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Chapter 11

Warriors in Drag: Performing Gender and Remaking Men in Prisoner of War Theater¹

Yücel Yanıkdağ

Playwright İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri's (1874-1935) one-act comedy *Gerdaniye Buselik* (roughly, Pendant Worthy of a Kiss) is about a young couple having a disagreement on their first anniversary (Figure 1). 23 year old and recently wed Nevber is unhappy with her husband Fahir Bey. The night before, Fahir ridiculed his live-in sister's use of foreign words in everyday speech, Nevber, who does the same thing, interpreted the criticism as also intended for her. The lifting of the curtain is supposed to reveal a "decorated salon" with "elegant furniture". Then enters a distressed Nevber in a chic, "medium décolleté" (*nim dekolte*) house-dress. When Fahir shows up a little later, she does not respond to his greeting and questions. Fahir's young sister Feriha becomes the messenger between the comically feuding couple. There is even talk of ending the marriage on its first anniversary. "What can we do, *kismet* was only this long for our marriage, I guess", says Fahir. Nevber adds that he might have better luck with an older and more traditional woman "with henna on her hands". Fahir responds "what can I do? It seems that I cannot get along with those wearing red nail polish". Pulling out a little box from his pocket, Fahir reveals a pendant necklace that was meant to be an anniversary gift; he suggests that it might now have to adorn the neck of another woman. As expected, the sight of the necklace ends Nevber's playful anger. After some more flirtatious back and forth, Nevber asks Fahir to put it on her neck. The play ends as Fahir, with an invitation from Nevber, kisses her neck as he clasps the "Pendant Worthy of a Kiss".²

The location of the play was a prisoner of war (POW) camp for Ottomans interned by the British in Egypt. Nevber, Feriha, and other female characters, like the audience, are all Ottoman soldiers, who were cross-dressed to play female roles. Presumed to be the epitome of manliness and masculinity in Ottoman-Turkish culture, which fashioned itself as a "military nation" where every Turk was born a soldier, hardened men in uniform impersonating women might sound unusual at first. Yet, this was just one of the dozens of plays staged in POW camps, and it imitated the seemingly humbler versions staged near frontlines during the war. Cut off from daily life of a normal society both at the front and the POW camps, especially officers but also enlisted men stepped up to play female roles. Female impersonation allowed the actors and their prisoner comrades at least a temporary release from the homosocial world of the front and the prison camps. Theater, with its warriors in cross-dress, provided the prisoners with a sense of prewar "normalcy", comfort and agency. They might not have had quite the decorated salon with "elegant" furniture the playwright intended for a peacetime theater, but in terms of the actors and "actresses", it seems, they were not lacking.

¹ I would like to thank Nilüfer Hatemi, Çiğdem Kılıç, Arzu Öztürkmen and Zafer Toprak for offering assistance in trying to locate Mehmed Rauf's play *Diken*, and Ayten Alkan, Chris Bischof, Jordana Cox, Jennifer Fronc, and Carol Summers who read various versions of this chapter and provided valuable comments. Sheryl Yanıkdağ read multiple versions. I am grateful for their time and help. Any shortcomings are my own. I also would to thank Kate Fleet and Ebru Boyar for inviting me to Newnham College, Cambridge, and including me in this volume.

² İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri, "Gerdâniye Buselik", *İnci* (Temmuz 1335/1919): pp. 9-11; Baraz, Mehmet Rebiî Hâtemi (ed.), *İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci* (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2001), vol. II, pp. 94-102.

This chapter examines Ottoman prison camp theaters in Egypt, from where more sources have survived. With the exception of some passing mentions in scholarship, entertainment in general, and theatre in particular in the Ottoman military is a neglected subject. Scholars of European history studying troop and prisoner of war entertainment during the two world wars have produced a noteworthy amount of material. Many have even focused specifically on soldiers' cross-dressing or female impersonation in theater on various fronts and prisoner of war camps.³ Older scholarship viewed female impersonation as mere entertainment, but more recent studies have taken up gender related issues.⁴ Drag performance could be a challenge to social norms regarding appropriate male behavior, argues Rachamimov in his examination of German speaking POWs in Russia, though some officers thought that female impersonators, by preserving the image of woman, could be an effective measure against outbreaks of "epidemic" homosexual behavior in prison camps.⁵ Another scholar has recently argued that female impersonation "allowed for a rich cultural lexicon based on ambiguity and mutability rather than referencing only gender identity or erotic object choice".⁶ Of course, gender analysis has not been the only way to interpret prison camp theaters. Other scholars viewed prison camp theaters and other cultural pursuits as curative or therapeutic activities, which helped prisoners deal with debilitating boredom, keep their sanity, and survive both mentally and physically.⁷ Going further and turning to the issues of gender and masculinity, this chapter will suggest that theater, namely those featuring female impersonators, was much more than a tool for dealing with boredom. It was therapeutic in helping heal and reaffirm the prisoners' sense of manliness and masculinity, which I will argue had been undermined by their capture and treatment. Of course, theater was also fun for both the performers and the audience. First, a brief historical background and context is needed.

Historical Background

During the First World War, Britain, Russia, France, and Romania captured nearly 250,000 Ottoman soldiers and officers. The British held just over 150,000 of them in Egypt, India, Burma, and a number of temporary camps before they were sent to permanent ones. Russia captured between 65,000-90,000 Ottomans, who were just a small proportion of the total 2.4 million prisoners interned in the vast Russian empire in some 200 camps of various sizes. The tendency in Russia for the comparatively smaller number of Ottoman POWs was to be scattered in a number of camps. Though they could be in adjacent or nearby camps, the enlisted men and officers were

³ Rachamimov, Alon, "Disruptive comforts of drag: (trans)gender performances among prisoners of war in Russia, 1914-1920", *American Historical Review*, 111 (2006): pp. 379-82; Draskau, Jennifer K., "Prisoners in petticoats: drag performance and its effects in the Great War internment camps in the Isle of Man", *Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 12 (2009), 187-209; Eldredge, Sears, "'We girls': female impersonators in prisoner-of-war entertainments on the Thailand-Burma railway", *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 5 (2014), 74-99; Boxwell, David, "The follies of war: cross-dressing and popular theatre on the British front lines, 1914-18", *Modernism/Modernity*, 9 (2002), 1-20; Sigel, Lisa Z., "'Best love': female impersonation in the Great War", *Sexualities*, 19 (2016), 98-118; Crouthamel, Jason, "Cross-dressing for the fatherland: sexual humor, masculinity and German soldiers in the First World War", *First World War Studies*, 2 (2011), 195-215.

⁴ Sigel, "'Best love'", p. 99.

⁵ Rachamimov, "Disruptive comforts of drag", pp. 379-82. Rachamimov discounts this "safety valve" argument.

⁶ Sigel, "'Best love'", p. 99.

⁷ Yanıkdağ, Yücel, *Healing the Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914-1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 30-1, 66-7, 91, largely in passing.

kept separately from one another in both locations. The enlisted men had to perform labor for the captor power for their upkeep. The officers did not have to work and received salaries. While a small number of prisoners were repatriated in 1918 at the end of the war, many had to stay in prison camps until the early 1920s in both Russia and Egypt. When their physiological needs were at least minimally satisfied, the younger junior officers turned to cultural activities to keep busy. Some officers, worried about the future of the nation, took advantage of being in close proximity to thousands of illiterate enlisted men and established informal prison camp schools, where they taught the men how to read, write and more. Many others learned languages, a few turned to sports, some to music, and some to theater.⁸ Actively engaging both the actors and the audience, theater was a more collective and uniting activity.

Despite the focus on entertainment in this chapter, the POWs had difficult, challenging, and even deadly experiences; many did not live to see their families again. Speaking of British POWs in Turkey during the same war, one Turkish newspaper, basing its conclusions on an academic's statement, produced the following truly unfortunate headline: "The British prisoners [in Afyonkarahisar, Turkey] spent all their days on music and staging plays".⁹ The outrageous implication is that their lives were one of comfort, entertainment, and nothing else. Just as it could not have been for the British, it was not for the Ottoman POWs either.

Capture and Emasculation

Scholars of European history have argued that the First World War "provoked a crisis in masculinity as nineteenth-century notions of the 'heroic', patriotic defender of the nation were challenged by the reality of dehumanizing, industrialized violence experienced".¹⁰ Elif Bilgin makes a similar observation and states that the war mutilated heroic masculinities, as it fragmented narratives about masculinity and created "vacuums of doubt through which gender teachings and traditional male roles could be plausibly questioned".¹¹ Arguably, having gone through the same experiences as the front soldiers before they were captured, those who became POWs were doubly exposed in terms of how war and captivity undermined their sense of manliness.

In examining cross-dressing German POWs, Iris Rachamimov interprets "capture by the enemy as a metaphoric castration and as a precipitous loss of status in social and gender hierarchy".¹² Without a doubt, the moment and experience of being captured was one of anxiety, fear, helplessness, and even shame for the Ottoman POWs as well.¹³ In a popular and military culture that increasingly fashioned itself since the late nineteenth century as a "military nation",

⁸ Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation*, pp. 30-2.

⁹ "Şahin: İngilizlerin Esareti Müzik ve Tiyatro ile Geçmiş", *Afyon Haber*, <http://www.afyonhaber.com/sahin-ingilizlerin-esareti-muzik-ve-tiyatroyla-gecmis/144121/>, accessed on 1 December 2017.

¹⁰ Crouthamel, "Cross-dressing for the fatherland", p. 195.

¹¹ Bilgin, Elif, "An Analysis of Turkish Modernity through Discourses of Masculinities", Ph.D. Thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2004, p. 31. See also my "Cihan Harbi'nde Korku, Cesaret ve Erkeklik", *Toplumsal Tarih*, 243 (2014), 48-55.

¹² Rachamimov, "Disruptive comforts of drag", p. 364; Feltman, Brian K., *The Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), p. 106 highlights the shame angle much as I did in *Healing the Nation*. Matthias Reiss, challenges this idea in "The Importance of being men: the Afrika-Korps in American captivity", *Journal of Social History*, 46 (2012), pp. 25-7.

¹³ Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation*, pp. 251-52.

Ottoman and Turkish conceptions of manliness and masculinity were clearly linked to military service and warrior qualities.¹⁴ Although some individual soldiers challenged the militaristic discourse of ‘die, do not become a prisoner of war’, one’s ‘fate’ of being captured could stir suspicions that a warrior forfeited those qualities, and therefore, his manliness.¹⁵ Ottoman prisoners report that at first they could not look at each others’ faces out of a feeling of shame.¹⁶ Those who had to raise their hands in the air and surrender their weapons were no longer facing their enemies as equals in battle, but as vulnerable victims. What is clear is that a drastic change took place at that moment. Gone was the heroic masculinity as the men marched into enforced passivity in the lands and under the guns of the enemy. Hilmi Erbuğ, an officer taken on the Russian front, remembered his moment of capture in explicitly gendered terms: “I stood there without a weapon, defenseless, as if like a woman”.¹⁷ Some, like Başkatıpzade Ragıp Bey, noted: “I could not comprehend anything; I lost my nerves; my body felt gelatinous”.¹⁸ This is nothing short of terror and utter vulnerability.¹⁹ While Rachamimov and others argue that emasculation lasted until repatriation, I argue here that the work of reclaiming masculinity started while they were POWs through various means, and female-impersonation in camp theater was one important step, especially for those in Egypt.²⁰

Entertainment in the Ottoman Military

Some original sources provide sporadic evidence of unit commanders arranging for occasional plays and concerts to boost the soldiers’ morale during the Great War. Organized entertainment could only happen during times of lulls in fighting or in the rear lines. One officer briefly mentioned that his division put on such a show near the Gallipoli front. As the soldiers constructed the stage for a play from whatever materials were available, such as blankets and tents, the division’s musical section played Carmen. As he commented “how strange! A field theater in a battle zone”, it is safe to assume that this was the first and possibly the only one he witnessed.²¹ Vasfi Şenözen, who was asked to play the lead in an Abdülhak Hamit play on the eastern Anatolian

¹⁴ Altınay, Ayşegül, *The Myth of the Military Nation: Militarism, Gender and Education in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

¹⁵ A. Süleyman, “Esaret Hatıraları,” *Vakit*, 21 September 1920, p. 2; Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation*, pp. 251-2.

¹⁶ Başkatıpzade Ragıp Bey, *Tarih-i Hayatım: Tahsil-Harp-Esaret-Kurtuluş Anıları* (Ankara: Kebikeç, 1996), p. 80.

¹⁷ Erbuğ, Merih Baran (ed.), *Kaybolan Yıllar: Mulazım Ahmet Hilmi’nin Sarıkamış, Sibiry, Afghanistan Hatıraları ve Hayatı* (İstanbul: Vadi, 2007), p. 172.

¹⁸ Başkatıpzade Ragıp Bey, *Tarih-i Hayatım*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Captivity narratives of Ottomans in British hands do not generally have such vivid descriptions of anxiety and terror at capture. For them, that moment likely was when they were forced to undress completely for delousing purposes before entering the prison camps. As they stood in line, ashamed of each other, they attempted to cover their private parts with their hands. The British soldiers yelling, laughing, and poking at them with sticks to keep the line moving is remembered by many as the most humiliating and torturous experience. Arguably, this was the moment of emasculation for them. See, Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation*, pp. 143-4 and Figure 4.5 therein, where the POWs bowing their heads is indication of the shame they felt.

²⁰ Besides Rachamimov, see also Heather Jones, who states that men entered the camps with a “virile image of soldierly masculinity”, but the prison camps unraveled their sense of themselves as men, “A missing paradigm? Military captivity and the prisoners of war, 1914-18”, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26 (2008), p. 19-48, quote at p. 25.

²¹ Hasan Cevdet Bey, *Kıyamet Koptuğunda: Hasan Cevdet Bey’in Çanakkale ve Doğu Cephesi Günlüğü* (İstanbul: Yeditepe, 2015), pp. 40-1.

front, did not find it as strange, even if he declined the offer.²² Whereas 80 percent of British divisions had theatrical sub-units to entertain the men on the field,²³ Ottoman frontline theaters seem to have taken place at the initiative of some divisional and regimental commanders as ad-hoc entertainment. A pre-1914 example from Ottoman Yemen shows that commanding officers occasionally encouraged men to entertain themselves. An actor himself, the officer was disappointed in his Anatolian soldiers because when left alone to entertain themselves, they resorted to crude forms of cross-dressing, resembling *orta oyunu*. That is, they simply “belly-danced” (*göbek atıp*) and made “coquettish movements with their heads” (*gerdan kırdılar*).²⁴ The officer had hoped that his Anatolian soldiers would sing “martial songs” or perform “war-plays”, as the local Ottoman-Yemeni gendarme reportedly did. His soldiers’ behavior tells us that they did not see anything unmanly in cross-dressing. Soldiers were quick to obtain women’s clothes for impromptu entertainment (Figure 2). Especially, the ‘woman’ on the right visible playing spoons might indicate some evidence of belly dancing and more.²⁵

Prison Camp Theaters

The practice of battlefield theatrical performances with female impersonators naturally passed into prison camps. While those in Egypt thrived after slow starts, Ottoman theater endeavors in Russia were modest affairs at least in terms of their repertoire. There are at least a couple of reasons for this. First, the captivity conditions were significantly more difficult in Russia; frequently the prisoners were in dire straits financially. Secondly, Ottomans tended to be a small minority among the prisoners captured by Russia. There were over 2 million Austro-Hungarians and at least 168,000 Germans in Russian prison camps. The smaller numbers hindered a livelier theater life. Frequently, there was not a large enough pool of people to draw actors from and also form a reliable audience base. For instance, Krasnoyarsk, a large prison camp which held thousands of Central Powers’ prisoners, had only 400 Ottoman officers. German speaking prisoners there had numerous successful productions, which even attracted local civilians.²⁶ Probably taking advantage of the stage built by European POWs, the 400 Ottoman officers still staged at least several plays including Hüseyin Rahmi’s *Mürebbiye* (1895, Governess). Başkatıpzade Ragıp Bey listed three other plays in Krasnoyarsk: *Çoban Kızı* (Shepherd Girl), *A be Karı* (Oh, What a Woman!), and *Paşa’nın Keyfi Yerinde* (The Paşa Enjoys Life).²⁷ Ottomans in other camps also note the staging of a play or two (Figure 3). Even in places with only a few dozen

²² Şenözen, Vasfi, *I. Dünya Savaşı Yılları ve Kafkas Cephesi Hatıraları* (Istanbul: Okuyan Us, 2013), p. 90.

²³ Boxwell, “The follies of war”, p. 5.

²⁴ Kemal Emin, “Sulh ve Tiyatro”, *Temaşa*, 10 (17 Teşrin-i evvel 1334/1918), pp. 2-3. In *Orta Oyunu*, literally meaning “the performance in the middle”, because the play took place outdoors and in the middle of a round crowd of watchers, men known as *zenne* played women’s roles. Kılıç, Çiğdem, “Men acting as women: The *zenne* in nineteenth-century popular theatre”, in *Celebration, Entertainment and Theatre in the Ottoman World*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi and Arzu Öztürkmen (London: Seagull Books, 2014), pp. 303-18. *Zenne* also appear in shadow plays popular in the Middle East since the thirteenth century. However, the *zenne* in the shadow play is a woman rather than a female impersonator. Zevi, Dror, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 136.

²⁵ In this case, it seems that they came across a “sünnet düğünü” at a village near an unidentified battlefield.

²⁶ Rachamimov, “Disruptive comforts of drag”, p. 372 and note 49.

²⁷ Başkatıpzade, *Tarih-i Hayatım*, pp. 100-1. I could not identify the latter three. They might be original plays or Ragıp Bey did not remember the names correctly.

Ottomans, prisoners still attempted to entertain themselves even if it meant sitting around in a room and reading lines informally. As M. Fuad Tokad noted, there was no cross-dressing, but only oral mimicry of female characters. Still, men could be “very good in female roles”.²⁸ As the number of Ottomans in British captivity jumped considerably starting in 1917, cultural and theatrical activity in the camps increased. With thousands of Ottomans in each of the several prison camps, Egypt had a much larger actor, director, and audience pool, which helped turn the initially modest efforts into nearly nightly entertainment. Prisoners who had some connection to theater or were active theater-goers led the way as they became actors, “actresses”, and directors. To ensure that it was a united effort, they established a “Theatre Committee” (*Heyet-i Temsiliye*, Figure 4) in each camp consisting of about up to two dozen people.²⁹ Thus, by 1918 every one of the nearly ten camps in Egypt featured a play every three to five days. Some nights even had double and triple features (See Table 1). The prisoners staged both national and European plays from Namık Kemal’s patriotic play *Gülnehal* to *Don Juan* or Alexander Dumas’s *the Women’s War*.³⁰

Ottoman prisoners relied on a variety of ways to acquire or create texts for the plays they eventually staged. One common method mentioned is reliance on the memory of those who were pre-war actors or theater-goers. Former officer prisoner Nureddin stated that “a friend with a good memory who had attended theater frequently in Istanbul” before the war “reconstructed” Ibn-ür Refik’s play *Hisse-i Şaiya* (Shared Possession) “almost exactly the same as the original”.³¹ Because some plays had to be rewritten from memory, the prisoner writers or directors might have taken some liberty in their reconstruction. They might have also acquired plays through Red Crescent efforts to send books to Ottoman POWs.³² Since it was in the interest of the camp commandants to keep the prisoners occupied because they were still holding them two to three years after the war, it is possible that camp officials even helped obtain such plays.

Most theater troupes and the stages on which they performed started amazingly modestly. Nureddin wrote that some POWs always imagined building a stage and having a troupe from the first days of their captivity. At first, they pushed large tables together in the mess tent to form a stage; for background they stitched together blankets. Because the set-up and rearrangement was too arduous they could only do “simple plays” and poetry reading at first. It seems what drove the “Turkish” prisoners like Nureddin is the competition Arab-Ottoman prisoners “started” by staging a short play about Salah al-Din and Richard the Lionheart, where Richard planted the contemporary British in Jerusalem. Thus, the “Turkish” prisoners wanted to upstage them for their insulting behavior and “cow-towing” to the British to win their favor.³³ Turkish-Ottomans responded with a patriotic play which resulted in red-white decorations and flags all over the modest stage. As the competition heated up, help came from a seemingly unlikely quarter: the Zekazik camp commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Jenkins. In a post-repatriation newspaper article, Nureddin publicly recorded his “appreciation” of Jenkins for his “effort and activities” to help theater lovers. Jenkins, an engineer, drew the plans for the stage and supervised its construction. He procured necessary material, attended plays, and even played violin, along with a few other

²⁸ Tokad, M. Fuad, *Kibrit Kutusundaki Sarıkamış-Sibirya Günlükleri*, 2nd printing (Istanbul: Timaş, 2010), p. 187.

²⁹ N. K., “Mısır’da Üsera Karargahlarında Osmanlı Sahneleri”, *Temaşa*, 22 (Mayıs 1336/1920), p. 14.

³⁰ N. K., “Mısır’da”, p. 14; Altınay, Ahmet, *Katran Kazanında Sterilize: Bir Türk Subayı’nın İngiliz Esir Kampında Üç Yılı* (Istanbul: Tarih Düşünce Kitapları, 2004), pp. 44-5; Yanıkdağ, *Healing the Nation*, p. 30.

³¹ Nureddin, “Esaret karargahında temaşa hayatı”, *Vakit*, 28 June 1924, p. 4. See also, N. K., “Mısır’da”, pp. 14-15.

³² See, Anameriç, Hakan, “Türk Kızılayı’nın (Osmanlı Hilal-i Ahmer Cemiyeti) Savaş Esirlerine Kitap ve Kütüphane Hizmetleri”, *Erdem*, 58 (2010), 19-44.

³³ Nureddin, “Esaret”, p. 4.

British soldiers, in the camp orchestra.³⁴ Simple beginnings of these theatrical efforts and the assistance offered by the British camp officials are seconded in Reşad Nuri's *Son Sığınak* (The Last/Final Shelter) novel; the narrator in the novel, Süleyman, is a former prisoner of war in Zekazik, Egypt where he was both actor and co-director.³⁵

Later on, stages became more sophisticated as interested officers likely pooled salaries, received assistance from the captors, and charged a small admission fee. One unidentified example of a theater in the Egyptian camps was a stand-alone structure covered with canvas cloth, or basically, a large tent. Officers supervised the enlisted men's construction of the stage measuring five by seven meters, but took charge of scenic designs and paintings. It cost 240 Egyptian pounds near the end of the war to construct and decorate.³⁶ While we have no panoramic photographic images of any of the stages, a drawing in one of the prison camp newspapers might give us some idea of what they looked like; the fact that the image also features an alluring 'woman' tells us what was on the minds of the prisoners (Figure 5).

With building of permanent stages and increased number of prisoners in the camps, theater life became extraordinarily active. Along with those plays they reconstructed from memory or through publications acquired, Ottoman theater enthusiasts in one camp alone wrote half-a-dozen original pieces, which, as one former prisoner wrote in a premiere theater journal after the war, were worthy of being considered for staging in the theaters of Istanbul.³⁷ The list of staged plays (Table 1) should be considered partial.

Table 1: Plays Staged in Egypt and Russia³⁸

<p>Vatan Cüda (Homesickness for the Fatherland) Zehirli Menekşe (Poisonous Violet) Altun Kaya (Golden Rock) Kırmızı-Mavi (Red-Blue) Hisse-i Şayia (Shared Possession (<i>La Pretexte</i>)) Dördüncü Madde (The Fourth Element) Gülñihal (Gülñihal) Diken (Thorn) Çoban Kızı (Shepherd Girl) İki Ahbap Çavuşlar (Two Cronies/Pals) Karanlıklar İçinde (In Darkness) Don Van (Don Juan) Otello (Othello) Kadınlar Muharebesi (<i>La Guerre de Femmes</i>) Hadise – Adese (Incident – Lens) Lades (Wishbone) Cem Sultan (Cem Sultan) Besleme (Live-in Servant) Don Kişot (Don Quixote)</p>	<p>Türk Ruhu (Turkish Soul) İstiklal-i Osmani (Ottoman Independence) Çaldıran Seferi (Chaldıran Campaign, 1514) Musa bin Gazan (Musa al-Ghazani) Öksüz Turgut (Orphan Turgut) Şeytan (The Devil) Uçurum (The Abyss (<i>La Flambeé</i>)) A be Karı (Oh, What a Woman) Paşa'nın Keyfi Yerinde (The Paşa Enjoys Life) Mürebbiye (The Governess) Balmumcu (<i>L'homme aux figures de cire</i>) Hukuk-i Nisvan (Women's Rights) Muhterem Sefile (Esteemed Prostitute) Fırtına (The Storm) Açık Bono (Blank Check) Gerdaniye Buselik (Pendant Worthy of a Kiss) Mukadderat Hakimdir (Fate Rules the Day) Kadın Dersi (Woman Lessons) Metres (Mistress)</p>
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³⁴ Nureddin, "Esaret", p. 4.

³⁵ It is likely that Reşad Nuri Güntekin either read how the prisoners did this in a memoir or heard it in person from one of the former prisoners who continued his theater life after repatriation. Süleyman Bey says "we decorated our simple stage very carefully. We could move it from one place to another and never paid any attention to its laughable, simple condition", p. 20. In his account the help from the British is much more modest, *Son Sığınak* (Istanbul: İnkılâp, 1961), pp. 30-1.

³⁶ Roughly the same amount of pound sterling, which equaled 1,000 Turkish lira in 1920. N. K., "Mısır'da", p. 14.

³⁷ N. K., "Mısır'da", p. 14.

³⁸ Sources are too many to list for the construction of this list. Most are listed in N. K., "Mısır'da", p. 14. Others are collated from passing mentions in various sources. Some are adaptations from European plays, where I could identify them, I provided the original name.

Creating the Feminine Presence

As the play titles like *Woman Lessons*, *Mistress*, *Shepherd Girl*, or *La Guerre de Femmes* indicate, many such productions required female characters. Given the environment, this might have seemed like an almost insurmountable challenge at first, but it was turned into a great opportunity for the directors and actors through initiative and creativity. By creating the feminine presence in the camps, the prisoners could entertain themselves, normalize their lives, and heal and remake their sensibilities. Actors in various female roles served multiple purposes.

Anthropologists argue that cross-dress provides men with a release from the “abnormal” state in homosocial environments. They call this the “safety valve” interpretation. They argue that female impersonators simply affirm the two-gender system by reintroducing a “feminine” presence, which maintains both gender and political hierarchies. They create a “safety valve” for conflicts but do not undermine the basic social and gender order.³⁹ However, some historians, challenging the safety valve argument, have asserted that cross-dressing can also destabilize gender identities.⁴⁰ Similarly, David Boxwell states that there were two kinds of performances among female impersonators: mimesis and mimicry. For him, the former was defined by glamour whereas the latter by the “dame” tradition. The dame tradition, a comedic effort, allowed men to dress and act as women without any erotic allure. Motivated by a “misogynistic animus”, it was an effort, he argues, to render women in a “hypercarnivalized” manner, as the “grotesque” and “ugly”. Mimetic performances, the focus of his article, however, emphasized glamor and eroticism.⁴¹ In a mimetic performance, he writes, a spectator’s desiring gaze “on a soldier in drag was not simply a matter of pleasure in a ‘surrogate’ woman; rather, his gaze was directed at a fellow man in drag”.⁴² That is, such a gaze means the possibility that some men were transgressing the threshold of heterosexual desire. Of course, we cannot say that it did not happen among the Ottoman POWs, but in the available evidence, there is no indication that the gaze was directed at the male prisoner in drag. Furthermore, Boxwell’s split seems to overlook the category of mothers and maternal types, who would fit neither the glamorous nor the grotesque. Ottoman plays featured all kinds of femininity from young alluring women - Ottoman as well, but especially foreign - to mothers, sisters, and elderly maids, who were considered as part of the family.⁴³ If the aim was to normalize their lives, wouldn’t a variety of women make more sense to fulfill different roles? We do not possess the texts of the plays as staged, but what is clear is that the camp “actresses” reportedly successfully played them all. Different kinds and roles of women as portrayed on stage helped rehabilitate the masculinity of the actors and the audience. The performances were not all necessarily about sex and sexual desire, but a desire for a return to

³⁹ Rachamimov, “Disruptive comforts of drag”, pp. 364, 375-7; and as noted by historian Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 130; Makepeace, Clare, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 118.

⁴⁰ Rachamimov’s argument was noted earlier in the article.

⁴¹ Boxwell, “The follies of war”, pp. 13-14.

⁴² Boxwell, “The follies of war”, p. 17.

⁴³ Unfortunately, we do not have adequate and detailed photographic examples of female impersonators to see how convincing they might have been as actresses.

normalcy and “regular” gender roles which affirmed the man’s status at the top of the social and cultural hierarchy.

Creating womanly presence in the camps by transforming an actor into an “actress” was a complicated process and required much attention to detail and creativity. Thanks to Daloğlu Fuad, an actor-director POW in the Sidi Bishr officer camp and an actor-writer after repatriation to Turkey, we have a marvelous description of the transformation. By using “patent leather shoes”, hair pins and “women’s vests featuring artificial breasts . . . our actresses went through a metamorphosis towards femininity”, to be as convincing as possible.⁴⁴

An incredible competition existed among these men. Everyone shaved their faces; frequently, they shaved their arms and chests; they let their hair grow. On the play nights, they spent hours in front of mirrors to the point of arguing over whose turn it was to use the mirror. Face powder, rouge, nail polish, lipstick, and other items were unnecessarily heavily used (*israf olunuyor*) by each actress to the point that they started to hide it from one another. Finally, we were forced to issue separate make up items to each actress. Some spent their own money on such things. Some substituted other items when they could (for example, for face powder chalk powder was substituted).⁴⁵

Clearly, the camp theaters had come a long way from the days of pushing together lunch tables in the mess hall to “women’s vests”. Daloğlu Fuad not only describes the metamorphosis, but his writing actually demonstrates that transformation. He begins with the competition among “the men”, and ends up referring to them as “actresses”. It is noteworthy that there is no use of quote marks around the word “actresses”, though it would be unwise to put too much emphasis on this.⁴⁶

Who played the female roles? Was it the enlisted men who were pressed into service? Not at all. Though occasionally enlisted men are mentioned, by all indications, young junior and reserve officers formed the overwhelming and willing majority of the actors and “actresses”. Evidence indicates that there was tough competition for the female roles. Describing the prison camp theater experience to his readers in a theater magazine after repatriation, one former prisoner had to ease his readers into this different world known only to those who experienced it. He asked his readers to avoid the assumption that female roles somehow fell to those who were not very good actors, or could not play leading male roles. This was not the case. Playing female roles were demanding and required a great deal of talent, certainly more than playing male roles. To convince the uninformed, he assured them these men were not the kind of actors “who appeared as women on the stage but were unaware of femininity”. To the contrary, “these ‘pretend women’s’ femininity (*kadınlığı*) is not about makeup and costumes alone. They have to be women with their voice, manners, all their emotions, and perform the [whole] play in this manner”.⁴⁷ These men in female roles had to be convincing enough to pull forth those emotions from the audience, the emotions that could only be accessed by women. In plays representing private Ottoman life, mothers and sisters likely occupied different places in the universe of filial piety than brothers and

⁴⁴ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, *Şebab*, 4 (3 Ağustos 1336/1920), p. 88. The word used here is “kadınlık”, which I am translating in this instance as femininity. I first encountered the mention of Daloğlu Fuad pieces in Sönmez, Kevser “‘Şebab’ Mecmuası Tahlilî Fihrist, İnceleme, Seçme Metinler”, M.A. Dissertation, Gazi University, 2015, pp. 29, 173-4, 209-10.

⁴⁵ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 88.

⁴⁶ Quotes are not used consistently in these Ottoman texts or camp newspapers.

⁴⁷ N. K., “Mısır’da”, p. 14.

fathers, especially for men who had fought and suffered for their nation. Reportedly, among a number of talented men, one stood out as better than others in playing female roles. Having first taken the stage with the play *Muhterem Sefile* (Esteemed Prostitute) Bayezid Bey was judged to be exceptional in both “Istanbulite” and “Western” women’s roles.⁴⁸ A review appearing in the camp newspaper of the play *Hukuk-i Nisvan* (Women’s Rights) in which Bayezid played the leading female role, noted his exceptional talents. Despite the title, the play seems to have contained contradictory messages. Educated prisoners were always interested in giving Ottoman women more rights since they saw this as part of being modern and civilized, but they did not mean absolute equality, nor did it exclude the likelihood of portraying at least some women as “ill-tempered” (*hırçın*) or irrational. In the play, Refik Bey finds himself in the position of having to put a “stop” to his wife’s continued “ill-tempered behavior”.⁴⁹ Thus, Bayezid has to play the role of a *hırçın* woman being reined in Refik Bey. “Especially for us Ottomans, who do not really allow their women on stage, it is great to see that our men also have similar subtleties in their abilities”.⁵⁰ “Our young brother” showed an amazing “determination” to master his art. Apparently, Bayezid Bey was so good that one could only detect the minimum of “unnaturalness” in his voice; “it was impossible not to be astonished by this”.⁵¹ It was important for the impersonators to maintain the illusion of femininity not only in their costume and makeup, but also in their stage voices. Another prisoner noted that though it did not happen often, “one problem that could ruin the moment was the actress suddenly losing the accord of her voice”.⁵² Even the smallest hint of a cracking, masculine voice or inappropriate posture could easily pierce the illusionary bubble and undermine the belief that a woman stood before them on stage; thus, the performance had to be as complete as possible to maintain the illusion of women in the camps.

Reportedly, the “actresses” were extremely successful in creating the physical image of women in the camps. Again, Daloğlu Fuad writes that those enlisted men seeing the “women” on stage for the first time briefly confused them for the real thing as they uttered the following among themselves: “These officers are really capable and resourceful men [*ne yaman şeyler*]; they somehow managed to bring in women from Alexandria just for the play”.⁵³ Similarly, another officer stated that a British general visiting the camp took the “actresses” as biological women and was amazed that they would be allowed in the camp.⁵⁴

As noted, the transformation of these actors into “actresses” was not only physical; most successful “actresses” needed to know something about women and femininity as well, or at least the way they imagined it. Without stating it explicitly, Daloğlu Fuad’s description of the competition among the “actresses” reveals an implicit sexist or even misogynist attitude about the kind of women he and other prisoners imagined. He seems to be saying that as the actors transformed into “actress”, they also acquired certain assumed “female characteristics”, that we might call emotional or psychological attributes.

Something secretly invented by one actress in the morning would be copied and perfected in a hundred different ways by others by the evening. Jealousy, quarreling, fights,

⁴⁸ Bayezid Bey also played Nevber Hanım in *Gerdaniye Buselik*, see Figure 1.

⁴⁹ A. F., “Bayezid Bey: Şahsiyeti ve Eseri - Hukuk-i Nisvan Temsili Münasebetiyle”, *Yarın*, 14 (14 Şubat 1336/1920), p. 8. The text implies that Bayezid Bey wrote the play *Hukuk-i Nisvan*.

⁵⁰ A. F., “Bayezid Bey”, p. 8.

⁵¹ A. F., “Bayezid Bey”, p. 8.

⁵² N. K., “Mısır’da”, p. 14.

⁵³ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 88.

⁵⁴ Nureddin, “Esaret karargahında”, p. 4.

complaints had become routines. There was a sense of purity and innocence attached to avoiding the roles of a married or a dishonorable woman. No one wanted to play the role of an old or ugly woman.⁵⁵

The competition took on different dimensions when “actresses” wanted to be the prettiest or to be seen in the best light on stage. At times like that, they worked to undermine each other or took delight in seeing others play those undesirable roles. Daloğlu Fuad continues:

It took us a week to convince a[n actress] friend of ours that a scene, which required [her] to hide in the fireplace and come out stained with soot, was necessary. The other actress, who [eagerly] volunteered to put the soot on [her] competitor, gave [our friend] a completely black face.⁵⁶

Petty jealousies, undermining fellow “actresses”, and one-upmanship both as practiced and narrated in the article is meant to show both what the prisoners thought of women, and that these men had successfully played women’s roles to the point of becoming and acting petty and jealous like them. Misogynistic as it is, this is clearly how the prisoners imagined women’s behavior. Seen in this light, the implication is that these “actresses” were more “womanly” than women; as the following will show, this is a repeating theme. Apparently, some “actresses” created trouble for actors as well: “Just like our “mother Eve” causing the fall of “our father Adam” from paradise, Sidi Bishr “actresses” became the cause of some actors deciding to abandon the stage”.⁵⁷ Thus, even the pretend women could easily become “troublemakers” and directly linked all the way to biblical evidence.

The audience seconded the observations about the “metamorphosis” noted above by those who participated in theater in various capacities. However, rather than seeing the transformation itself, they observed the results of it on stage. On a night when Camp C Theater in Sidi Bishr had two plays on for the night with leading female characters, everyone had the chance to compare the two “actresses”. A review appeared in one of the camp newspapers doing just that. The first play was an unnamed “Frenk comedy”, or a European comedy, while the second was *The Governess*, a play based on the highly influential 1895 novel by Hüseyin Rahmi [Gürpınar], which is the story of a French governess employed in a well-off Ottoman household in Istanbul.⁵⁸ Speaking for the audience, the reviewer first protested the British camp authorities’ censorship of *The Governess*. A serious social commentary, the original novel boldly attacked the prevalent upper class custom of entrusting Ottoman children to the care of European governesses. The criticism was that such children did not properly learn their own Ottoman customs and traditions, but that of Europe.⁵⁹ The Frenk comedy, the reviewer admitted, was funnier than they had assumed at first. His attention quickly turned to the “dance-loving and whimsical” mademoiselle in the play. This “man-chaser” was something else:

⁵⁵ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 88.

⁵⁷ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 89. Although this version of the “fall of man” from the Garden of Eden partially contradicts the story in the Quran, it represents the popular interpretation.

⁵⁸ *Mürebbiye* was also made into a movie in 1919, during the Allied invasion of Istanbul.

⁵⁹ The original play scheduled for the night was *Mürebbiye*. Perhaps seeing some “anti-European” sentiment in the play, the commandant allowed it to go on with reduced cultural criticism. Because of the censorship, the “Theatre Committee” and the directors decided to compensate by offering a second play for the night, which was the *Frenk* comedy.

She had on a beautifully crafted outfit as she appeared on the stage like a rising sun. With her doe-eyed flirtatious looks and coquettish moves, she was something to see. The way she held her skirt as she moved about and how she moved her shoulders mischievously as she spoke, to tell the honest truth, *she was more womanly than a woman*. Especially when she pouted her lips as she talked, she seemed like a coy-mannered young woman from head to toe.⁶⁰

The review did not name the mademoiselle, but she certainly seems to have captivated the audience. Stated publicly in camp newspapers, the observation that she was more womanly than a woman actually reminds the reader, as before, that the “actress” was more convincing as woman than a biological woman.

The same reviewer then turned to *The Governess* to compare the décor, players, and performance of the two female impersonators. Mademoiselle Angel, or the Governess herself, was no less impressive in comparison. In the play, an oversexed western woman, Angel, seduces the all-too-eager males in the household, including the cook, one by one and turns them against each other, where the members of the family confront one another with knife in hand. As she “manages” everyone in the household with “clever simplicity”, she becomes an irresistible object of desire for every male including the patriarch, who is discovered hiding in Angel’s closet by the rest of the extended family members. As an “actress”, Angel was beyond impressive; those who looked only at “her innocent face,” the play reviewer suggested, could not possibly comprehend “the sexual desire and greed in her heart. The way this man-chaser exited her bedroom in the middle of the night was delightful enough to enter into the dreams of those who slept a dreamless sleep”.⁶¹ We will shortly return to the “reliving” of the scene, but the havoc Angel, not only as woman, but especially as western woman, causes in the household is also important here, even if it was the weaknesses of these men who chased after or gave into her.

The prisoners “relived” the image of Angel as performance, at least because such a comment is made in a camp newspaper for everyone to read. The desire was for what Angel represented. I suggest that while this desire is similar to the same feeling felt for women in other plays, Angel being a foreign woman gives this production an added amount of frisson for the POW audience. The same is true for the unnamed mademoiselle in the Frenk comedy. Although there were not many of these play reviews in the camp newspapers, what is available gives a clear indication that there is much more sexualizing of European women. Either by being loyal to the original texts or possibly to the slightly overacted performances in the homosocial prison camp theaters, European women are clearly represented as seductive, “available” or even oversexed. Due to her assumed loose morals, desiring a European woman is not only more acceptable because she is not one of “our women,” but she is especially desirable precisely because she is the enemy’s woman. Arguably, such objectifying of the foreign female Other did not only reclaim the prisoners’ manliness, but also that of his patriotic and national sensibilities given the context of the war.

In reviews of plays representing Ottoman domestic life without foreigners, sexualizing comments are toned down or absent. Whether staged in a prison camp or at home, this is probably a reflection of the plays themselves. Even if some of these plays were adaptations from European ones, they were likely changed to represent Ottoman social and cultural lives and values. Though there might be flirtatious characters like Nevber in *Gerdaniye Buselik* or Farika in *Açık Bono*

⁶⁰ Halid Rıfki, “Temaşa”, *Yarın*, 18 (19 Mart 1336/1920), p. 6.

⁶¹ Halid Rıfki, “Temaşa”, p. 7.

(Blank Check, see Figure 1), they flirt with their husbands or it is part of a clever game and therefore not serious.⁶² For instance, Farika, a young woman of 20 from a wealthy family, agrees to an unusual transaction with the manager of a fabric shop. Nadir Bey, the manager, offers to sell Farika the fabric she likes at “one kiss per meter”. Farika agrees and asks Nadir to deliver the fabric in person to her house and collect the fee. However, when Nadir appears, he also finds Marika, the 55-year old non-Muslim Ottoman servant, and Farika’s friend, Mebrure present. Since Mebrure is unaware of Farika’s plan, she is aghast at the idea of paying with kisses. That is, until Farika outsmarts Nadir by asking Marika to give the kisses owed to him, which he protests.⁶³ Thus, traditional Muslim gender roles and behavior are not upset, but reaffirmed as Farika cleverly avoids a compromising situation.

Cult Following of “Actresses” or Return to the Masculine Self?

A number of scholars studying female impersonation among European POWs of different nations have shown that many impersonators maintained their female stage personalities off stage and had a cult following of admirers. Rachamimov writes that some “actresses” in Russia had admirers, whose task it was to wash and iron women’s undergarments and other items of clothing.⁶⁴ Others reportedly had “boyfriends” and bodyguards to keep these admirers at bay; yet, some enjoyed all the attention they received.⁶⁵ It is abundantly clear that Ottoman female impersonators did not stay in character after the plays and they did not have the kind of attention European “actresses” did. First, there is no indication of such a following in any of the sources. Secondly, a reviewer in the camp newspaper first acknowledged Bayezid Bey’s talents in impersonation, but he immediately followed that with a comparison: “The difference between the Bayezid with an astrakhan hat (*kalpak*) on his head and jacket on his back, and the Bayezid in women’s clothes on stage is as stark as the difference between masculinity and femininity”.⁶⁶ There was no blurring of gender boundaries here. We should acknowledge, however, that the nature of the prison camp meant that perhaps it was a role that could never be fully shaken. Because these actors and “actresses” lived alongside their fellow actors and the audience, it is possible that their performance characters did not disappear as quickly as changing into one’s jacket and *kalpak*, as it might have with a traditional performance in a peacetime environment.⁶⁷ Despite the likely possibility of a “residual” stage personality, what is significant here is the reviewer’s pointed assertion about the difference between the two Bayezids.

Of course, it would be silly to suggest that no Ottoman POWs somehow felt some same-sex desire for the man behind the performance. If, as the European POWs and international doctors visiting prison camps suggested, theater and “pin up pictures” of women curbed outbreaks of homosexuality,⁶⁸ then “outbreaks” must have existed for them to be curbed by one method or

⁶² İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri, “Gerdaniye Buselik”, pp. 9-11; and Baraz, *İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci*, II, pp. 94-102 for *Gerdaniye Buselik*.

⁶³ Baraz, *İbn-ür Refik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci*, I, pp. 160-4. The deal was for “metresi bir buse”.

⁶⁴ Rachamimov, “Disruptive comforts of drag”, pp. 377-8.

⁶⁵ Eldredge, ““We girls””, p. 87.

⁶⁶ Halid Rıfki, “Temaşa”, p. 6.

⁶⁷ I would like to thank my colleague Chris Bischof for making this point.

⁶⁸ Feltman, *The Stigma of Surrender*, p. 131 and Vishcher, Adolf L., *Barbed Wire Disease: A Psychological Study of the Prisoners of War* (London: Bale and Danielsson, 1919).

another. In fact, in a rare occurrence, one Ottoman POW in Burma openly wrote about “sexuality in the camp” among his enlisted male comrades, even though he blamed the Burmese, Indians and the British for “introducing” Ottomans to such practices.⁶⁹ Could there have been instances of blurring of boundaries from the perspective of some audience members in the homosocial environment of a prison camp? Of course. We do not have evidence in this regard, however. When the POW in Burma writes about the sexual practices in the camp there, it is certainly not in the context of theater, which is not mentioned at all in the memoir.

With its female impersonators of various kinds of women - glamorous, maternal, and others - prison camp theater allowed the prisoners to heal or reaffirm their masculine identity through sexualizing these women or using them to confirm traditional gender relations. Yet, this was not the only method. Whether triggered by the plays or movies they occasionally saw in the camps, talking about heterosexual sex and expressing desire for female company was also another way to constantly reaffirm their masculine identity. Talking about women seems to have happened among those in Russia more, likely because most of the prisoners came into relatively regular contact, or at the very least were able to observe them from a nearby distance. In fact, many even established romantic and sexual relationships with Russian women in the absence of their male relatives.⁷⁰ While the first person narratives from Egypt do not reveal conversation about women, the camp newspapers featured translated novels about women.⁷¹ These newspapers featured numerous drawings of women - some completely naked, some not.⁷² In another issue, where the prisoner is dreaming of a naked woman “after last night’s cinema”, there are also pictures on the wall (see Figure 6).⁷³ Though what kind of pictures on the wall is unclear, female pin ups are much more likely given the context of the dream. Some officers kept cut out pictures of women in their diaries or notebooks even if they did not pin them up.

Everything is Performance?

A brief story Daloğlu Fuad relates from Egypt reminds us that sometimes in the absence of further evidence all we can do is speculate about gender and sexuality in the camps. He wrote that a young camp actor who volunteered to play one of the female roles presented the theater director with a photo of himself in officer’s uniform. The note on the photo read “your [future] actress in the role of an officer”.⁷⁴ If the competition was as tough as we saw, was he simply trying to attract attention with his enthusiasm and creativity? Or in a marvelous flip of the script, was it a suggestion that being an officer was the “real” performance? Given the rest of the article by Daloğlu, where he talks about the competition and jealousy among the “actresses”, the former is much more likely.

Meanwhile, there was arguably yet another layer of performance going on all along that involved the actors, “actresses” and audience in the camps. This implicit idea, rather fleeting and barely perceptible in first person sources, is made explicit in Reşat Nuri’s *Son Sığınak* by

⁶⁹ Peker, Nurettin, *Tüfek Omza* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2009), pp. 202-5.

⁷⁰ Yanıkdağ, Yücel, “Flirting with the enemy: Ottoman prisoners of war and Russian women during the Great War”, article in progress.

⁷¹ One of the camp newspapers, *Yarın*, for example, featured a serialized story called “Women’s Letters”. See *Yarın* (1 Nisan 1336/1920), p. 6 for an example.

⁷² *Yarın*, 21 (12 Nisan 1336/1920), cover page.

⁷³ *Yarın*, 9 (3 Şubat 1336/1920), cover page.

⁷⁴ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, pp. 88-9.

Süleyman, the former POW and camp actor. A fellow former POW says of Süleyman and other camp actors to a Turkish General they meet well after the war that these men were “heroes”, in the role of “artists”. Furthermore, Süleyman writes that the “brightest young men . . . of my unfortunate generation, dove into the desert theater like they were diving into water” in the middle of a desert. The “desert theater” not only allowed them to make fruitful use of their time, it helped them to survive captivity, and gave them agency to resist the captor. Süleyman wrote: “The British soldiers who came to watch [our shows] never realized how we escaped the guards standing sentry by the camp’s barbed wire during those hours and strolled through the streets of Istanbul, Bursa, and Konya”.⁷⁵ In other words, even as they remained in the camps, the audience became part of the performance along with those actors on stage, which allowed them mentally to escape the guards and the camps. Unbeknownst to the captor, at those times they were free. True, the captors were in charge of the captives and influenced their lives, but the prisoners also influenced the captors by their behavior; enlisting the captor’s help to establish the theater which allowed them mentally to escape is one example of this. These performances were another way of reminding themselves and others, including the guards who might have organized their own theater, that everything was a performance, including their everyday behavior as docile POWs. Put differently, if they could make such convincing women so as to fool a British general and other captors who watched their shows regularly, perhaps their everyday role as compliant POWs itself was nothing but a role.

Despite all their talent in performing female roles, was there anything at which the POW “actresses” failed? Again, Daloğlu Fuad writes that “despite all of our successes, we could not do any better than reminding ourselves with longing of the kind angel-like finesse specific to *our women*. It is because of this, love had minimal presence in our plays”.⁷⁶ Love was something only the biological women waiting at home could properly offer to the men in the audience. Furthermore, the reference to “our women” makes them different than the foreign women portrayed on stage, on the one hand, and reaffirms their sense of patriotism and nationalism.

Conclusion

Many POWs interpreted capture and captivity as shameful and emasculating experience. While some scholars have argued that remasculinization had to wait until repatriation, this chapter has argued that the prisoners started that process in the prison camps, and theater with its female impersonation was a crucial factor in this endeavor. Masculinity and femininity are relational constructs. “Characterization and validation of either one...depends on the very existence of the other”. Thus, it is impossible to understand one “without an overt or subtle reference” to the other.⁷⁷ Because the POWs could not and did not compare well to the manliness the captor represented, as those who captured them, all they could do was to reaffirm their manliness and masculinity by objectifying, sexualizing, and confirming traditional gender roles over foreign and domestic women. For this, they needed all kinds of women: nationalized “our women”, foreign women, as well as glamorous and maternal types. Objectifying and sexualizing the glamorous female other, especially the European women, in the form of the female impersonators, POWs most directly emphasized their manliness. The performances were not only about sexual desire,

⁷⁵ Güntekin, *Son Sığınak*, pp. 20 and 31.

⁷⁶ Daloğlu Fuad, “Sanatda Ahlak”, p. 88.

⁷⁷ Bilgin, “An Analysis of Turkish Modernity through Discourses of Masculinities”, p. 33.

but a desire for a return to normalcy and “regular” gender roles which affirmed the man’s place at top of the social hierarchy. Other types of women allowed them to confirm these traditional gender roles at home. Descriptions of how actors transformed into “actresses” also tell us what these men thought of perceived “women’s behavior”. In their misogynistic view, women were jealous, greedy, back-stabbing, and scheming. And these were qualities men supposedly did not possess. These men were better at being female than were women themselves, which made them superior to women. Plays represented the home life and an idealized femininity as the actors and “actresses” saw it and as it was imagined by male writers, directors, and the audience. The female impersonation helped to heal and reassert their masculine sensibilities in relation to women they represented in the homo-social environment of the prison camps. Moreover, as a form of much-appreciated entertainment, theater also provided a means of mental escape from the camps, and therefore resistance to the captor, for both the players and the audience.

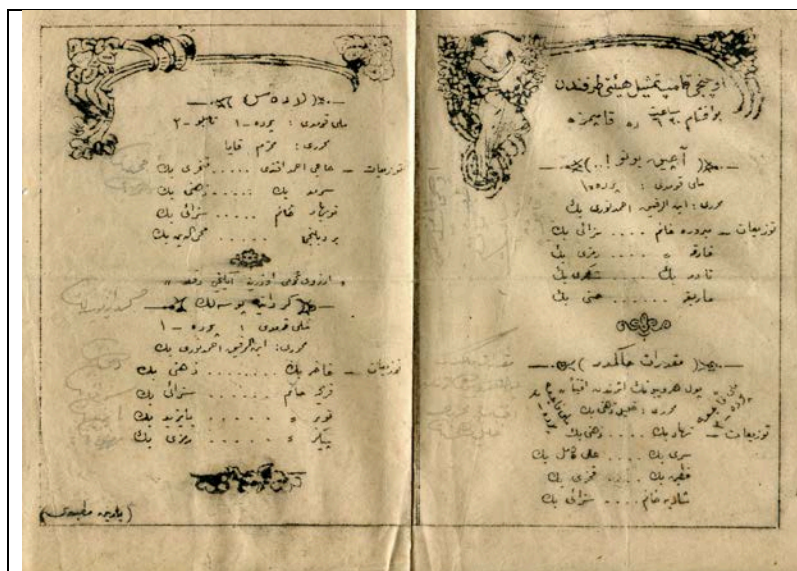


Figure 1: Playbill for *Açık Bono, Mukadderat Hakimidir, Lades, and Gerdâniye Buselik*, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 2: An unidentified Ottoman unit entertaining at a village circumcision ceremony. Location unknown, ÖNB/Wien, WK1/ALB058/16102



Figure 3: *Kadın Dersi* at Pervaya Rechka prison camp, Russia, courtesy of Prof. Bingür Sönmez Private Collection



Figure 4: A Kampı Heyet-i Temsiliyesi, (Camp "A" Theater Committee) Egypt, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 5: *Yarin*, Sidi Bishr camp newspaper (Egypt), cover page

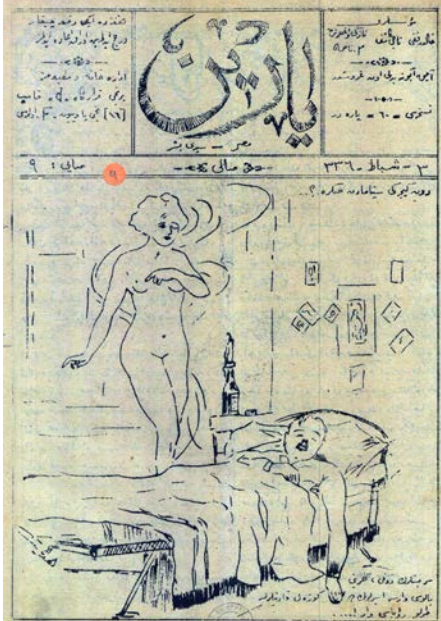


Figure 6: *Yarin*, Sidi Bishr camp newspaper (Egypt), cover page



Figure 7: Unidentified location and actors, Courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 8: An unidentified play, Pervaya Rechka prison camp, Russia, courtesy of Prof. Bingür Sönmez Private Collection



Figure 9: An unidentified play, Pervaya Rechka prison camp, Russia, courtesy of Prof. Bingür Sönmez Private Collection

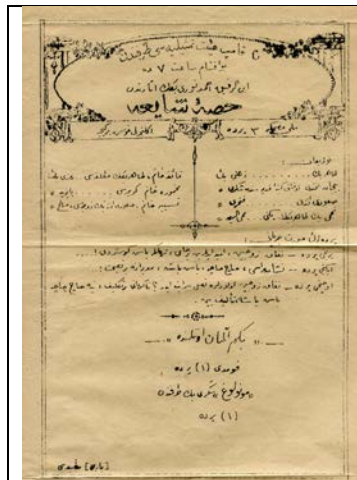


Figure 10: Playbill for *Hisse-i Şaiya*, Egypt, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 11: Playbill for *Diken*, Egypt, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 12: Crowded theater scene, *Yarın*, Sidi Bishr camp newspaper (Egypt)



Figure 13: Scene from an unidentified play in Egypt, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 14: Actors from an unidentified play in Egypt, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection



Figure 15: Actors from *Rivayet-i [Banu] Adiy*, Malta, courtesy of Kemal Giray Private Collection