Ze’evi’s book opens new windows into understandings of sexuality in the Ottoman Empire and also exhibits the interconnections between Ottoman knowledge production and that of the Europeans. In his words, his task is to display and analyze different ‘perspectives on Ottoman sexuality’ (p. 149), resulting in a tempting work, the reading of which turns into a whole adventure ‘from North Africa to the Arabic-speaking lands of the Fertile crescent into Anatolia’. Although one might argue against his assumption that these lands ‘shared the same text-based sexual outlook’ (p. 11), he dares to demonstrate how hegemonic views were also ‘constantly at odds with the margin’ (p. 12).

Extremely rich in scope, the book first develops the notion of the continuum of women and men in early Ottoman science. The notion that women’s bodies are less developed versions of men’s leads to discussions of sexuality in Ottoman law, sufism, dream literature, and shadow theatre. Finally, Ze’evi connects the continuum theory to a maze on the part of the Ottomans when the multi-sexed European model starts to become prevalent in the late nineteenth century. However, the segregated worlds of women or the culture that these women developed are not evaluated. In fact, Ze’evi, in a generalizing fashion, believes that women neither interacted in public life like they did in Europe (p. 47), nor wrote anything (p. 167). Nonetheless, his emphasis on the strong influence of Galenic medicine on the Ottoman understanding of sex in particular (p. 18), and Galenos in contrast to Aristotle— that results in understandings of both sexes as producing semen (p. 31) and the notion of contraception as a joint effort of man and woman (p. 9)—challenges the continuum theory where women’s worlds are not valued.

In this line, he compares the Ottoman Empire and Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, he argues that when Europe was stuck with monogenesis, the Ottomans were already discussing the Galenic view (p. 39). However, he concludes that they lost this advantage permanently by the end of the nineteenth century. Even when he flatters the Ottoman ways of thinking, such as in referring to their egalitarianism, whether in classifications in law or in individual choices of partner, he idealizes this notion and minimizes the importance of class, status and gender (pp. 54, 93). Arriving at the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, he argues that, while in Europe the disappearance of sexuality from certain discourses was balanced by its appearance in others, there were no other emerging discourses in the Ottoman Empire. He proceeds by bringing insights into different stages of sexuality in Europe, though without discussing the significance (or perhaps, for him, the insignificance) of the Victorian era (1837–1901) until the very last pages (pp. 165, 171). Politics in the Hamidian era (1876–1909) is similarly unmentioned, and the disappearance of the penis—read obscenity—from the theatrical discourse is merely connected to Europeans’ attitude towards Ottoman sexuality, almost independently from its own devel-
the nineteenth century. He suggests that while the much criticized brothels of Europe became a part of the Ottoman cities along with Karagöz plays (pp. 147–148, 154), the similarly despised sodomy of the Ottomans became a part of the European culture with books like 1001 Nights, the Perfumed Garden, etc. (p. 170). In this line, while the Karagöz plays were cleansed from their intense sexuality, other arenas, like Kanto—a sexually intense form of singing that catered for the needs of European armies in İstanbul—emerged. The ‘minorities’, or more accurately, the members of different religious communities, were the main performers. Ze’evi also demonstrates the aforementioned silence in the post-1839 laws with blurred gender definitions and the non-mention of slavery (p. 74), and perhaps the disappearance of clothing laws can be added to this sequel. However, the exhibitions of such silences, such as the ‘newspeak’ adopted by legislators to obfuscate sexual terms (p. 74), provide clues as to how what may be interpreted as silence may manifest itself differently.

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