Dear participants of the Adab colloquium,

Thank you very much for your time to read my work, which is part of my second book project on the social and emotional world of the low- and mid-ranking scholars in the rigidly hierarchical early modern Ottoman scholarly establishment. What you will find below is a short article written for a special IJMES roundtable on Ottoman ego documents and the accompanying English translation of two petitions the main protagonist in the article had submitted.

An extensive scholarship has been produced on how the centralizing Ottoman empire created and maintained an unprecedented scholarly bureaucracy by implementing strict measures about scholar-bureaucrats’ training, appointment, and mobility. However, little is known what the “cogs in the machine” thought, felt, and did as they tried (and often failed to) maneuver within and through this structure. Centered around the rich autobiographical writings (private letter collections, archival petitions, manuscript marginalia, and poetry and other literary works, among others) of an “exceptionally normal” low-ranking scholar from the so-named “magnificent” century of the Ottomans and inspired by some of the microhistory classics, the book aims to challenge and decenter the marked scholarly biases in Islamic and Ottoman intellectual history for reconstructing the triumphal biographies of celebrated names over the failures and emotional takes of the ordinary ones. The voices and narratives of no-name/unfortunate scholars about their profession’s perceived hardships and other structural or circumstantial problems could also echo well in the growingly precarious present-day academy.

I am very much looking forward to hearing your thoughts and questions.

Thank you,

A. Tunç Şen
Life is tough for many in the increasing precarity of today’s academy. Despite all the degrees received, courses taught, grants awarded, conferences attended, articles published, resumes polished, and networks established, many people aspiring to a thriving academic career are now denied the opportunity to prosper in a stable position and to secure a settled life. Given the shrinking academic job market worldwide, especially for humanities and social science disciplines, it is no wonder that over the last two decades quit-lit written by disillusioned members of the academy has grown to such an extent that it now comprises a particular genre. From personal social media accounts to newspapers and websites circulating recent news about academics’ life across and beyond the United States, a wide array of platforms daily reveals the gloomy perspectives and emotional reactions of nontenured academic laborers overwhelmed by the uncertainties and insecurities that mark their professional and private lives.

Did life in the academic structures and cultures of past societies actually look rosier? Were relative circumstances any better in the professional and private lives of, say, a 10th-century Byzantine savant, a 13th-century Chinese scholar-bureaucrat, or a 16th-century Ottoman madrasa instructor? After all the knowledge obtained, places visited, books taught, texts penned, scholarly gatherings attended, and esteemed patrons approached, did these scholars in the past attain with ease positions and resources commensurate with their desires and self-assumed credentials? What about those less fortunate individuals constituting the greater majority who either did not receive any opportunity to pursue the life they would have considered satisfactory or for some reason missed the boat when offered a chance? How did they navigate the structural challenges and insecurities they had to face during their academic journeys? Which emotional reactions did these experiences trigger, and in what types of language were they couched?

Implying that there is an affinity between the realities of contemporary and past academic life might appear blatantly presentist at first glance to those who profess that “the past is a foreign country.” For historians to study their subjects objectively, a certain degree of defamiliarization and exoticization is required to create an ideal distance between their own present and the present of the past. Once that distance is established, it becomes convenient to move forward with the assumptions that not only did people in the past live in different conditions, pursue different lifestyles, and have different habits and moral values, but that they also felt differently. Did they really?

Whether or not feelings are universal human qualities that show little to no difference across time and space is the central question occupying the burgeoning field of the history of emotions. The field even stimulated a recent historical “turn” early in the 21st century, as seen in specialized journals, at research centers and conferences, and in collected volumes. This is not the place to overview the history of the “history of emotions” and expound the reasons for its recent boom; already there are several useful systematic accounts that summarize significant milestones in the development of the field.

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note, however, that long before its gradual triumph, there already had been several noteworthy attempts, from Lucien Febvre, the cofounder of the Annales School in the first half of the 20th century, to the subscribers of the relatively short-lived current of psychohistory in the 1960s and 1970s that put emotions and human sensibilities at the center of historical analyses. Febvre’s invitation to reconstruct the emotional categories of past individuals was particularly important, as he also pointed out presciently the potential dangers of viewing emotions as immutable entities and projecting our present values and emotional vocabularies onto attitudes and categories in the past.3

Regardless of whether or not our familiar feelings resemble past emotions, there are additional challenges for historians who would like to explore them as a legitimate historical inquiry. Indeed, what are emotions? Do easily defined metrics exist to distinguish between emotions, feelings, sensations, sentiments, or affections? How can modern historians access the emotions of past individuals? Can the written, visual, or verbal expressions of emotions ever be the same as the emotions themselves? Which sources are more appropriate for tracing them? In response to these broader considerations, pioneering scholars in the new wave of the history of emotions, including William Reddy and Barbara Rosenwein, among others, have suggested different methodological approaches. Due to space constraints, important nuances among these methodological perspectives are omitted here.4 Nevertheless, one of the pitfalls of these suggestions, and the studies based on them—including a few recent examples in Middle East and Ottoman studies—is the insistence on writing the history of emotions in unnecessarily broad strokes.5 The majority of historians of emotions tend to craft grand narratives, either on how different epochs can be defined through the lens of particular emotions or how a specific feeling, such as fear, anger, or love, shaped the affective strategies and vocabularies of particular groups and communities. Attractive as these narratives may be, such wholesale approaches may fail to acknowledge how emotions, or those mental and discursive categories constituting what we now characterize as such, were conceived and expressed by different historical actors from diverse social backgrounds. Besides, why do we have to give precedence to tracing preconceived notions of feelings as the emotional index of communities, instead of delineating how specific individuals self-expressed their emotional states at particular moments of their lives? Would it necessarily be parochial to reduce the scale and adopt a radically micro-historical perspective that closely tracks a single individual’s overtly emotional utterances, which in turn may strongly reflect the social and sentimental dynamics of this individual’s respective community?

In this paper, I will focus on a particular Ottoman madrasa instructor from the so-called magnificent years of Süleyman’s reign (r. 1520–66) whose self-narratives or “ego-documents,” scattered across a


4Dissatisfied with assumptions about the immutable nature of emotions, William Reddy coined the term “emotives” to emphasize the performative and communicative nature of emotions that individuals enact in first-person speech. These enactments or “utterances” of emotions, which Reddy thinks are socially determined, reflect and embody the “emotional regimes” that are by nature subject to change across time and geography. See William M. Reddy, The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Echoing Reddy’s notion, Barbara Rosenwein created a new category, “emotional communities,” suggesting adoption of a more “micro” perspective than emotional regimes, which allow one to explore how specific groups in a society set and follow their norms and rules to feel and express a diverse range of emotions; Barbara H. Rosenwein, Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

5For a recent brief overview of the field in Middle East and Ottoman studies, see Julia Bray, “Toward an Abbasid History of Emotions: The Case of Slavery,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 49, no. 1 (2017): 143–47; and Nil Tekgül, “Early Modern Ottoman Politics of Emotion: What Has Love Got to Do with It?” Turkish Historical Review 10, no. 2–3 (2019): 132–54. Although the emotional turn in history writing sparked an interest among contemporary Ottoman historians after the 2010s, it would be a grave mistake to not acknowledge the efforts of earlier generations, from Halil İnalcık, Cornell Fleischer, and Cemal Kaftad to Madeline Zilfi, Christine Woodhead, Derin Terziolu, and Aslı Niyaziolu, all of whom demonstrated in their studies how narrative sources and autobiographical accounts are important for conveying the emotions of individuals, specifically the literati, scholars, and Sufis. These studies can even be stretched back to Fuad Köprü, who suggested in an influential article on methods in Turkish literary history in 1913 that literary history “would bring to life systematically the intellectual and sensory development (bəktə ve hissi tekamül)” of past people (author’s emphasis). See M. Fuad Köprü, “Türk Edebiyat Tarihinde Usul,” Bilgi Mecmuası 1 (1913): 3–52; translated into English by Gary Leiser as “Method in Turkish Literary History,” Middle Eastern Literatures 11, no. 1 (2008): 55–84.
multitude of sources, illustrate the emotional states of a mid- to low-ranking member of the rigidly hierarchical Ottoman scholarly establishment. His is a richly documented case of an "exceptionally normal," full of vivid details that allow us to decenter the available literature on early modern Islamicate and Ottoman intellectual history and its marked preference for the success stories of celebrated names over the failures of more marginal figures.\(^6\) In examining the writings of Ottoman scholars of lesser rank and social standing that are dispersed among their understudied private letter collections (münüseât mecmü’alari), autobiographical accounts, literary compositions, scholarly treatises, and even the paratextual records that one may locate in the manuscripts these scholars copied or possessed, one can reconstruct emotional pendulums that swung across various feelings in the face of ever-changing and challenging structural and circumstantial limitations. These limitations include more than just the financial insecurities and intellectual rivalries that were inherent both in the scholarly bureaucratic hierarchy and the overarching patronage system of the early modern Ottoman world of scholarship. One also should take into account how recurrent diseases, unexpected disasters, and physical distance to familiar people and places between rotational appointments left their indelible marks on the emotional canvas of Ottoman scholars.

The Actor and the Stage

Like many of his schoolmates, Muhammed b. Evrenos (d. after 1557), who later adopted the penname Za’ifi (the Frail One), had high hopes when he first arrived in Istanbul to advance his studies. Born in 1494–95 to a longtime fief-holding family in Kratovo (in modern-day North Macedonia), his initial inclination was to follow his distant ancestors’ path and become a warrior. After “sensing” divine tranquility in his heart (irisdi kalbe Allâh’dan sekine), as he expressed in the autobiographical narrative (Sergüzeştname) that he started writing in 1523 and completed only in the early 1540s, he decided to take his learned father’s advice and began his madrasa training.\(^7\) He first obtained the rudiments of Arabic grammar and madrasa sciences from his father and others in his immediate locality. He then studied in the madrasas of Edirne and Bursa, the two Ottoman capitals before Istanbul. He ultimately reached Istanbul in his late teens. A few years after arriving in the capital, he became a student at the Sahn schools, the eight colleges operating since their establishment in the late 1460s as the flagship institution of higher education in the centralizing empire. Here, Za’ifi attached himself to the grand mufti of the time, Mevlâna ‘Ali (d. 1526). As a favorite student of an influential scholar-bureaucrat, Za’ifi had every reason to dream about a promising career. Nevertheless, years of advanced studentship with little stipend caused financial strain. To cope with the poverty that “burnt him up” (âtes-i fâkr ile sütân), he tutored the son of a wealthy bureaucrat for three years.\(^8\) As the compensation he received—after an unbearably long delay—fell much below his expectations, his doubts grew about the prospects of financial stability in the private service of wealthy individuals. He thus settled on staying in the regularized career track of the learned establishment and kept an eye on gaining his first appointment in the teaching profession. Things took a turn for the worse, however, after the untimely death of his advisor and benefactor.

By the time Za’ifi had started his academic journey, the Ottoman scholarly establishment was already organized around a set of regulations codified in the law books.\(^9\) These regulations sought to prescribe the entrance, appointment, and promotion of individuals set to walk the scholarly path, from advanced students and fresh graduates to instructors and judges. Teaching positions in the madrasas and judiciary

\(^6\)The notion of “exceptionally normal” (eccezionalmente normale) was first introduced by Edoardo Grendi in “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977): 506–20.


\(^8\)Coşkun, Za’ifi’nin Sergüzeştname’si, 129.

offices across the empire’s core lands were classified and ranked according to its officeholder’s daily salary. Particularly in the teaching track, the lowest-tiered provincial madrasas came to be known as twenty-akçe paying institutes. The salary would gradually increase to thirty, forty, and eventually to fifty as the instructor climbed up the hierarchy, thanks not merely to his merits but also, importantly, to his patrons’ influence. Until the foundation of the Süleymaniye madrasas in the mid-1550s, the Sahn schools constituted the pinnacle of a student’s learning career and a threshold across which incumbents could jump to the highest positions in the scholarly hierarchy. A fresh graduate from the Sahn, who first held the status of mülazım (candidate for an appointment), had the discretion to choose if he would begin with a madrasa or a judgeship position. The latter offered entry-level salaries for provincial judges that were twice as much as those for instructors, but limited chances for their holders to attain a prestigious judiciary or administrative position later in their careers. By contrast, a teaching career was rewarding in the long run. If an individual could receive his “tenure” (i.e., a fifty-akçe paying madrasa, including one of the Sahn colleges), he became exempt from the “adjunct” cycle in lower-ranking madrasas and eligible to receive appointments to dignitary positions, such as the office of chief military judge or grand mufti. Aside from these financial concerns and prestige considerations, piétistic issues also accounted for the candidates’ decisions: some hesitated to become a judge and decide on others’ fates. No matter which particular track the candidate chose, he had to go through several rounds of rotation, dismissal from office, extended and uncompensated periods of waiting before receiving a new appointment, and troublesome travels, sometimes alone and sometimes with his household.

Much has been written about how the centralizing Ottoman imperial enterprise created and maintained such an unprecedented scholarly bureaucracy through strict measures related to ulama training, appointment, and mobility. However, little is known about what the cogs in this “machinery” thought, felt, and did as they maneuvered within and through this structure. What did school rankings, expressed through explicit reference to daily salaries, mean to them? Did the organization of the learned establishment according to ranks and salaries feed scholarly envies? What were their opinions about peers occupying more lucrative and prestigious offices? How were such concepts as intellectual superiority, seniority, success, or prestige defined and contended? What strategies did they employ to maintain relationships with their present patrons or to establish new links with potential ones who could help them attain desired positions? How did they endure, both financially and emotionally, extended years with only a disappointing arrangement or without any appointment at all?

Such questions can best be traced through the vast corpus of texts penned by and about the Ottoman ‘ulama’. With their easy access to the technologies of writing, the Ottoman ‘ulama’ left an impressive paper trail, from poetry and other literary works of an autobiographical nature to archival petitions, private letter collections, and even physical copies of manuscripts and notebooks they once possessed that sometimes house paratexts with a discernibly autobiographical and emotional vocabulary. One also should include the biographical dictionaries of scholars and anthologies of poets that emerged as a fully fledged genre in the mid-16th century and continued well into the 19th century. Although a thorough examination of this latter body of biographical accounts through the lens of emotions remains a major desideratum, even a cursory look at 16th-century examples quickly reveals expressions of intellectual rivalry, envy, or discomfort with the individual’s professional circumstances. This is not to suggest that competition among men of learning over social and economic capital was peculiar to the Ottomans. One can easily draw similar examples from various premodern contexts, Islamicate or otherwise, where the inevitable precarity inherent in patronage culture put members of the learned community into fierce competition for access to limited resources and positions. What is striking in the Ottoman case is the

11 For instance, the relatively better-known story of Molla Lütfi (d. 1495), a Sahn professor executed on the charge of disbelief and apostasy, was couched by 16th-century sources in the framework of stiff scholarly competition over prestige and highest-ranking teaching positions; this apparently unleashed the envy (hased-i akran) of Lütfi’s peers. See İbrahim Maraş, “Tokathi Molla Lütfi: Hayati, Eserleri ve Felsefesi,” Divan İmi Araştırmaları 14 (2003): 119–36.
abundance and candor of individuals who associated the seemingly meritocratic and overtly hierarchical path of learning with troubles, uncertainties, rivalries, and emotional distress. Such anecdotes and remarks loom large in the moralistic literature of the 17th and 18th centuries, in which the authors often warn their target audience about the financial and emotional hardships awaiting job seekers in the scholarly bureaucracy. Yet, as early as the 16th century, certain Ottoman observers had already diagnosed that the world of scholarship was plagued by jealousies and envies that were further exacerbated by the novel Ottoman practice of defining hierarchical ranks and degrees. To them, these codes and conventions, which were introduced to regulate scholarly careers, only gave way to careerist scholars.

Za'ifi’s relatively extensive oeuvre presents a myriad of details that catch sight of the scholar’s emotional ebbs and flows throughout his professional journey in the academic hierarchy. He penned at least fifteen separate titles, six of which are Turkish translations of Persian texts and literary classics such as Sa‘di-i Shirazi’s (d. 1292) Gulistan (The Rose Garden) and Bostan (The Orchard) and Farid al-Din ‘Attar’s (d. 1221) Mantiq al-Tayr (The Conference of the Birds) and Pendname (The Book of Wisdom). Other works include a collection of his poems (Divan), an allegorical-mystical love poem with rich autobiographical details (Kissa-i ‘Işki ve Maşuk, The Story of ‘Işki and Maşuk), a moralist treatise in prose (Sabru‘l-mes‘ib, The Endurance of Troubles), autobiographical narratives in verse (Sergüzeşname, The Book of Adventures) and in prose (Risale-i imtihanîye, The Treatise of Examination), and a collection of copies of letters he sent to his patrons, peers, and wife (Münşe‘at).

As he was an instructor for a long time in low- to mid-ranking madrasas, one would expect him to have composed scholarly treatises on various madrasa disciplines. However, aside from a brief gloss on a canonical exegetical work that he incorporated into his Arabic Risale-i imtihanîye, his publication record lacks an academic treatise on a madrasa science. The death of his scholarly compositions might explain why the famous biographer Taşköprüzade (d. 1561) referred to him neither in a separate entry nor in passing in his celebrated account of the lives and deeds of Ottoman scholars and Sufi saints from the 13th century to the late 1550s. There were many other scholars who were even less prolific and lower-ranked than Za’ifi but still found their way into Taşköprüzade’s work. Hence, there must be another reason for Za’ifi’s absence. Perhaps Taşköprüzade had never heard of him, but, as a promising student of his generation at the Sahh and a frequent attendant of scholarly gatherings in the capital in the 1550s, Za’ifi’s name and story are unlikely to have escaped Taşköprüzade’s attention. Considering the emphasis Taşköprüzade puts in his text on the ethos of scholars minding their own business and avoiding compare and despair games, Za’ifi’s constant complaints about his career and possessions, manifest in almost all of his extant writings, might have irritated the normative biographer.

As the above list of his compositions indicates, Za’ifi had a distinct penchant for writing in the first person. Aside from the contents of his works, a strong autobiographical presence also is evident in the colophons, prefaces, and margins of the texts he copied, all of which enable us to identify the particular occasions on which Za’ifi’s overtly emotional expressions strike the eye. The examples are too numerous.

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14In his advice manual, the grand vizier Lutfi Paşa (d. 1563) says explicitly that scholars act upon the sense of envy (“muderrisin ve ‘ulumâ’ tâ’ifesin birbirine hased üzeredir”). See Asaﬂname, ed. Ahmet Uğur (Istanbul: Büyüyen Ay Yayınları, 2017), 63. Even sharp observations on his time and society, the late 16th-century Ottoman litterateur Mustafa ‘Ali (d. 1600) noted that Mehmed II introduced his bureaucratic scheme with the good intention of tracking scholars’ progress through their accomplishments but did not foresee how teachers more in love with possessions and prestige would eventually reign supreme. See Tables of Delicacies Concerning the Rules of Social Gatherings, trans. Douglas S. Brookes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 2003), 68.

15For the catalog information of the works he composed and the extant manuscripts housing all or some of these titles, see Fatma Büyükkarı Yılmaz, “Za’ifi’nin Manzum Gülistan Tercümesi: Kitab-ı Nigaristan-ı Şehri, Kitab-ı Manzaristan, Kitab-ı Manzum Nusrat-ı Osmaniye” (PhD diss., Marmara University, 2001).

16Taşköprüzade frequently uses these two phrases to praise the noble characteristics of the scholar in question: mü果实abilan bi-nafisî (busy with his own issues) and ghayr multifatî ilâ ahwâl ghayrîli (not giving attention to how others are doing). See Taşköprüzade Ahmed Efendi, ef-Şaka’ku’n-nu’manîyye fi ulerma’l-Devletî-’Osmaniyye (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2019).
to cite in this brief article, as Za'i'fi rarely failed to note what he “felt” when he, for instance, got separated from his beloved wife, lost his children in a plague outbreak, marveled at the beauties of Istanbul at first sight, witnessed the brutal cold in Sivas when he joined the campaign against the Safavids in 1533 with the hope of remaining close to his patron, and was left shaken by the massive earthquake that hit the capital in August 1556. The overarching theme in all of his records, however, is a sweeping sense of distress about his career and holdings that pale in comparison to what he believes his peers and “the students of his students” (şâkirdimîn şâkîrîdî) enjoyed. From his advanced studentship days in the mid-1520s until his retirement after 1556, Za'i'fi never stopped putting his career frustrations into words.

Za'i'fi received his first appointment in the early 1530s at a twenty-akçe paying madrasa in Giannitsa (in modern-day Greece). After spending some time in Anatolia during the Ottomans’ eastern campaign and briefly occupying a teaching position in Diyarbekir, Za'i'fi was offered a new post in Pleven on the northern Balkan frontier. In 1537, while teaching at this twenty-five-akçe Mihaloglu 'Ali madrasa, he sent two letters to his patron, Sofu Muhammed Paşa. In these letters, he described in colorful detail his miserable state (perişân hâl), with his eyes weeping tears of blood (sirîk-i çeşnim hûn). Complaining about his particular location and the total absence of pleasure, such as conversing with friends or accessing books, he begged Sofu Muhammed Paşa, then the governor general (beglerbegî) of Rumelia, to help him obtain either a madrasa, ideally in Istanbul, that was commensurate to his current pay rate or, in the worst-case scenario, a thirty-akçe madrasa in a more habitable place in the Balkans. His request was partially realized, as in the late 1530s Za'i'fi was holding a thirty-akçe madrasa in Giannitsa. Nonetheless, his career from the early 1530s until the mid-1540s did not progress upward: he got stuck in the thirty-akçe madrasas and regularly tasted the bitter juice of dismissal between his reappointments. Irked by the burden of lingering at low-ranking madrasas in less favorable locations while seeing his peers entertain superior positions (gezer akrân 'âlî pâyelerde), Za'i'fi decided to withdraw from the academic rat race and undertook new ventures in merchandizing textiles. After losing all of his assets in a burglary, however, he had to return, unwillingly, to professorial life and reentered the endless cycle of candidacy, appointment, and dismissal.

During his days of unemployment, Za'i'fi was often busy writing, translating, and copying. As the prefaces or colophons of some of his extant works document, while waiting anxiously for a new appointment he filled this free time with completing new writing projects. The details he recorded are particularly rich manifestations of his career frustrations and emotional outbursts. In the preface of his Gûlîstan translation of 1543, for example, he says that when Süleyman arrived in Edirne for his military expedition against the Habsburgs, all the high-ranking administrators joined him there, including the chief military judge who was in charge of appointments in the learned establishment. Za'i'fi, however, could not leave Istanbul for Edirne because of his poverty and impotence. After he saw that all the other recently dismissed instructors had been able to travel to Edirne to be closer to men of influence and thereby received new positions, his despair grew (baña mansûbdan âhir geldi çûn ye's), and his sorrow reached a peak (pes aldî gûssa kûhîn bâsına re's). As he concisely expressed in his Bostan translation, completed during another period of dismissal, being removed from office only distorted his heart with pain and anxiety (zamân-i 'azlde bir eglence hîç, yğ idî dil olmuştî gûşaÂylya piç). In the second half of the 1540s, Za'i'fi's fortunes seem to have turned slightly positive, as he received his first posts in a forty- and then a fifty-akçe madrasa. However, around the year 1549, he was dismissed from his latest position in a fifty-akçe madrasa. This he took as an infringement of established norms and rules in the scholarly bureaucracy. For the next three to four years, all his attempts to obtain a position proper to his tenured status were to no avail. He stayed in Istanbul with his extended family, apparently under exacting living conditions that he described in the texts he composed or copied. Among these are two specific letters he sent to the grand vizier Rüstem Paşa, whom he held responsible for his most recent dismissal. In the first letter, likely delivered around March 1553 when Rüstem Paşa was about to leave the capital for the Safavid campaign, Za'i'fi related in picturesque detail that “the blade of dismissal” had

\[\text{320 A. Tunç Şen}\]
sickened him, physically and mentally (tiğ-i ‘azl cismimi hâste ve . . . pây-i ‘âklimi belum eylemişdir), when those at the level of his students or who were previously under his guidance enjoyed comfort in high positions. Za’ifi asked Rüstem Paşa to appoint him to one of the madrasas at the Sahn, a position that would be commensurate for his age and experience. He wrote a second letter shortly thereafter to complain that although other scholars were promoted from a madrasa of forty akçes to one of fifty, or from a fifty-akçes madrasa to a madrasa at the Sahn, the men in charge in the capital had offered him only a disgraceful retreat to a forty-akçes madrasa, even though he had already enjoyed a fifty-akçe madrasa. Reminding the grand vizier of the importance of observing the Ottoman sultans’ laws and honor (pâdişâhlar ‘râzi ve nâmusu), he reiterated his request to be appointed to a Sahn madrasa.

During this three- to four-year window, Za’ifi was busy, as usual, copying texts. There is a multi-text volume (mecmu’a) located today in the Boğaziçi University Kandilli Observatory Library comprising fourteen different treatises on astronomical, mathematical, and divinatory sciences. As the colophons of these works reveal, Za’ifi copied nine of them between March 1551 and March 1552. At the end of the first treatise lays a brief note placed perpendicular on the lower-left corner of the page. The note does not relate to the contents of the treatise in Arabic on the use of an astronomical treatise. It instead offers a back-of-the-envelope type divinatory calculation that predicts the outcome of one’s request from another person. Accordingly, one needs to calculate the abjad (numerical values of letters) sum of one’s name and the name of the benefactor in question. If, after performing the instructed arithmetical calculations, the remainder is 1, the supplicant will not attain the request. If it is 2, the matter will turn out well. If it is 3, then the matter will eventually turn out well, after a certain amount of suffering and uncertainty. When exemplifying how one could apply this method, the notetaker curiously uses the name and the name of the benefactor in question. If, after performing the instructed arithmetical calculations, the remainder is three, which he interpreted as a sign that he would eventually attain his request from Rüstem Paşa about a specific request he had made?

As a matter of general principle and method, could we read such seemingly insignificant and obscure paratextual fragments, which abound in surviving manuscripts, as emotional indices of individuals at certain moments and crises in their lives?

No matter how distinct Za’ifi might appear for writing in first-person and conveying in colorful vocabulary what he was feeling, his case was far from unique. Despite earlier scholarly convictions regarding the total absence of diary writing and other forms of autobiographical narratives in Islamicate and Ottoman literary cultures during the medieval and early modern periods, a growing number of studies in the last few decades have convincingly shown otherwise. A cursory comparison of the number of extant diaries and memoirs from the regional contexts of the medieval and early modern Islamicate world to those available in the Renaissance and early modern Europe might support the idea or belief about a rigid cultural or “civilizational” contrast. Yet diaries and memoirs were not the only forms of writing in which first-person perspectives and expressions of emotional states permeated. From collections of poems and private correspondences to petitions in the archives and all sorts of manuscripts with rich paratextual elements, a dazzling array of written sources from the Islamicate and specifically the Ottoman realm promises a multitude of new opportunities to both reconstruct the emotional universe of individuals from different walks of life and intersect these emotional standpoints with the broader socio-economic realities of their times and communities.

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21Ibid., 327b–28b.
22Boğaziçi University Kandilli Observatory Library, Ms. 123, 2a.
23The remainder in his own calculation was three, which he interpreted as a sign that he would eventually attain his request from Rüstem after some suffering (3 bâkî kâlhd hâceti zahmetle devâ olur diriz).

ZAİFI’S FIRST LETTER TO RÜSTEM PASHA

ca. Spring of 1553

This is a copy of Zaifi’s letter of supplication submitted to the illustrious grand vizier Rüstem Pasha around the time that the son-in-law of the king of the universe set out for the Persian Campaign. [God] is the Merciful and the Sustainer.

The petition of the insignificant, poor, and wretched shred of a man to the most honorable among the compassionate, the supporter of scholars, the source of beneficence, the mine of munificence, the protector of the poor, the benefactor of commanders, the crown on the heads of the viziers, is as follows:

2 Letters of an Insecure Scholar
The torments of poverty and trouble have overwhelmed and left me bereft of all my belongings. I have no assets to buy a house, nor do I have a mansion in which to live with my dependents in peace. My limbs and heart are in poor health; my children and dependents are abased like me. During summertime, they use rocks as pillows and the soil as a mattress. In wintertime, if they are lucky enough to find a blanket to cover themselves, they cannot find a mattress; when there is a mattress, there is no blanket. Their once splendid clothes have become sackcloth; their brocade coats have become coarse cloaks. Nor do I have a beast left to ride to visit your gate every day. Of my servants not even two remain so that I could leave one at home while taking the other with me when I visit your threshold. My feet are swollen from walking on foot. Whenever I see acquaintances mounted on Arabian horses while this humble servant walks on feet defiled by soil, I cannot help but suffer from spiritual pain. I had previously scrimped and purchased with my professorial income a modest robe [for each member of my family] to cover our disgrace. Lest people think we are impoverished, they put them on during religious festivals and similar special days, when they are exposed to other people’s gaze. [The members of my household] are afraid that these robes will soon wear out if they don them all day long, as they know that I will not be able to replace them with new ones. What they wear every day at home are shabby robes and cloaks that are completely tattered. In accordance with the word of God, the Almighty, most worthy of praise—The ignorant man supposes them to be rich because of their abstinence, but you will know them by their mark: they do not beg importunately from the people (Qur’an 2:273)—we scrupulously avoid revealing our poverty and indigence to others out of dignity. We keep praying day and night to the Creator of the night and day, being fully resigned to Him in line with the [Qur’anic verse]: Those who put their trust in God, He will suffice them (Qur’an 65:3).

Nonetheless, as the saying goes, “a spear cannot be concealed in a sack,” and some of the venerable and generous among the wealthy have become aware of and engaged with the conditions of these paupers. They have showed some attention, from time to time, by divine inspiration, and bestowed on us their benefaction, albeit at the level of meeting bare necessities. Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, we have not yet been left hungry and dispossessed to date. In particular, the donation of your excellency, the mighty grand vizier pasha, in this month of Şaban, helped us replenish our stocks. However, that which is being spent will surely not last forever. If there is no [stable] income, the money in hand cannot meet expenses. Plants flourish by the blessings of clouds and the poor become gratified by the alms of the generous. People of rank fall from grace when they are dismissed [from office]; they have no bright day, only dark nights. For almost three years, the blade of dismissal has sickened my body and the cord of trouble and hardship has hobbled the feet of my mind. For that reason, I have become a desperate man with a thin, diseased body, despised by my fellows. I have not committed a sin so grave as to deserve this sort of reprimand; nor have I committed a crime so serious that I should earn such rebuke. Some that are only at the level of my students occupy high positions. Those who were previously under my guidance enjoy comfort and ease. This destitute one lives in a mansion as dark and narrow as the heart of a
miser. When the weather is humid our courtyard becomes tar-like due to the clay. Our dependents can only walk around barefoot, as it is not possible to walk there with shoes. My friends and loved ones come and tell him, “while there is life, there is still hope.”

It has become clear to me that you are the only one who can decisively solve this problem, but since you are soon embarking on a campaign toward distant countries there is no hope for my disease to be cured. There is nothing I can do but express my best wishes for your well-being. Judgment belongs to God. Would not it be more proper to implement a sort of action similar to that of the surgeon, who makes punctures with his scalpel and lets the body bleed [only] as much as he wants? He then puts salt on the wound and bandages it tightly. I could talk more about my current condition, but I shall not, lest people call me a grumbler. But in accordance with the saying, “Cautery is the end of medicine,” you would deserve to be utterly admired by the public, should you treat my pained bosom with the mark of your favor and grace, and consider this slave—that is, me—as one of your marked and branded Indian (?) slaves. It is required to protect the honor and virtue of glorious sultans. When I was appointed to the Suleyman Pasha medrese in Iznik, I did not take the appointment because it was not much distinguished in your view. Then, the professorship at the medrese of [Sultan] Orhan [in Iznik], the grand ancestor of his excellency, our padishah—may God glorify his helpers—was assigned to me but I was dismissed before two years were up. Since then, for the last three years, I have not received an appointment. It is clearly an infringement of the virtue of the sultanate that [a dismissed scholar] remains so long desperate and deprived of means.

You submit [your recommendation] to the sultan that such and such scholar is a righteous person and learned in every science, which is then also written on our certificates of appointments. How strange it is that you reverse your opinion when that righteous and learned scholar reaches fifty or sixty years of age, after holding offices in many medresas! Yet, if you intend [to show your beneficence] again, it will doubtlessly happen. As for compassion, there has never been a vizier at the Ottoman court as benevolent as yourself. Your hand of support could lift a particle from the earth to the Pleiades, and the alchemy of your kindness could make soil like gold.

My felicitous lord! For God’s sake, do not bother yourself with examining my dismissal or oppression by poverty and indigence. Since you are the lord of grace, show your utmost generosity, eminent grace, and benevolence for the destitute, and bestow on me, your servant, one of the medresas at the Eight [Courtyards]. Thereby I will be one of your special servants who will always wish the best for you. Since the day I was dismissed, I have not appealed to anyone else’s gate. When Hudhud (the hoopoe) was missing [from the bird assembly], Prophet Solomon—may God’s blessings be upon him—said, “I shall punish it severely” [Qur’an 27:21]. The Qur’an commentators have interpreted this as Hudhud’s peers being promoted to higher positions, and Hudhud being degraded. This humble one has been greatly suffering [like Hudhud]. Judgment belongs to God, yet we have not given up hope for reward. It is
not uncommon that a master first reprimands his servant and then shows his benevolence
to help him receive a reward. Your servant is not yet entirely without hope. If you decline my
request, I will be a rejected servant; if you accept me, then I will be the one admired by peo-
ple. The rest is upon God, Creator of all existing things and Provider for mankind and jinn.

[Signed:] The weakest of all servants, Zaifi, the humble one.

ZAIFI’S SECOND LETTER TO RÜSTEM PASHA

ca. Fall of 1553

This is the petition of the feeble servant and weak slave of the most eminent of the honorable
viziers, the most glorious of the respected commanders, the protection of poor scholars of
the world, the confidant of the sultan of Arab and Persian lands, the cloud of generosity,
beneficence, and grace, the rain pouring from the sky of prosperity onto the people, the
exalted grand vizier, the mighty pasha:

As you embarked on the campaign toward an area as far as my farthest ambitions, this
despicable one remained hopeless about a [teaching] position, like a diseased person despair-
ing of remedy.

The spiritual efforts of the men of the unseen world, who are able even to uproot moun-
tains, brought your far-flung imperial campaign closer and made certain that you return
soon to your felicitous palace. This reanimated this sick one who had given up hope and
made me realize that my request of attaining a position would, God the Compassionate will-
ing, be soon fulfilled; With [all] the hardship there is some ease (Qur’an 94:6). It is hoped that
with the abundance of your benefaction, these afflictions will come to an end and the
requests this servant has made will be attained with ease. Amen! O God who responds to
those who pray! Before you gloriously departed for the campaign, you had ordered those
staying in the city to appoint me to a medrese. Although they had to observe the honor of my
gracious and munificent lord and the dignity of the Ottoman sultans, they did not offer me
a position appropriate to my rank, but one that would cause me to die from sorrow a thou-
sand times over every day. While other scholars are [ordinarily] promoted from a medrese of
forty akçe per day to one of fifty, or from a fifty-akçe medrese to a medrese at the Eight
Courtyards, or even higher positions, they offered this servant, who had previously enjoyed
a fifty-akçe medrese, a shameful retreat to a medrese of forty akçe per day, saying, “We were
only able to persuade the pasha of this level.”

I said [to them], “The pasha is a generous person, famed for lifting his protégés from the
ground to the sky.” When I was offered the Davud Pasha medrese [in Istanbul], the professor
whom I replaced there had previously held the judgeship of Egypt. The professor who was
appointed there after me has [meanwhile] attained [a position in a medrese] in Uskudar at
the rank of [Eight] Courtyards. My distraught status, however, for the last three years has not
been addressed with mercy and compassion at all.

Seeing that I was not being offered a teaching position according to my wish, I said, “I
wish the pasha had not left for the campaign!” They said, “Hang on till he returns.” I said,
"I hope I can!" The saying, "The good thing that one was hoping for has actually happened" is fitting here, and you have not been long and have returned sound and safe. The men of the unseen world, by divine command, have auspiciously brought you back to your place so that you now can carry out the [unfinished] affairs of many desperate people like me.

Oh my mighty and saintly lord, who shall remain seated for ages upon the throne of felicity! In order that God—may He be glorified and exalted—give you a long life, and that God may make you appear more gracefully and pleasingly in the fortunate sultan's blessed eyes, and that the Absolute Creator give my prosperous lord a beautiful noble son, light of everyone's eyes and joy of everyone's hearts, brilliant as the sun, sublime as the celestial sphere, with the character of an angel, a face similar to the moon, and a well-proportioned physique, with a long life—please do not leave this servant of yours bereft of an office of rank.

Scholars, commanders, and even commoners are taking pity on my current state. I have no possessions, no horse, no property or house to stay in. My dependents wear worn-out coats with no cotton filling left therein. I have suffered for years the burden of dismissal and have lived a debased life among my peers. Please bestow on me a medrese from the Eight [Courtyards] for the sake of the felicitous sultan's life. Don't let me go somewhere else with all my dependents; my children are innocent and sinless. We have in no way the strength and power to go half a day's journey. It is an easy thing for you to say, "I have appointed you to a medrese of the Eight [Courtyards]." For you it is not even as much as giving a silver coin to a pauper. [But] for us it is more valuable than receiving one thousand gold coins. A minimal commendation to the padishah (sultan) from you will cause him to fully approve of me. For the last three years, I have been striving every day to secure the livelihood of sixteen people or more [in my household]. It is not befitting to see, in the time of such a generous and
benevolent vizier like my lord, that the garments of the dependents of a fifty-akçe professor are of lower quality than those of the children of artisans. Just treatment is half of the religion!

Most of the artisans treated him justly
So that he [too] became a just person

The Ottoman dynasty has never witnessed such a gracious, benevolent, generous, and bounteous vizier like my lord.

O my lord! Please show me your mercy and bestow on me your grace for the sake of God. The rest is up to God, Lord of the jinn and mankind, and Creator of day and night.