

# HALDUN TANER & THE VIRTUE PHARMACY

## A PLAY SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF PHARMACY IN TURKEY

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### INTRODUCTION

Among the sources that a pharmacy historian can refer to, are literary works that discuss pharmacy or pharmaceutical events of a particular period. Despite the increasing number of international literature studies on the relationship between “art, literature, theatre,” and pharmacy, the number of studies conducted in Turkey on this subject is still small. Taking this dearth into consideration, this study aims to examine a play, entitled the *Fazilet Eczanesi* (The Virtue Pharmacy), written by **Haldun Taner** (1915–1986), a famous Turkish writer and pioneer of epic theatre in Turkey. This play was originally developed from a short story entitled “Eczanenin Akşam Müşterileri,” (The Evening Customers of the Pharmacy) written in 1952 by the author himself, and is based on the happenings and incidents that occur in and around the pharmacy of Sadettin Dertsavar.

### HALDUN TANER (1915–1986)

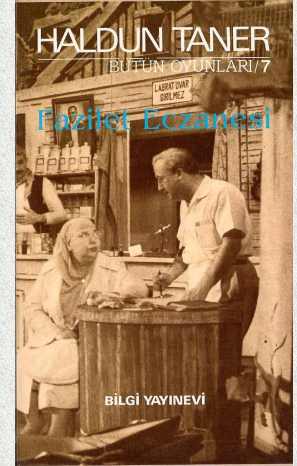
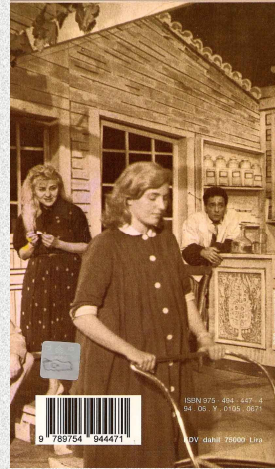
**Haldun Taner** is a well-known Turkish writer and a pioneer of epic theatre in Turkey. His works, stories in particular, were translated into almost all the major world languages, bringing him international acclaim. He was born on March 16, 1915, in Istanbul. After graduating from one of the most prestigious high schools, the *Galatasaray Lisesi*, he studied politics and economy at the *University of Heidelberg* in Germany, until a serious health problem forced him to return to Turkey, where he graduated from the *Faculty of German Literature and Linguistics* in 1950. He also studied theatre and philosophy at the *University of Vienna* between 1955 and 1957 under the direction of **Heinz Kindermann** (1894–1985), an Austrian theater and literary scholar. As a well-disciplined writer accumulating a rich blend of culture, Taner wrote a great number of stories, generally humorous; essays, newspaper columns, travel writings and theatre plays, in particular, brought him several important awards including the New York Herald Tribune Story Contest First Prize (1954), the International Festival of the Humor of Bordighera Award (1969), and so on. Among his plays, the most popular is *Keşanlı Ali Destanı* (Epopée of Ali of Keshan). He died of a sudden heart attack on May 7, 1986, in Istanbul.



Haldun Taner caricature (Semih Poroy)

### FAZİLET ECZANESİ (The VIRTUE PHARMACY)

In the foreword to his play, Taner says: “*Pharmacies are laboratories, not only of medicines but also of people. How variety of subjects comes here and goes. The pharmacy is a micro cosmos.*” These words clearly express the core idea behind his deliberate choice of the “pharmacy” as the décor of his oeuvre. The play is set in the 1950s, Istanbul, in the Virtue Pharmacy\*, and revolves around the happenings and incidents that occur around Sadettin Dertsavar, a friendly, diligent, white-haired pharmacist in his sixties. He relies on his own pharmaceutical preparations rather than on the factory made counterparts imported from the Europe. Despite some of his customers rebuking him on this, he persisted in his belief that a pharmacist should put his love and labor into his preparations, which a machine cannot do. Due to a delay in receiving one of his newly developed pharmaceutical preparation’s (termed Kalminol Sadettin) raw material, he is forced to hypothecate his pharmacy to his landlord. However, soon, he was informed that his 36-year old pharmacy store would change hands; complicating the situation even more, were his issues with both his wife and son. Faced with an acute financial crisis, he decides to sell his pharmacy; however, his customers and neighbors came to his rescue and he continued to operate the store. A few years later, the pharmacist passed away, and his son, Unal, who once wished to become a sculptor instead of a pharmacist, a cause for frequent conflicts with his father, continues his father’s pharmacy by selling factory made pharmaceuticals.



The play was first performed in 1960 in Istanbul.

### CONCLUSION

Taner’s play the “Virtue Pharmacy” has a special contribution with respect to the history of pharmacy in Turkey; the play reflects Taner’s keen observations about the pharmacy (including, its layout and decoration), the pharmacist and his staff, pharmaceutical preparations and practices, and the relationship between the pharmacist and his customers during the 1950s. The main theme of the play is based on the protagonist Sadettin’s struggle to prepare pharmaceuticals by himself with the limited facilities in his pharmacy; at the same time, his peers’ directly imported factory made pharmaceuticals from Europe and made more profits than him. This situation is quite similar to that of Turkish pharmacies of the same period, after the legislation of the Law (No 6224) in 1954, for Encouragement of Foreign Capital by the Turkish government, and the pharmacists start selling large quantities of imported factory made pharmaceuticals.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Haldun Taner’s wife Mrs. F. Demet Taner, pharmacist, and Mrs. Reyhan Biray Üstüner, Publishing Manager of the Bilgi Yayınevi.

### NOTES & REFERENCES

\*As confirmed by Haldun Taner’s wife, Mrs. Demet Taner, the writer of the play was inspired by “*Afiyet Eczanesi*” (The Welfare Pharmacy) located in Erenköy, Istanbul, and his observations of the same pharmacy.

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