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Imperial Diction: Language and Politics in a Mediterranean Exchange

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Abstract:

Throughout the sixteenth century, Ottoman scholars produced works that discussed Ottoman poetry and literary production through the narration of biographical notes, discussions of literary criticism, and the compilation of epistolaries. The life stories of Ottoman princes, scholars, and bureaucrats preserved in these works zigzagged from fame to disgrace. Ottoman scholars and poets narrated, explained, and discussed the choices that led their peers to face those consequences in biographical dictionaries and compilations of bureaucratic and personal correspondence. This essay offers a study of how Ottoman intellectuals and bureaucrats provided models for social and political behavior through exemplary lives. It focuses on a high-profile case: Ottoman prince Cem Sulan (1481). By studying exempla for diplomatic and official writing, and simultaneously for poetry and literary composition, this essay focuses on narratives of Cem Sultan's struggle for the throne and his subsequent exile in Europe and demonstrates that the literary language created *ex professo* for imperial and personal communications allowed Ottoman intellectuals to make a series of social prescriptions for the ruling elite.