in medieval Ottoman lyric poetry as it moves the woman from being the object of poetry to becoming the subject who writes

Key Words: Mihri Hatun, Medieval women poets, Medieval Ottoman literature, literature and women.

ORTAÇAĞ KADINI, ŞİİR VE MİHRİ HATUN

Özet

Ortaçağ kadın edebiyatı Ortaçağda kadınların yazar olmasının kültürle yakından ilişkili olduğunu göstermektedir. Ortaçağ kadın yazarlar kadını sistematik bir şekilde yazın dünyasından uzak tutan bir kültürde yaşamışlardır. Kadını okur yazarlıktan ve yazarlıktan uzak tutan söylem sonucu Ortaçağ kadın yazar sayısı son derece azdır. Örneğin Ortaçağ İngiliz kadın yazarlar cinsiyetlerini yazarlık yolunda bir engel olarak görürler ve kadın yazar olarak edebiyatla ilişkilendirilmek istemezler. Aslında kadın yazarların bu tür endişeleri onları erkeklere oranla ikinci sınıf sayan ve bu nedenle entellektüel dünyadan uzak tutan kültürle bağlantılıdır. Kadının yazar olma yolunu açacak eğitim hakkının kısıtlanması kadınların yazar olma isteklerinin önünde önemli bir engeldir. Ayrıca, kadınlar baskın söylem sonucu kadınlıkla yazarlığın bağdaşmadığına inandığından yazarlık yönlerini baskılama veya neden yazar olmak istediklerini açıklama eğilimindedirler. Aslında kadınların yazar olma konusundaki sorunları belirli bir kültüre özel bir durum değildir. Osmanlı kadın şair Mihri Hatun'un hayatı ve şiirleri Osmanlı kadın söyleminin kadınların yazar olmalarına engel oluşturan bir söylem olduğunu göstermektedir. Osmanlı toplumunun kadınla ilgili görüşleri kadının yerinin evi olduğu, temel görevlerinin eşlik ve annelik olduğu yönündedir. Yarattığıyla erkekten aşağı olduğu düşünülen kadının yeterince akıllı olmadığı için sürekli kontrol altında tutulması gerektiği de bu söylemin bir parçasıdır. Mihri Hatun gibi Ortaçağ Osmanlı kadın yazarları özel durumu olan kadınlardır. Resmi eğitim dışında tutulduklarından yazarlıklarına imkan veren eğitimi özel olarak almışlardır. Yine de kadın yazarlar kültürel koşullamanın doğurduğu kısıtlamaları aşmak için bir dizi stratejiler geliştirmeyi başarmışlardır. Bu makale Mihri Hatun'un hayatı ve şiirlerini egemen kültür değerlerini yeniden gözden geçiren ve uyarlayan bir metin olarak incelemektedir. Mihri Hatun'un aslında genel olarak kadın yazarlarda görülen güven eksikliği yaşamadığı, tam aksine kendini bir kadın şair olarak tanıdığı ve tanıtmak istediği anlaşılmaktadır. Aslında Mihri Hatun Divan şiiri geleneğine uyarak erkek aşık olarak konuşmaktadır ancak bu onun kadın şair kimliğini ötelemesine yol açmamaktadır. Aslında Mihri Hatun Ortaçağ Osmanlı edebiyatında kadın yazar ve edebiyat ilişkisini örnekleyerek bu dönem Osmanlı kadın şairlerinin yaşadığı kısıtlamaları, başarmak istedikleri şeyleri ve yenilgilerini ya da kimliklerinde vazgeçmek zorunda kaldıkları özelliklerine ışık tutar. Resmi eğitimin dışladığı, erkek egemen edebiyat geleneğinin ancak şiir konusu olarak kabullendiği kadının yazar olarak tanınması oldukça zor olmuştur. Mihri Hatun kadının edebiyattaki yerini Ortaçağ Osmanlı şiirinin konusu olmaktan çıkarıp bu şiirin yazarı olması şeklinde değiştiren bir örnektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mihri Hatun, Ortaçağ kadın şairler, Ortaçağ Osmanlı edebiyatı, edebiyat ve kadın.

Women's writing suggests that there is an interdependent relationship between culture and literature; culture not only produces literature but it is also produced by literature. As Sinfield argues, societies reproduce themselves culturally by putting into circulation stories of how the world goes ... through which ideologies are reinforced and contested, for subordinate groups struggle to make space for themselves, and attempts to legitimate the prevailing order have to negotiate resistant experience and traditions (1997: 2).

Indeed, as Jones states, medieval women's history "can be read as a process of struggle and creative accommodation to social realities and cultural forms" (1990: 9), for,

despite their limited and inaccessible educational opportunities confounded by cultural restrictions, “most of the cultural, religious and literary movements of the Middle Ages produced at least one representative among women writers” (Wilson, 1984: IX). There are indeed very few women writers in the Middle Ages. Yet, they wrote in almost all genres of the Middle Ages, and, unlike the women writers of later periods, they confidently identified themselves by their names and by their sex. However, their writing is marked with a strong awareness of their exceptional status, for, as Jones states of the Renaissance women writers, (1986: 299) to be a woman writer in the Middle Ages was to be an exception. Medieval women reflect their exceptional position to be the result of “their general social, ideological and economic restriction” (Staley, 1994: 5). The two women writers of medieval English literature, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, wrote in the tradition of mystical writing, a tradition that enabled the mystic to transcend the gender restrictions. Still, both Margery and Julian inform us of their cultural subjection as they register a separate entry about their gender in their respective works. In fact, Margery Kempe’s work can be considered an examination of Margery’s growth as a writer. Their writing displays an authorial self-consciousness generated by their gender. They feel compelled to justify their engagement with literature since it means “a meaningful engagement with literary and cultural pursuits usually associated with men” (Andrews and Kalpaklı, 2005: 193). Margery and Julian lived in a culture which recognised writing as an act of authority which was “in its theological, political and literary senses...thoroughly male” (Barratt, 1992: 6) Julian of Norwich negotiates the restrictions of her subjection as a woman but she does not confront the authority that denies her the right to write, nor does she try to subvert it. Instead, she attempts to transcend it by presenting herself as a “vessel” or “instrument” of God ordered and authorised by God to transmit the knowledge revealed to her. Otherwise, she protests, “God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher...for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail” (Julian of Norwich, 1978: 135). Margery’s writing is also at the expense of self-erasure as a woman for she reiterates the view that God can appoint a weak woman to teach his doctrine (Kempe, 1985: 88, 109). Both Margery and Julian seek equality with men not through their potential wisdom or skill in writing as women but through transcendence of their sex, for religious devotion is genderless. It is, in fact, an authorial strategy that these women acknowledge their inferior state as women. Zeynep Hatun and Mihri Hatun as poets of classical Ottoman love poetry also wrote in a tradition “steeped in dominant modes of patriarchal values” which accordingly “ostracised and automatically controlled the voice of women” (Silay, 1997: 199). Indeed, constrained by the cultural values similar to those of medieval English literature, women poets of medieval Ottoman lyric poetry recognise the literary tradition in which they write as “created *by* men and *for* men in an age of belief and authority” (Silay, 1997: 201). Because they derive their material, even their authorial position, from the writings of male writers, Zeynep Hatun, for instance, considers the masculine mode as the regular paradigm for poetic success and wants to adopt the male values: “Zeynep, stop this desire for worldly pleasures/Be like a man, give up these weaknesses” (Quoted in Silay, 1997: 210). Recognising women as the “weaker sex” is common to Ottoman culture. Unlike her contemporary Zeynep Hatun, and unlike the women mystics of medieval English literature, Mihri Hatun negotiates her acceptance as a woman poet by challenging the ways in which her society reproduces cultural construction of gender, and its literary hierarchies. This paper focuses on Mihri Hatun as a woman poet. It examines Mihri Hatun’s poetry as a form of “resistant experience” that demands negotiation for a reevaluation of women’s subjection and helps us to define the relationship between women and poetry writing in medieval Ottoman culture.

The fifteenth-century Ottoman woman poet Mihri Hatun has a complex relationship with Ottoman court poetry. As Andrews and Kalpaklı state, women poets presented serious problems for Ottoman “male” cultural elites, since

On the one hand, for a woman to write poetry makes a woman visible; it introduces her into the public arena...on the other hand, writing poetry...means speaking, revealing a sexual presence, taking an active role in a competitive cultural arena...In a sense this abandonment of silence and invisibility is inseparable from the abandonment of virtue. (2005: 196)

Mihri Hatun occupies a threshold position, as, on the one hand, she uses the conventional images of lyric poetry “without troubling the definitions of gender roles which were inscribed in the images themselves” and freely borrows “from the male discourse and the prestige it maintained in that culture” (Silay, 1997: 208, 212). On the other hand, she violates the cultural norms of silence and invisibility required of her gender and demands recognition as a woman poet. Bibliographic dictionaries, too, note her double-edged poetic identity. According to historical registers, Mihri Hatun traverses a male world as a woman; her intelligence and education are as good as those of the male poets. Her poetry mentions the male poets Gvahi, Zati, Makami and Hatemi as her fellow poets. She even competes with male poets in writing poetry. She writes *nazires* (parallel poems) to Necati’s poems and functions as a poet at the *sohbet* circles of the Ottoman princes Beyazid and Ahmet. Yet, she is there “on the sufferance of males and must conform to male conventions”, because “the gender of high-culture literature was predominantly masculine” (Andrews and Kalpaklı, 2005: 57, 54).

Mihri Hatun’s submission to the conventions of high-culture Ottoman poetry can be observed in her choice of the lover in her poems. She does not present a female lover addressing love sentiments to a male beloved. Her style has been described as feminine (Ayan, 1989: 29), and there are some identifiable references to her real life acquaintances,¹ however, her position in her poetry as a lover is not distinguishable from that of a man addressing a woman beloved.² Indeed, the lover’s feelings or the beloved’s gender are not reliable sources for the poet’s gender. Although the beloved is “most often...a male beloved”, “the beloved of the poetry is ambiguous, androgynous, and could as well be a woman” (Andrews and Kalpaklı, 2005: 57). In Mihri Hatun’s poems, the lover/speaker occupies an unchallenged position as the conventional lover who addresses conventional feelings of anguish, love and jealousy to a beautiful woman and erases any potential evidence to suggest that Mihri Hatun desires to establish a female position from which to speak. Instead, as stated above, Mihri Hatun conforms to the rules of the conventional poetry that she practices. It is possible that Mihri Hatun, in fact, gives voice to her own feelings of love and pain in her poems, as Sezer suggests (2005: 229, 270-71). Yet, clearly, in the expression of her own feelings, too, she has to

¹ It is generally accepted that Mihri inscribes the name of her platonic love İskender in her poetry. See Ayan, 1989: 25-26. Sennur Sezer presents İskender and Hatemi as men Mihri wrote love poems for. See, Sezer, 2005. By providing a personal emotional background to Mihri Hatun’s conventional pose as a lover Sezer’s biography of Mihri Hatun restores to her poetic identity a great deal missing in the bare details about her life in the bibliographic dictionaries.

² The gender of the beloved, however, is a controversial and complex issue. Andrews and Kalpaklı argue that the gender of the beloved in the Ottoman classical poetry is male, although the beloved is always feminine. The female poets too address their poems to the same male beloved. See Andrews and Kalpaklı, 2005: 57, 198. That there is no gender marker in the language complicates the matter further.

adopt the conventional pose. Her love poems introduce a beautiful lady who apparently takes pleasure in the suffering of the lover. They also display the fluctuating, often conflicting, states of the mood of the lover. The speaker is weepy and occasionally aggressive in his address to the beloved: "Come on, don't let me weep tears of blood my dear/ This will not do any good to you, it will kill you eventually" (IV, 2).³ Indeed, Mihri Hatun presents a lover determined to attract the beloved's attention. The lover presents a series of varied feelings and attitudes to achieve this. Sometimes, the lover comforts himself with the promise of a new lady: "Don't you worry if your beloved gives you pain and suffering all the time/ There will be a beautiful woman for you in this world" (IV, 5). The helplessly desolate lover of the Ottoman classical poetry in Mihri Hatun's poems complains that "I have never had any favours from my beloved/I have never been granted any help by the powers" (CV, 1). It is clear that the woman beloved is a source of pain and suffering for him: "What have I done to the beauty that she never cares about me/ She never is interested in me" (LXXVIII, 1). The lover cries out in despair and asks for recognition by the beloved: "I am in love with you dear, I want remedy for my troubles/ Enough of your troubles, I want my cure" (CXIV, 1). Mihri Hatun portrays the conventional unfaithful teasing woman causing the lover pain and jealousy by favouring the others right before the lover's eyes: "My beloved favours my rival by showing him care and affection" (III,4). The lover is guilty of crimes which he knows nothing about: "I do not know what I have done wrong/ My beloved lady does not speak to or look at me/ My beloved has only curtively acknowledged me/It is clear that my rival has again spoken against me" (VII, 1-2). Moreover, the lover suffers from negligence and lack of interest of the beloved and tries for a solution. He sometimes begs for a little attention and sometimes offers instruction to the lover about how to love. The lover's happiness is also dependent on the lady's behaviour. It is only when the lover gains favour that he expresses joy and pleasure in life: "We walked about with my beloved tonight/ I will not mind dying of gratitude tonight" (CXLV,1) or "The heart was wounded by the arrows/Her red lips gave medicine for that wound tonight/ We had suffered the pain of the wind for long/Thank God the beloved took away our pain tonight" (CXLVI, 2-3). Thus, the lover is able to boast of the night-long happiness that he enjoyed with the beloved. Alternatively, the lover demands that he deserves recognition as the only true lover of the beloved: "It would not be a crime/If you gave us a kiss you infidel/ In this world truly/It is Mihri who is addicted to you, you infidel" (XXX, 5). As well as being prepared to lose everything for the sake of his beloved, the lover is ready to fight for his love: "If you are in love do not be ashamed/Fight for your love or lose the beloved (XLIV,1). This statement is based on the lover's own experience of loss: "Once Mihri was doing really well / Look now and you see how he/she became a nobody because of this" (XLIV, 7). The lover, however, is convinced of the necessity of love: "No matter what others say we can not live without love/We will never abandon the friendship of beautiful ladies" (LIII, 6). Despite all the pain and suffering that loving costs him, the lover considers love as the source of vitality and life: "you who enjoys life fight for a life of love/If you want to be happy with yourself and enjoy life" (LXXII,2).

Sampling Mihri Hatun's poetry, thus, serves to confirm the view that her love poetry is not a site of contest for the recognition of its author as a woman. On the other hand, she

³ References to Mihri Hatun are from *Mihri Hatun Divanı İnceleme Tenkitli Metin*, (Mihri Hatun's Divan: A Critical Edition) Metin Hakverdioğlu, Unpublished Masters Thesis. Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Kazak-Türk Üniversitesi, Ankara, 1998. The form of citation is the number of the poem followed by the couplet. Translations into English are mine.

voices perhaps the strongest challenge to the cultural norms and hierarchies of the fifteenth-century Ottoman classical poetry and culture since a plea for an unprejudiced reception of her work accompanies Mihri's self-confident pose of a lover: "İşidüp ta'ñ itmeye her bî-haber/Mihrinün kalbine gelmeye keder", (Let not ignorant people speak ill of my work/ Let not Mihri's heart be grieved for that) (T. XIV, 8). Mihri Hatun goes on to state that, though "nâkıs 'akl olur derler nisâ" (women are said to be deficient in reason/short-witted),

Bir müennes yegdurur kim ehl ola
Biñ müzekkerden ki ol nâ-ehl ola

Bir müennes yeg ki zihnî pâk ola
Bin müzekkerden ki bî-idrâk ola (T.XIV, 11-12)

(A wise woman is better than a thousand unwise men/ A woman of a pure mind is better than a thousand men with no mind).

Mihri Hatun's dismissal of the negative stereotyping attached to her gender is clearly a courageous rebuttal which she develops by introducing the corrective paradigm that "a wise woman is better than a thousand unwise men". But, it also alerts us to the formative role of the cultural values Mihri Hatun is trying to shield herself from. Her fears are doubly important because she belongs to that particular group of Ottoman women of the ruling elites which "provided the few women writers or poets on record" (Dengler, 1978: 236). As the daughter of an upper class family, Mihri Hatun grew up among the learned educated members of the society. Her father was the "kadi" (judge) of Amasya, who, in open defiance of the cultural stigmas about women, encouraged his daughter to write poetry and gave her daughter a very good education in the sciences and literatures of the period. At a time when "advanced training in Arabic and Persian, the languages essential in the cultured world of the intellectual elites" was unusual for women, (Dengler, 1978: 231), Mihri Hatun mastered Arabic and Persian. She developed a reputation for her skill and knowledge in the scientific debates with her male colleagues. She was particularly known for her knowledge in Islamic law (Fıkıh and Feraiz) and matters concerning women (Hayız and Nifas) and she is believed to have written articles on these issues (Ayan, 1989: 24).

Despite her exceptional background, Mihri Hatun is afraid of her culture's gender bias. It is possible that Mihri Hatun's express anxieties point to a recognisable misogynist tradition in the Ottoman culture. Indeed, information about the life and status of women in the fifteenth century Ottoman Empire is scarce as women have left no records of their lives (Ahmed, 1992: 121), and the accounts of European travellers are stereotypical accounts (Roded, 1999: 5). Goodwin mentions *History of Forty Vezirs* dating from the mid-fifteenth century as a work of antifeminist views comparable to views about women in the fifteenth-century England (1997: 198). In medieval England, as Margery emphasises in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, the only way for women to have control over their own lives was through dedicating their lives to religion. A literary career, on the other hand, was not conceivable for a woman as both Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich had to negotiate the authority of writing their books without appearing to be in defiance of St. Paul who declares that women should learn in silence and should not be allowed to teach. (First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy. 2: 8-15. Today's English Version). Thus, in her demand for recognition on the merits of her work because a woman can also write well, Mihri Hatun is trying to subvert a notion of women that

finds support in the commentaries of the Quran. The interpreters of the verses in the Quran about women and women's relation to men and authority attribute to the sexes qualities that they consider inherent in their nature. Women, according to such interpretations, need to be checked and ruled by men as they lack reason. The Islamic historian and Quran interpreter Fahreddin er-Razi states that woman is lacking in reason and as a result of this natural lack of reason women are incapable of making decisions and spending their money reasonably let alone being fit for public posts of authority (1990: 349). Gazali, as the most important intellectual of the Middle Ages, fosters antifeminist ideas that contribute to the construction of woman as a negative category. Gazali states that women are pitiable because of their lack of reason, and they should be treated accordingly (1974: 111). Gazali introduces woman as lacking in reason, submissive and subject to her husband's rule. Moreover, according to Gazali, women are dangerous, too. Based on a hadith which states that women are the most dangerous of all, Gazali considers the power of temptation he ascribes to women as a destructive power. Evidently, Gazali's portrait of women is based on his selection of anti-women hadiths which he uses to ban women from public life and to endorse the Quranic statement that women are subject to the authority of their husbands (1974: 224, 122-123). Similar to St. Paul's declarations about women, Gazali argues that man is not the ruled but the ruler. The ruler is not the woman but man (1974: 116-177). Such views seem to have a wide enough circulation to be imprinted on the minds of the medieval intellectuals. Nizam-ul Mulk's *Siyasat-name*, written in the eleventh century, is one of the influential texts that severely condemns women and advocates women's weakness and women's secondary position to men. Written as a political counsel book, *Siyasat-name* advocates a clear distinction between men and women and considers women as potential destructive enemies of wisdom and men. Accordingly, it advises the king not to trust women. Women, "those who wear the veil, and those who are short of wit and wisdom" (Roded, 1999: 121), are the cause of fall of great men including Adam. Nizam'ul Mulk uses the prophet Muhammed's statements and the hadiths to support his view that women are unreliable and deceitful (Roded, 1999: 124). Similar views are to be found in *Kutadgu Bilig*, where Yusuf Has Hacip warrants the killing of baby girls on account of their sex, and warns against the unreliability and deceitfulness of women although Mevlana states that only the wise and the learned can appreciate the true value of women (Doğramacı, 1989: 7-8).

Mihri Hatun's reference to this stereotypical representation of women suggests the enormity of the implications of such antifeminist views for medieval Ottoman women, as the truths they support created an inequality it took centuries to correct in the educational policies of the Ottoman Empire. Until the nineteenth century, except for some upper class women, mostly of the "ulama class" whose father, husband or some male relative provided private education for them in the sciences and literatures of the period, women were not given education in the Ottoman society (Ahmed, 1992: 113-114). Latifi describes Zeynep Hatun as a famous poet "rare for women" and states that she was educated by her father who "saw skill in her nature and agility in her mind" (1990: 416), although most of her knowledge of literature was self-taught. On the other hand, except for the private education, for the Ottoman women the only opportunity for education was "Sübyan Okulu" (infant school) to attend until they were six years old and where they could learn about religion (Akyüz, 1999: 144; Altındal, 1994: 51). Harem seems to be the main educational center for women. But the education provided there did not go beyond teaching the *cariyes* main social rules, religion, the holy book and reading and writing along with possible addition of training in music, singing, dancing, poetry and love (Uluçay, 1971: 11, 17-19; Goodwin, 1997: 131). In fact, the

fifteenth century is a period of an educational reform in the Ottoman Empire. During the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent *medreses* (religious schools) developed to enable the studying of law, theology, literature, medicine and mathematics (Doğramacı, 1989: 17). *Medreses* were closed to women whose education, as Kınalızade Ali states, was confined to learning “shame, honour, how to keep away from men and performing domestic chores” (quoted in Akyüz, 1999: 107) However, in order to write ottoman court poetry, it was essential to receive education in Persian and Arabic literatures and languages. Moreover, for its rhetoric, similes and metaphors, Ottoman court poetry required a very good knowledge of the Quran, astrology, logic, theology, and eastern mythology (İsen and Bilkan, 1997: 6). This education was available in the *medreses*. The *medrese* system that excluded women thus also excluded women from the literary world. Evidently, there are women who received good education and obtained certificates, but no women in the Ottoman period received *medrese* education or became salaried teachers (Ahmed, 1992: 114).

It is against this background that we need to view Mihri Hatun’s achievement. Her silence about the gender of her lover or the beloved does not mean that she is silent about the gender politics of Ottoman culture. She is a very confident poet, in fact. It is important in this context, for instance, that Mihri Hatun’s poetry is not concerned merely with the expression of love pain caused by the beautiful and cruel lady of the convention but it also presents the lover as engaged in writing poems. It can be observed that Mihri assigns herself a secondary place when she gives a definition of herself in relation to love: “Among people I am Mihri, and among the lovers a novice/ In my beloved’s eyes, poor and pitiful I am” (CXXXVII, 7). The lover introduces poetry writing as an important part of being a lover, and it is in relation to composing a *divan* (a poetry collection) that the lover is most competitive and self-assured. Indeed, the lover/poet has no anxieties about being or becoming a poet. Significantly, composing a *divan* is necessary for poetic recognition, it is the public proof of poetic engagements and achievements (Eyüboğlu, 1994: 76). Mihri frequently reminds the reader that she is composing a *divan*: “Whoever reads our *divan* may he be happy” (XIII, 5) and considers herself worthy of sultan’s praise. The difficulty of understanding love is compared to Mihri’s knowledge in poetry. She complains that “Mihri who has been writing this *divan*/Does not know what to do about love (XXVI,6), still she hopes that “Your lovers will rush to the book of love/Let Mihri’s *divan* be the first to be written among the *divans*” (CLXV, 7). Similarly, in the *Tazarrunname*, the final chapter in her *divan*, Mihri Hatun writes: “God be thanked.../I have finished this *tazarrunname*/ God be thanked when I had wits and skill/I versed this theology (T. XIV, 1-2). This sense of accomplishment is followed by her assertion that although they say women are deficient in reason there are exceptional women to disprove such a generalisation and she clearly is one of those exceptional women. Mihri Hatun did not want her poetic identity to be subsumed by the conventions of Ottoman lyric poetry. She evidently wanted to be recognised as a woman poet. There is historical evidence that Mihri Hatun’s strivings to become a recognised poet do not go unnoticed as she receives a considerable reward granted by the Sultan (Mutlu, “Osmanlıda Kadın Şairler, IV”). Moreover, it is clear that her position as a poet is a severely contested position. Mihri Hatun gives voice to her lack of confidence that clashes with her high aspirations of achieving equality with the male poets of the court. She writes parallels to Necati’s poems, but she also considers her efforts as hopeless: “Mihri you write parallels to Necati’s poems/ You are a poor beggar he is with the sultan” (CLXIII, 7). This unfavourable comparison is corroborated by Necati’s own response, who, as a representative of the male poets’ view on women’s writing, considers Mihri’s parallels

to his poems as blatant violations of modesty and as an overly bold attempt since, in Necati's view, Mihri Hatun does not have the talent to write poems of quality to compete with his poems. Necati angrily warns Mihri Hatun in a poem not to assume "my poems are in rhyme and rhytm as good as Necati's" (Latifi, 1990: 330). Necati's disapproval of Mihri Hatun explicitly introduces gender competition to Mihri's literary territory. She is an unlikely competitor, evidently.

The historical entries about Mihri Hatun make special note of her learning and education and determine her position as a poet in comparison to men. Mihri Hatun is described by Evliya Çelebi, the famous Turkish traveller, as a wise and knowledgeable woman. Evliya Çelebi refers to Mihri Hatun as "üstad şair" (gifted poet), who knew at least 70 volumes of books by heart and proved to be a learned and wise woman in the scientific discussions with the wise men of her time (1966: 534). Hammer places Mihri Hatun with the male poets of the fifteenth century, too. Praising Mihri Hatun for her beauty, Hammer makes special mention of her unique talent as a female poet. According to Hammer, Mihri Hatun is "the beautiful poetess of Amasya". More importantly, because of her talent and success as a woman poet, she is "the Sapho of the Ottomans" (1966: 240; İsen, 1994: 164).

A significant bibliographic detail about Mihri Hatun is that Mihri Hatun did not live in the confined world of Ottoman women. On the contrary, as a single, learned and beautiful young woman poet she took part frequently at the court meetings first of Prince Bayazıt and then Prince Ahmed. Mihri Hatun's close association with men creates a rather gender-specific concern to the extent that the entries in the bibliographic dictionaries make a point of her beauty but hasten to add that her virtue and honour were equally matchless as a woman. In this context, it is important to note that bibliographic dictionaries mention the public nature of Mihri's career. While Mihri is concerned that her gender will obstruct a fair assessment of her poetry, literary historians acknowledge her poetic skill but with hints that practicing a vocal art is likely to prejudice her virtue. Aşık Çelebi compares Mihri to a female lion and argues that male or female a lion is a lion to emphasise her equality in strenght of expression with men, as well as her integrity. It is Kınalı-zade Hasan Çelebi who guarantees that although Mihri was a frequent participant in the meetings and debates on love, she never had any immoral tendencies. Gelibolulu Ali compares Mihri's protection of her virtue to maleness and states that Mihri never had tendencies for the worldly pleasures and she left the world as she came to it, like a man" (Ayan, 1989: 24-25). It seems that Mihri Hatun's desire to be acknowledged as a woman poet has been realised since the historical sources present Mihri Hatun as an extraordinary woman with exceptional poetic skills. Yet, it needs to be emphasised that her position is at the same time problematic and it presents women and poetry as a problematic combination. Mihri Hatun is particularly guarded from associations with her sex. Her poetry is like "women's embroidery", but in terms of virtue she is like a man. The overt masculinisation of Mihri Hatun in the bibliographical dictionaries reveals the "threshold" position of women poets in the Ottoman culture. There are concerns about the potential violation of feminine virtues of silence and invisibility through poetry. (Andrews and Kalpaklı, 2005: 198-199). Mihri Hatun's work is not criticised on account of her gender, but her reputation as a woman poet is irretrievably tied with her virginity and her life-long chastity. Her success, therefore, is built upon a comparative evaluation of her literary skill with that of the male poets and her impeccable virtue as a woman. As such, Mihri Hatun's poetic career provides a number of paradigms for our understanding of medieval Ottoman women as authors of literary works. Evidently,

upper class women had the material conditions to write poetry in the fifteenth century but their literary interests were culturally constrained. More suitable for women was writing poetry as a pastime activity which had to be abandoned for serious responsibilities when they got married. Aşık Çelebi states that Zeynep Hatun gave up poetry when she married and “came under the rule of her husband” (Quoted in Silay, 1997: 211). Mihri Hatun did not marry, she did not give up writing poetry, either. Instead of doing what was considered suitable for women, Mihri Hatun dedicated her life to educating herself and writing in the tradition of courtly poetry, negotiating, in Jones’ words, her “subordination to men’s social power and masculine orders of language” (1990: 10) to become the “Sappho of the Ottomans”, a title that leaves no doubt about her gender as a poet.

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