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## Critique

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### Debt and damnation: Islam in Dante

IAN THOMSON

September 2018



"Dante and Virgil in the Ninth Circle of Hell", by Gustave Doré, 1861

It might seem strange that a poem most emblematic of medieval Christian Europe, *The Divine Comedy*, should contain so many Arabic loan-words ("assassin", "alchemy", "zenith", "alcohol") as well as references to Islamic intellectual life. Eastern treatises on medicine, natural science and mathematics had entered the Italian peninsula chiefly by way of Muslim Spain and Sicily, and left their fingerprints on Dante Alighieri's great 14th-century work. In the face of Islam's rapid westward expansion, however, Dante had absorbed also a fierce dislike and incomprehension of Islam. Pointedly, the only Arabic word in his three-volumed journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise that refers to Islam as an actual religion is *meschite* ("mosques"). Mosques, in the Tuscan poet's medieval Christian judgment, were a symbol of stubborn heretical allegiance and false belief. In the poem's first volume, "The Inferno", the pilgrim-poet Dante approaches the fortified Islamic citadel of Dis in Lower Hell, where gleaming red *meschite* of the sort seen by Crusaders in the Holy Land emerge from the charred and fatty air.

The Crusades were a recent memory to Dante's generation. For 300 years, knights from Northern Europe had traversed Tuscan regions on their way to the "Promised Land", returning from Palestine with Islamic silks and spices. Italian city-states joined the Crusades belatedly in the mid-12th century, having prospered through banking. Dante's great-great-grandfather Cacciaguada degli Elisei, a pugnacious and haughty character in *The Divine Comedy*, died a Crusader's death in the Holy Land in 1148. Muslims are a "foul race" (*gente turpa*), Cacciaguada announces to Dante in the poem. Exalted among the "blessed souls" of heaven, Cacciaguada is seen as a martyr to the West's anti-Islamic cause; and Dante, by claiming a Crusader ancestry for himself in *The Divine Comedy*, honours that cause. Dante shared many of the narrow medieval beliefs that animated Europe's crusade against the jihad. One such was that the Prophet Muhammad was an apostate Catholic cardinal — a fake Christian —

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who founded an offshoot of Christianity after his failure to become pope or some other eminence in the Roman Curia.

Begun in around 1308 (Dante's chronology is uncertain), *The Divine Comedy* is virtually unknown in Arabic countries. Dante subjects the Prophet and his son-in-law Ali to a punishment so grotesque that Islam might well protest. In Canto 28 of "The Inferno" Muhammad's body is split from end to end, while an attendant devil cleaves Ali's face in two. Dante's "Maometto" is damned not as the founder of Islam but as a "sower of scandal and discord" who ruptured Christianity by preaching a *nuova legge*, or "new law". In this, Dante had followed the 12th-century Benedictine abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, who in turn had followed John of Damascus, the Syrian monk active in the 8th century. Dante saw Islam as a heretical interpretation of Christianity that aggravated East-West antagonisms. Ali is punished because he engineered a schism in the Islamic community (Ummah) by founding the Shia sect soon after the Prophet died in AD 63; this broke up the Caliphate and set Shiites murderously against Sunnis. While Ali is left fatally cloven, a sword-bearing devil slashes open the Prophet's wound whenever it heals itself. Thus the dividers of humanity are themselves divided. Accompanied by the ghost of the Roman poet Virgil, his guide, Dante is struck dumb at the sight of the butchered Prophet, who prises open the wound in his chest for him to see, a gesture which intensifies his eternal fate.

The bowels hung out between his legs;  
one could see his organs and the foul sack  
that makes shit from all we swallow.  
I stood and stared at him —  
he gazed back, tearing open his chest  
with both hands. "Look how Muhammad claws  
And mangles himself, torn open down to the breast!  
Ali goes screaming in front of me,  
carved from his chin to his brow . . ."

Here, conceivably, is the mystical Islamic legend of *al-sharh* or symbolic "opening up" (the principle meaning of *sharh* is "explaining", or "anatomising") of Muhammad's breast by God with the intent to purify him morally; however, Dante transforms it into a slice of proto-Burroughsian grand guignol. (When William Burroughs's hallucinatory novel *Naked Lunch* was prosecuted for obscenity in Boston in 1965 — the uproarious "talking asshole" chapter — Dante was cited in its defence.)

There is much that is horrible in Canto 28, whose gleefully crude language evokes an image for us of dirty dead meat, butchers and excrement (as well as, perhaps, contemporary horror film). It is by no means certain that the date of Muhammad's death was known in the West in Dante's day. Dante may or may not have known that the Prophet Muhammad died on the same day as his muse and great love Beatrice dei Portinari — June 8; if so, the coincidence would surely have dismayed him.

Muhammad's physical sundering is certainly grotesque; but is it really, as Edward Said argues in his study of colonialism and empire, *Orientalism* (1978), "a peculiarly disgusting" example of Western Orientalism and denigration of Islam? Dante's "moral apprehension" of Islam is part of the "Orientalist vision" which turns Islam into a pariah religion, says Said, and Muhammad into an "imposter" who is "always the Oriental". However, all schismatics, not just the Prophet and Ali, suffer violence in "The Inferno". Whether they are Muslim or Christian (most of them are Christian), Dante's damned souls are frequently twisted, torn, pricked and gnawed at by devils or harpies. "The Inferno", a giant judicial machine in which God's justice is vindicated before all men, subjects Muslims and Christians alike to the same merciless sword. Edward Said does not (or perhaps does not wish to) acknowledge Dante's ambiguous view of Islamic culture. The Prophet is vilified by Dante as a Christian schismatic; at the same time Dante displays a degree of sympathy for Arabic culture and even, according to one critic, borrows from an Islamic imagery of the afterlife.

At a time when European romances used the derogatory term "Mahound" for Muhammad (in Islam dogs — hounds, a possible source for "Mahound" — are reckoned to be a ritually unclean animal), Dante consigned three Muslims to the first circle or "Limbo" zone of Hell reserved for those who are not wicked enough for damnation but who are insufficiently redeemed for Heaven. The respect Dante accords his "righteous" Muslims frustrates accusations of anti-Arab, anti-Islamic Eurocentrism levelled by Said.

The first of the three Muslim luminaries is Saladin (Salah al-Din), the 12th-century Kurdish sultan of Egypt who defeated the Crusaders in 1187 and retook Jerusalem. The second is the Andalusian philosopher Averroës (Ibn Rushd), whose Arabic commentaries on Aristotle were credited with the survival of Aristotelian philosophy in the West and were thus foundational to Western Christian civilisation. The third is Avicenna (Ibn Sina), another noted medieval Aristotelian. All three non-Christians are made to suffer a minimal ("even honourable", says Said) punishment; Dante could not bear to damn the Muslims everlastingly because he admired their virtues and accomplishments. Their only sin is that they were not baptised as Christians; their exclusion from salvation, inevitable under Christian doctrine, saddens Dante: "A great grief seized my heart" (*Gran duol mi prese al cor*). Especially by placing Saladin in Limbo, Dante reflects the judgment of his age. In Muslim-conquered Jerusalem Saladin had showed a degree of mercy to his captive Crusaders (and moreover reinstated the right of every Jew to settle in the holy city); to Dante Saladin thus appeared to possess virtues and ideals of chivalry more usually associated with those of Christianity. The adducement of Saladin as a "good Muslim" is in fact found commonly: if a Muslim can behave honourably, how much more should a



Islamic Sicily. The language of Sicilian poets — a Sicilian version of Provençal-Romance vernacular — became a point of reference for Dante as he developed the Tuscan vernacular for *The Divine Comedy*.

Scholars have long debated how much of Arabic culture Dante absorbed, unknowingly or not, through the Sicilian verse which as a young man he read and admired. Palermo was far removed from the gracious suavities of the poet's pre-Renaissance Florence. Jasmine-flavoured ice and sherbet were served as refreshment at the Palermitan court after the sirocco had blown in hot from Tunisia nearby. (It was the Arabs who brought sherbet to this part of the Mediterranean — and jasmine is surely a Saracen touch.) Sicilian vernacular poets such as Ciullo d'Alcamo and Rinaldo d'Aquino — both of them mentioned in *The Divine Comedy* — wrote for an exclusive audience at Frederick's palace, where an Arabic-Saracen *douceur* had lingered since the days of the Muslim conquest in the 9th century; only Sicilians of refinement (and, naturally, leisure) could enjoy the poetry's idealised gallantry towards women and other Arabo-Sicilian delights. Yet Dante conceded the poetry's influence on him. "All the poems of our predecessors in the vulgar tongue were called Sicilian," he observed in his unfinished treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* (*On Eloquence in the Vernacular*), written sometime between 1302 and 1305.

Giacomo da Lentini, another important Sicilian poet, appears in "Purgatory" as the "*Notaro*" or Notary: he was a lawyer from the Sicilian city of Catania. Da Lentini's poems (some 40 of which have survived) reveal a lively interest in Islamic culture if not Islamic religion. The Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti translated Da Lentini's and other medieval Sicilian verse for his 1861 volume *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo d'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri*. Inevitably the "Italian" verse was haunted by two and a half centuries of Arabic culture: when the Arabs invaded Sicily in 831 they introduced mosques, pink-domed cupolas, as well as a few thousand verses by Siculo-Arabic poets such as the great Ibn Hamdis, who fought against the Christian invader during the Norman Conquest, before fleeing to Seville. Sicilian vernacular authors such as d'Alcamo, who borrowed from Hamdis and other Mediterranean Arabic poets, wrote of date palms, turban-wearing pashas, perfumed roses, minarets and concubines; they loved backgammon and falconry, and they danced to *zajal* and *muwashshah* songs while music played on the Arabic lute and tambourine. D'Alcamo himself, as Rossetti points out, took his Muslim-sounding surname from Alcamo, a town not far from Palermo, whose name is said to derive from the Arab *al-qama*, "rich soil".

Ibn Hamdis was the best-known of some 170 Arab language panegyrist-poets at work in Sicily before the Normans came to oust the emirate from the island. Their poetry stood as a model — attractive, unavoidable — for the first Sicilian vernacular poets who were to influence Dante. Arabic sonorities and elements of Islamic lyric tradition are detectable in d'Alcamo's use of sibilance and alliteration (the euphonious "*rosa fresca aulentissima*", "sweet-smelling fresh red rose") and in the way d'Alcamo divines a trace of the pale moon in the face of his beloved. D'Alcamo's poetry, much of it, reads like a lost leaf out of some early Arabian Nights, and traces of it would insinuate *The Divine Comedy* a century later. Such was the power of Provençalism among the "Sicilian school", indeed, that Dante is said to have considered composing the "Inferno", "Purgatory" and "Paradise" in Siculo-Provençal dialect rather than in his native Tuscan. Impressively, the Sicilian poets invented the two most important forms of Italian verse: the *canzone* or lyric poem set to music, and the rhymed 14-line poem known as the sonnet. It is curious to reflect that the Shakespearean or Miltonic sonnet "originated" on a Mediterranean island which many Italians today regard as a Saracenic darkness — the place where Europe finally ends. (A smug joke still told in northern Italy says that Sicily is the only Arab country not at war with Israel.)

On Frederick II's death in 1250, Sicilian poetry migrated via trade and commerce to peninsular Italy, first to the north and then south to Dante's Tuscany, where inevitably it lost something of its original vigour and tinge of exoticism. Dante was beholden to the poetry but whether he borrowed directly from Islamic religious sources is still a matter of great controversy. In his clamorous book *La éscatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Muslim Eschatology in the Divine Comedy), published in Spain in 1919, the Madrid university professor of Arabic studies and Jesuit priest Miguel Asín Palacios argued that Dante had not only taken (Asín does not exactly say "plagiarised") from Muslim sources but was indebted to Islamic eschatological traditions. In Professor Asín's opinion *The Divine Comedy* was not quite an original work because Dante used a wealth of Islamic writings on the afterlife. Asín was not trying to denigrate *The Divine Comedy* which, for many, remains the single greatest work of Western literature; rather, he wished to establish Islamic linkages and motifs.

With the exception of the great Italian philologist Maria Corti, Italian Dantists and Roman Catholic clergymen were aghast: Dante's Christianity and very identity as a European were undermined by Asín's insistence on a debt to a non-Christian precedence. (Given the allegations of a "Muhammadan influence", Asín's book was not published in Italy until 1993, 74 years after the Spanish original.) According to Asín, *The Divine Comedy* elaborates, in part, on the nighttime journey which the Prophet Muhammad undertook in AD 620 through the seven levels of Heaven, before fathoming Hell. The Prophet's journey — in Arabic the *Isra* and *Mi'raj* (The Night Visit and Ascension) — is mentioned in the Koran, but most details derive from the later oral traditions or hadiths surrounding the Prophet, and from an account of the miraculous one-night journey written in Arabic around the 11th century, called the *Kitab al-Mi'raj* (Book of the Ascension). The journey was instigated by the archangel Gabriel (Jibril), whose winged horse Buraq transports the Prophet from Mecca to the "farthest mosque", usually understood to be the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. After alighting at

Jerusalem, the Prophet accompanied by a golden ladder to Paradise. During the ascent he encounters various prophets of the Abrahamic tradition; first Adam, then John the Baptist, followed by Jesus; then Joseph, Idris, Aaron, Moses and, lastly, Abraham. Muhammad continues upward until he is finally ushered into the Divine Court of Allah; after which he is guided downwards through the Islamic Hell known as *Jahannam*.

It is hardly surprising that Dante would not have acknowledged the Muslim *Kitab al-Mi'raj* as an inspiration for his poem, though most scholars agree that he was at least aware and possibly borrowed from elements of the Islamic religious tradition. No work comparable to *The Divine Comedy* has been written in the Muslim world. Yet the structure of the Prophet's night journey — the eventual revelation of God in heaven, the symmetric levels of hell — does appear to be mirrored in *The Divine Comedy*. Of all the monotheist religions, Islam is the richest in legends of the afterlife: the Koran abounds in detailed descriptions of the abodes of blessed and wicked souls. A guide (Gabriel) takes the pilgrim-voyager (Muhammad) on a tour through the afterlife, much as a guide (Virgil) does Dante. According to the *Kitab al-Mi'raj*, Hell lies just beneath Jerusalem (it does, too, in *The Divine Comedy*). An ever-streaming multitude of “disbelievers” dragging iron chains rolls into the sulphur-colour air; adulterers burn in an oven-like pit. (“And fear the Fire which is prepared for the disbelievers”, admonishes the Koran — a fire which is said to be seventy times greater than the heat of the sun.) The Muslim Paradise, by contrast, brims with springs and rivers; a bright, almost inhuman luminosity radiates from a purifying flame. At one point the Prophet visits a part of *Jahannam* reserved for those “who sow discord”; Dante had entrapped Muhammad in just such a hopeless place. The rewards of Heaven — emeralds, pearls, gold, silver — are moreover emphasised in the Arabic sources as they are in Dante's “Paradise”, with its promise of “rubies” and the “cool refreshment of an eternal shower” (*lo rifrigio dell'eterna ploia*).



**“The Chart of Hell”, by Sandro Botticelli , 1480-1490**

There is nothing in Islam comparable to Purgatory, however. In medieval Catholic orthodoxy, Purgatory was an in-between state where imperfect souls were cleansed by fire in preparation for their entry into heaven. The theme of despair ascending through hope towards salvation is, essentially, Catholic. Tommaso Campanella, the Dominican philosopher who was charged with heresy in 1599, admired *The Divine Comedy* because it “teaches in a popular fashion how to live according to Catholic belief”. Throughout his poem, Dante is a “humble person on a journey” (*una persona umile e peregrina*), who moves from a state of penitential barrenness to one of grace. Asín assumes that Dante not only had access to a large library of Arabic language books but was able to read and understand Arabic. As far as we know Dante was unfamiliar with Arabic (or any other Semitic language). It could be that he heard of the Prophet's Night Journey from Crusader-knights recently returned from the Middle East: Dante was a child when Edward I of England took part in the seventh Crusade against Islam in 1248. However, it is most probable that Dante read the *Kitab al-Mi'raj* in one of its three known European-language versions. The book was translated from Arabic into Castilian in the mid-13th century by a Jewish physician named Abraham Alfaquím (*al-hakīm* is Arabic for “wise one” or “the doctor”); in turn, the Castilian version served as the basis for Latin and Old French versions. These last two versions are believed to have been the work of the Tuscan lawyer-poet Bonaventura of Siena, whose patron was King Alfonso X of Castile. Known as “the Learned”, Alfonso was a cultivated sovereign who encouraged the translation of Arabic works into Castilian vernacular.

There are several ways in which Dante might have seen either Bonaventura's Latin and French translations or Alfaquím's Castilian translation. One way was through his lay mentor and teacher Brunetto Latini, a notary and orator, who was among the first in the Middle Ages to urge a return to Greco-Roman culture, thus paving the way for what became the European Renaissance. Between 1259 and 1260, Latini served in Seville as Florentine ambassador to Alfonso X. (To this day, however, thanks to Dante's portrayal of Latini as a sexual deviant adrift in “The Inferno”, he is remembered more as a sodomite than as a great 13th-century humanist or transmitter of Arabo-Andalusian culture.) Either Latini had heard the story of the Islamic night journey from Alfonso X, which he then communicated to Dante, or Latini presented Dante with a copy of the Castilian or the Old French or Latin versions of the *Kitab al-Mi'raj*. The Latin version, under the title *Liber Scalae* (“the book of the ladder”), was in all likelihood known to

Dante.

Dante is not known to have visited al-Andalus (Muslim Spain); in 1264, however, Latini happened to be in Cordoba and very likely he travelled on to the Andalusian capital of Granada, where the red-coloured Alhambra (*Katat al-Hamra*, "Red Castle") would soon be built. In Granada the Moorish-Andalusian architecture, with its cedarwood ceilings and jasper inlay, stood as a reminder of those tolerant times before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled Muslims and Jews from Spain in the 15th century. Latini's two years in medieval Iberia coincided with the peaceful "coexistence" (*convivencia*, in Spanish) of Islam with Catholic Christianity. In Latini's diplomatic posting at Seville the gold mosaic tesserae of the Almohad Mosque created an overwhelming impression of space and luminosity. The mosque's geometric harmonies, intimating things beyond the comprehension of man, were an exploration of Islamic notions of infinity; the divine spheres, shining circles and heavenly roses of Dante's "Paradise" issue from the same Abrahamic monotheist belief system.

To be sure, Dante Alighieri's poetic grasp of Islam betrays many of the misapprehensions of a time when the West-Orient divide had widened as a consequence of the Christian wars in the Holy Land. He followed the medieval Western tradition of being bitterly opposed to Islam as a religion, but acknowledged the great debt of the West towards Arabic works by Averroës, Avicenna, Alfragano and others. We must not blame everything on the Crusades or indeed on Orientalism. Dante's appreciation of Arabic literature was deep-rooted and it never deserted him. The author of *The Divine Comedy*, having been exposed to the cultural Arabia of the Mediterranean, had the philosophic temper to see that Islam was more than just schism, jihad or a clash between "Western Civilisation" and "Islamic Civilisation". Islam was also a gold-burnished marvel that proclaimed the spirit of Saladin and the sufi lore of al-Andalus.

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**amcdonald**

September 1st,  
2018  
1:09 PM

Perhaps we should be requesting Dante be read out on Roger McGough`s Poetry Please on Radio 4 ? This is a fascinating article. The cartoon balloon of Sadiq Khan is flying in London today. What circle of Hell is Theresa May in this week? Is Anne Marie Waters our `Dante` on the horrors?

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