

ROUNDTABLE

The Emotional Universe of Insecure Scholars in the Early Modern Ottoman Hierarchy of Learning

A. Tunç Şen*

Department of History, Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ats2171@columbia.edu

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.¹ 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.² One should still

¹Grant Shreve, “Quit Lit’ Then and Now,” Inside Higher Ed, 4 April 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/04/04/comparison-quit-lit-1970s-and-today-opinion>.

²See for instance Peter Burke, “Is There a Cultural History of the Emotions?” in *Representing Emotions*, ed. Penelope Gouk and Helen Hills (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 35–48; Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018).

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

³Lucien Febvre, “La Sensibilité et l'histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?” *Annales d'histoire sociale* 3, no. 1–2 (1941): 5–20. The article was translated into English by K. Folca and published as “Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past,” in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 12–26.

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 Teggül, “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 İnalçık, Cornell Fleischer, and Cemal Kafadar to Madeline Zilfi, Christine Woodhead, Derin Terzioğlu, and Aslı Niyazioğlu, 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 Köprülü, 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 (fikri ve hissi tekamül)” of past people (author's emphasis). See M. Fuad Köprülü, “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 (*münşe’ât mecmû’aları*), 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’îfi (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 (*irişdi kalbe Allâhdan sekîne*), 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’îfi attached himself to the grand mufti of the time, Mevlana ‘Ali (d. 1526). As a favorite student of an influential scholar-bureaucrat, Za’îfi 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” (*âteş-i fakr ile sūzân*), 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’îfi 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

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

⁷For the most recent critical edition of Za’îfi’s autobiography (*Sergüzeştname*), reconstructed on the basis of the four extant manuscripts of the text, see Vildan Serdaroglu Coşkun, *Za’îfi’nin Sergüzeştname’si: “Sergüzeştüm Güzel Hikayettür”* (Istanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2013). For the earlier studies and transcriptions of the text, see Robert Anhegger, “16. Asır Şairlerinden Za’îfi,” *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi* 4, no. 1–2 (1950): 133–66; and Mehmet Ali Üzümcü, “Kitab-ı Sergüzeşt-i Za’îfi” (MA thesis, Kocaeli University, 2008).

⁸Coşkun, *Za’îfi’nin Sergüzeştname’si*, 129.

⁹The discussion in this paragraph is based on the following studies: İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin İlmiye Teşkilatı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1965); R. C. Repp, *The Müfti of Istanbul: A Study in the Development of the Ottoman Learned Hierarchy* (London: Ithaca Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, 1986); and Abdurrahman Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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 *mülâzım* (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, pietistic issues also accounted for the candidates' decisions: some hesitated to become a judge and decide on others' fates.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² What is striking in the Ottoman case is the

¹⁰Aslı Niyazioğlu, "On Altıncı Yüzyıl Sonunda Osmanlı'da Kadılık Kabusu ve Nihani'nin Rüyası," *Journal of Turkish Studies/Türklik Bilgisi Araştırmaları* 31, no. 2 (2007): 133–43.

¹¹For instance, the relatively better-known story of Molla Lutfi (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 akrân*) of Lutfi's peers. See İbrahim Maraş, "Tokatlı Molla Lutfi: Hayatı, Eserleri ve Felsefesi," *Divan İlmi Araştırmalar* 14 (2003): 119–36.

¹²See, for instance, Peter Denley, "Career, Springboard, or Sinecure? University Teaching in Fifteenth-Century Italy," *Medieval Prosopography* 12, no. 2 (1991): 95–114; and Anne F. Broadbridge, "Academic Rivalry and the Patronage System in Fifteenth-Century Egypt: Al-'Ayni, al-Maqrizi, and Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani," *Mamluk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 85–107.

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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) *Gülistan* (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 (*Kıssa-i 'İşki ve Ma'suk*, The Story of 'İşki and Ma'suk), a moralist treatise in prose (*Sabru'l-mesa'ib*, The Endurance of Troubles), autobiographical narratives in verse (*Sergüzeştname*, The Book of Adventures) and in prose (*Risale-i imtihaniye*, The Treatise of Examination), and a collection of copies of letters he sent to his patrons, peers, and wife (*Münşe'at*).¹⁵ 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 imtihaniye*, his publication record lacks an academic treatise on a madrasa science. The dearth of his scholarly compositions might explain why the famous biographer Taşköprizade (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 Taşköprizade's work. Hence, there must be another reason for Za'ifi's absence. Perhaps Taşköprizade had never heard of him, but, as a promising student of his generation at the Sahn and a frequent attendant of scholarly gatherings in the capital in the 1550s, Za'ifi's name and story are unlikely to have escaped Taşköprizade's attention. Considering the emphasis Taşköprizade 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.¹⁶

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

¹³One of the most straightforward critiques came from the poet Nabi (d. 1712), who enumerates all the possible troubles of a career in the learned hierarchy; *Hayriyye-i Nabi: İnceleme-Metin*, ed. Mehmet Kaplan (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1995), 287–91. For a more detailed treatment of Nabi's text from the perspective of the sociology of science, see Harun Küçük, *Science without Leisure: Practical Naturalism in Istanbul, 1660–1732* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

¹⁴In his advice manual, the grand vizier Lutfi Paşa (d. 1563) says explicitly that scholars act upon the sense of envy (*"müderrişin ve 'ulemâ tâ'ifesi birbirine hâşed üzeredir"*). See *Asafname*, ed. Ahmet Uğur (Istanbul: Büyüyen Ay Yayınları, 2017), 63. Among 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 Büyükkaracı Yılmaz, "Za'ifi'nin Manzum Gülistan Tercümesi: Kitab-ı Nigaristan-ı Şehristan-ı Dirahtistan-ı Sebzistan" (PhD diss., Marmara University, 2001).

¹⁶Taşköprizade frequently uses these two phrases to praise the noble characteristics of the scholar in question: *mushtaghılan bi-nafsihi* (busy with his own issues) and *ghayr multafit ilâ ahwâl ghayrihi* (not giving attention to how others are doing). See Taşköprülüzade Ahmed Efendi, *eş-Şaka'iku'n-nu'maniyye fi ulemai'd-Devleti'l-Osmaniyye* (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2019).

to cite in this brief article, as Za‘îfi 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” (*şakirdimiñ şakirdi*) enjoyed. From his advanced studentship days in the mid-1520s until his retirement after 1556, Za‘îfi never stopped putting his career frustrations into words.

Za‘îfi 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 Diyarbakir, Za‘îfi was offered a new post in Pleven on the northern Balkan frontier. In 1537, while teaching at this twenty-five-*akçe* Mihaloğlu ‘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 (*sirişk-i çeşmim hûn*).¹⁷ 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 (*beğlerbeği*) 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‘îfi 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. Irrked 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‘îfi 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‘îfi 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 *Gülistan* 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‘îfi, 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 manşıbdan âhîr geldi çün ye’s*), and his sorrow reached a peak (*pes aldı gûşşa kûhûñ başına re’s*).¹⁸ 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-ı ‘azlde bir eglence hiç, yoğ idi dil olmuşdı gûşşayla pîç*).¹⁹

In the second half of the 1540s, Za‘îfi’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.²⁰ 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‘îfi related in picturesque detail that “the blade of dismissal” had

¹⁷Bibliothèque Nationale de France (hereafter BnF), Suppl. turc 572, 321a–322b.

¹⁸Yılmaz, “Za‘îfi’nin Manzum Gülistan Tercümesi,” 561.

¹⁹BnF, Suppl. turc 572, 4a.

²⁰Ibid, 299b–302b.

sickened him, physically and mentally (*tîğ-i ‘azl cismimi haste ve . . . pây-i ‘aqlımı beste eylemiştir*), when those at the level of his students or who were previously under his guidance enjoyed comfort in high positions.²¹ Za‘îfi 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 *akçe*s to one of fifty, or from a fifty-*akçe* madrasa to a madrasa at the Sahn, the men in charge in the capital had offered him only a disgraceful retreat to a forty-*akçe* 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 (*pâdişahlar ‘ırzı ve nâmusu*), he reiterated his request to be appointed to a Sahn madrasa.

During this three- to four-year window, Za‘îfi was busy, as usual, copying texts. There is a multi-text volume (*mecmû‘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‘îfi 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.²² When exemplifying how one could apply this method, the notetaker curiously uses the name Muhammed for the supplicant and Rüstem for the benefactor. Considering Za‘îfi’s affairs with the grand vizier at the time, would it be far-fetched to claim that the note was indeed jotted down by Za‘îfi (whose real name was Muhammad), capturing a particular moment of his emotional eruption when he was impatiently waiting to hear from Rüstem Paşa about a specific request he had made?²³ 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‘îfi 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.

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 kaldı hâceti zahmetle devâ olur diriz*).