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Voicing an Islamic Dante: The Problem of Translating the *Commedia* into Arabic

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Abstract The *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri poses a range of problematic questions specific to the Muslim translator. Dante's reliance upon Islamic sources, along with his polemical critique of the Muslim faithful, renders the *Commedia* one of the most challenging Christian texts to translate into an Islamic vernacular. Focussing upon Hasan 'Uthmān's Arabic edition of the *Commedia*, the present study seeks to identify the linguistic, literary and theological difficulties which must be addressed in rendering the Dantean canon for a Muslim audience. Exploring the intriguing textual complexities generated by 'Uthmān's Arabic *Commedia*, this paper reveals how the translation of Dante's poem into the language of Islamic scripture provokes a subtle shift in its poetic constitution, as well as its religious import.

Introduction

On the 23rd of June 2002, the Milan based *Corriere della Sera* reported the arrest of a group of men, all charged with plotting to blow up Bologna's *Basilica di San Petronio*. The alleged motivation of the accused was the Basilica's housing of Giovanni da Modena's *Il Giudizio Finale*, a 1415 fresco which explicitly locates Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in Hell. Da Modena, elaborating upon an episode recounted in the twenty-eighth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, portrays this religious founder unclothed, suffering, and in the clutches of a demon.[1]

[1] Fasano and Sarzanini (2002). On the following day, this story was widely reported by the English media as well; see, for example, Johnston (2002). All translations from both Italian and Arabic in the present paper are mine unless otherwise noted.

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These 2002 arrests, and the debate which continues to rage concerning the exhibition of *Il Giudizio Finale*, serve as contemporary reminders of the problematic, yet essential, character of the Church's historical relationship with the Muslim World—a fact recently highlighted once again by the diverse reactions elicited by Pope Benedict's address at the University of Regensburg.[2] Conflict provoked by the Bolognese fresco also suggests, however, that although more than seven centuries have elapsed since the composition of the *Commedia*, the legacy of Dante's poem within Western art and society holds a surprising relevance for contemporary interfaith relations; this 14th-century poem continues to haunt 21st-century encounters between Muslims and Catholics, continues to foment controversy and generate dialogue between the adherents of two global religious traditions.

Throughout the 20th-century, considerable scholarly attention was paid to Dante's own reception of the literary and philosophical traditions of Islam. Critical estimations of the poet's reliance upon Muslim authors, and the identification of possible Islamic sources for the *Commedia*, provided the bases for numerous works of Dantean criticism. This tradition of academic discourse, ignited by Miguel Asin Palacios' 1919 *La Escatologia Musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, has succeeded in providing an additional forum through which Catholic and Islamic scholars and scholarship have encountered one another; through the extensive heritage of Dante critique, the *Commedia* has once again proved central to contemporary understandings of the historical relationship between Catholicism and Islam.[3]

While Dante's reception of Islamic sources has received significant scholarly consideration, it is of interest to note that there has been very little scholarship devoted to the inverse relationship—namely, the reception of Dante in the Islamic world. Despite this scarcity of critical attention, there is clear evidence to suggest that the mediaeval Italian poet has attracted a Muslim readership in the modern Middle East. The preceding century, for example, witnessed the rendition of a considerable portion of the Dantean canon into the vernacular languages of Islam, and translations of the *Commedia* have now appeared in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu.[4] Between 1959 and 1969, the Egyptian scholar Hasan 'Uthmān (d. 1973) published a three volume Arabic rendering of the entire *Commedia*, a work which qualifies not only as one of the most substantial translations of Dante's poetry into

[2] Pope Benedict XVI delivered his "Faith, Reason and the University" address at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006, causing widespread offence in the Muslim world. See "Pope statement fails to end anger," *BBC News* 18 September 2006, 1 November 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5354862.stm>.

[3] Palacios (1919) succeeded in provoking a myriad of scholarly responses, from both Western and Middle Eastern critics, throughout the 20th century. For the most recent studies of Dante's reliance upon Islamic models and sources see Cisneros (2001), and Costanza (2003).

[4] For translations of the *Commedia* into Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu respectively, see *Al-Rihlah al-Dāntiyyah fī al-Mamālik al-Ilahiyyah*, trans. 'Abbūd Abū Rāshid, 3 vol. (Tripoli, 1930–33); *Kumidī Ilahī*, trans. Farīdah Mahdavī-Dāmghānī, 3 vol. (Tehran: Nashr-i Tīr, 1999); *Ilahi Komedi*, trans. Hamdi Varoglu (Istanbul: Hilmi Kitabevi, 1948); and *Karbiyah Tarbiyah*, trans. Shaukat Wasti (Peshawar: Idarah Ilm va Fan, 1982).

Arabic, but also as one of the few critical editions of Dante's complete epic designed for a Muslim audience.[5]

It is the linguistic, literary and theological problems raised by this Italian–Arabic translation process which will constitute the basis for the present study. Dante's exceptional reputation as both the principal poet of mediaeval Catholicism, as well as the early European poet most influenced by Islamic texts, necessarily renders him one of the most problematic Christian authors to translate into Arabic—the language of both Islamic liturgy and Islamic scripture. The following paper will outline the unique problems posed by the voicing of an Arabic *Commedia*, exploring the revisionary process of constructing an Islamic Dante.

Purging the *Inferno*: Arabic Censorship of the Twenty-Eighth Canto

Considering the furore caused by da Modena's *Il Giudizio Finale*, as well as the fresco's Dantean origins, it will not surprise us to find that it is the *Inferno*'s twenty-eighth canto—the canto featuring the Islamic prophet—which presents the most conspicuous problem for a Muslim translator of the *Commedia*. In consigning both Muhammad and 'Alī to the eighth circle of Hell, the twenty-eighth canto holds the potential not only to deeply offend Muslim sensibilities, but also to transgress strict Islamic interdictions against defaming the prophet.[6] The Muslim translator of Dante's epic is thus confronted with a stark choice: either faithfully render their Italian source text, or faithfully uphold the foundational tenets of their religious tradition.

Only four years before the publication of his own Arabic translation of Dante's *Inferno*, Hasan 'Uthmān authored one of the very few articles which has previously identified the problems posed by the twenty-eighth canto for an Islamic readership. Appearing in the *73rd Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 'Uthmān's 1955 "Dante in Arabic" provided a brief outline of Arab receptions of Dante during the first half of the 20th century.[7] In his survey of the foregoing Arabic translations of the *Commedia* produced by 'Abbūd Abū Rāshid (1933) and Amīn Abū Sha'r (1938), 'Uthmān notes that both translators chose to censor the Dantean episode which

[5] *Kūmīdiyā Dāntī Alījyīrī*, trans. Hasan 'Uthmān, 3 vol. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1959–1969). The following paper will reference the 2nd edition of 'Uthmān's translation (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1967–1969), hereafter simply *Kūmīdiyā*. Although 'Abbūd Abū Rāshid published his *Al-Rihlah al-Dāntiyyah* two decades before 'Uthmān's complete Arabic rendition, this foregoing translation lacked the extenstive critical apparatus included in the three volumes of 'Uthmān's *Commedia* edition.

[6] For example, the defamation of the Islamic prophet (in Arabic "سب الرسول" ["*sabb ar-rasūl*"]) is prohibited in the Qur'ān, 33:56–57: "Verily God and His angels bless the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings upon him and salute him with worthy salutation. Verily, those who malign God and His messenger, God has cursed them in this world and in the hereafter, and has prepared for them a humiliating punishment."

[7] 'Uthmān (1955). The only other author who has previously addressed the difficulties posed by translating the *Commedia* into Arabic is the late Italian Orientalist Francesco Gabrieli (1992), who published a three page survey of Arab receptions of Dante. In their brief articles, neither 'Uthmān nor Gabrieli analyze passages from foregoing Arabic translations, limiting themselves to providing cursory descriptions of previous renditions.

mentions Muhammad and ‘Alī, “in order not to arouse Muhammedan public opinion.”[8]

When the initial volume of ‘Uthmān’s own Arabic translation of the *Commedia* subsequently appeared in 1959, it would have been immediately clear to educated readers that this work signaled a significant shift in the approach to Dantean study in the Middle East. Unlike previous Dante translations in the Arab world, ‘Uthmān’s edition represented a profound work of scholarship, evidencing a deep familiarity with Italian Letters and Christian poetics.[9] ‘Uthmān’s 1959–1969 *Kūmīdiyā* succeeds not only in rendering Dante’s Italian into “elegant modern Arabic prose”, but also in providing extensive introductions and copious notes which judiciously explicate the theological, historical and aesthetic intracacies of Dante’s influential epic.[10]

However, it would have also been clear to those reading ‘Uthmān’s Arabic *Inferno* for the first time in 1959 that this translation was effected within a distinctly Islamic context, that it originated from a Muslim perspective and was prepared for a Muslim audience. The introduction to ‘Uthmān’s version, for example, expresses particular interest in possible Islamic sources for Dante’s ideas and poetry;[11] the footnotes which accompany ‘Uthmān’s translation frequently suggest Islamic and Qur’ānic parallels to individual Dantean verses;[12] and when Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is mentioned within ‘Uthmān’s critical apparatus, this name is followed by a standard Islamic benediction for this Muslim prophet.[13] It is only when the Arabic reader reaches the *Inferno*’s twenty-eighth canto, however, that the extent to which this Muslim *Commedia* will adhere to religious duty, rather than to textual accuracy, becomes clear.

The twenty-eighth canto of Dante’s *Inferno* is dedicated to the ninth “bolgia” (or “pouch”) of Hell’s eighth circle, detailing the punishments inflicted upon the

[8] ‘Uthmān, “Dante in Arabic,” 51.

[9] Although a professor of History at Cairo University, ‘Uthmān visited Italy often and spoke Italian well. He first became acquainted with Dante’s works during a trip to Italy in 1934 (see Gabrieli 252 and ‘Uthmān, “Dante in Arabic,” 51).

[10] The quote is from Francesco Gabrieli, who correctly observes that ‘Uthmān’s translation is written in “elegante prosa araba moderna” (252). The critical apparatus provided in the *Kūmīdiyā* is extensive; the scholarly introductions which accompany each of the three volumes alone comprise more than one hundred and fifty pages (see *Kūmīdiyā* I:13–77; II:11–51; and III:11–77).

[11] See, in particular, the introduction to the first volume of ‘Uthmān’s *Kūmīdiyā* which draws parallels between Dantean eschatology, and the afterlife envisioned by Islamic sources (*Kūmīdiyā*, I:58).

[12] The Arabic footnotes which draw parallels between the *Commedia* and Islamic texts are too numerous to be mentioned here. ‘Uthmān evidences particular interest in the analogies between the final three cantos of *Paradiso* and the writings of the celebrated Islamic philosopher and mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (see *Kūmīdiyā*, III:533; III:545; III:549; III:559; III:561–3).

[13] When the name “Muhammad” appears in the introduction to his *Inferno* translation, for example, ‘Uthmān appends the customary prophetic benediction “عليه الصلاة والسلام” [“upon him be prayers and peace”] (*Kūmīdiyā*, I:59).

"disseminators of scandal and schism."[14] The first twenty-one lines of the canto introduce a horrific and bloody setting, concluding with Dante's revulsion at "il modo de la nona bolgia sozzo," ("the hideous state of the ninth pouch").[15] The very next line, the twenty-second verse of the Italian text, describes the Pilgrim's first encounter with an anonymous sufferer, subsequently identified as "Mäometto", the founder of Islam.[16] When the Arabic reader proceeds to the twenty-second line of 'Uthmān's version, however, they do not find a translation of the original Italian's twenty-second verse, but rather a translation of its sixty-fourth.[17] The Arabic *Inferno* hurdles over a full forty-two lines of Dante's text, neglecting to render lines twenty-two through sixty-three of the twenty-eighth canto—precisely the verses which feature Muhammad and 'Alī.

Despite the thoroughly annotated character of 'Uthmān's Arabic edition, no footnote is assigned to the twenty-second line to expose this significant omission; in stark contrast to the scholarly attention lavished upon the remainder of the *Commedia*, 'Uthmān fails to indicate the textual location from which he excises nearly one third of the original Dantean verses.[18] It is also of consequence to note that the exclusion of these forty-two lines succeeds not only in expunging the "Mäometto" episode in the Arabic edition, but also functions to significantly alter the overall constitution of the source text. Instead of comprising the one hundred and forty-two lines of Dante's Italian, this Arabic chapter includes only one hundred verses, thereby significantly deviating from the length of the original *Commedia* canto; while the remainder of the chapters within the Arabic and Italian editions of the *Inferno* broadly maintain a structural consistency, the twenty-eighth canto of 'Uthmān's edition is exceptionally and conspicuously brief.[19]

The excision of verses from the body of the Dantean canto also compels the Arabic translator to slightly modify the way in which he renders the text which surrounds his excision. Immediately following his accurate translation of the canto's first twenty-one lines, 'Uthmān skips directly to the sixty-fourth line of the Italian original, a line which introduces Pier da Medicina as "Un altro, che forata avea la gola" ("Another, who had his throat slit").[20] If translated literally, this line—and its initial phrase in particular—would appear wholly out of place in 'Uthmān's heavily edited Arabic canto. "Un altro" clearly implies that at least one character has already been introduced in this canto, functioning in the original Italian to connect

[14] This is the characterization of the inhabitants of this "bolgia" provided in the thirty-fifth line of the canto, i.e. "seminator di scandalo e di scisma." See Alighieri (1966–67), II:474, hereafter *Commedia*.

[15] *Commedia*, II:474.

[16] *Commedia*, II:475 and ff.

[17] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:365.

[18] Although there *is* a footnote appended to this twenty-second line in the Arabic edition, it does not identify the excision which 'Uthmān has carried out in this location, focussing instead upon the Virgilian echoes of the verse (see *Kūmīdiyā*, I:368).

[19] The original Italian *Inferno* contains no chapter shorter than one hundred and fifteen lines (e.g. the eleventh canto).

[20] *Commedia*, II:479.

the episode of Pier da Medicina (lines 64–142) with the earlier episode of "Mäometto" and "Ali" (lines 22–63). However, as the Arabic canto has yet to introduce any character within this ninth pouch of Hell, there can be no reason to commence the first line after the canto's prologue with "Un altro." Clearly recognizing this problem, 'Uthmān elects to begin his translation of the Pier da Medicina episode with the Arabic "و معذب"—a phrase which does not translate the Italian "Un altro…" ["Another..."], but signifies rather "And a sufferer…"[21] Such a substitution ensures that the Arabic excision of lines twenty-three to sixty-four of the Italian original does not explicitly impair the narrative coherency of the canto; in order to balance both his desire to censor the Italian text and to create an intelligible Arabic translation, 'Uthmān finds it necessary to subtly alter, as well as omit, lines from his Dantean source.

It is only at the very conclusion of the footnotes allocated to 'Uthmān's translation of the twenty-eighth canto that the Arabic reader will find a very brief acknowledgement that this section of the *Inferno* has been abridged. Unconnected to any one of the footnotes which attend this canto, 'Uthmān's brief caveat neglects to indicate the amount, the content, or the original location of the material which the translator has removed. This inconspicuous addendum, noticeable only to the reader who continues down to the end of fifty-one small-print footnotes, commences with 'Uthmān's admission that "ولقد حذفت من هذه الانشودة أبياتا وجدتها غير جديرة بالترجمة" ["I have excised from this canto verses which I have found unfit for translation"]; the note then confesses that these excised verses did in fact concern "النبى محمد عليه افضل الصلاة والسلام" ["the prophet Muhammad, upon him be the most beneficent prayers and peace"].[22] Consistent with his purgation of forty-two lines from this canto, 'Uthmān's primary concern in this critical appendage seems to be religious, rather than textual; while this note fails to clarify the precise ways in which 'Uthmān's Arabic translation diverges from Dante's Italian source text, it does succeed in evoking sanctification upon the prophet's name. Although the reader is not enlightened as to *why* Dante's verses have been found "unfit" ("غير جديرة"), 'Uthmān continues his note by observing that "أخطأ دانتى فى ذلك خطأ جسيما", i.e. "In this, Dante committed a weighty error."[23] According to 'Uthmān, it is the Italian author and his text, rather than the Arabic translator and his translation, which must be held responsible for both the original composition, and the subsequent excision, of the "Mäometto" passage.[24]

[21] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:365; the Arabic "معذب" literally signifies one who is subject to torment or punishment.

[22] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:371.

[23] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:371.

[24] It is of interest to note that translations of the *Commedia* into the other vernacular languages of Islam also carry out similar excisions; see, for example, Farīdah Mahdavī-Dāmghānī's Persian translation, *Kumidī Ilahī*, I:728. Unlike 'Uthmān, however, Dāmghānī indicates the location from which verses have been cut in her Persian translation through an irregularity in her line numbers; reading through canto twenty-eight, it is obvious to the Persian reader that lines 31–42 have been removed, as Dāmghānī's line number 30 is followed directly by her line number 43 (*Kumidī Ilahī*, I:728).

Arabic in the *Commedia*; the *Commedia* in Arabic

In addition to the dramatic question posed by the *Inferno*'s twenty-eighth canto, the *Commedia* raises a multitude of problematic issues specific to Arabic translation. Many of these difficulties have their origin in the *Commedia*'s referencing of Islamic sources, and the resultant inclusion of Arabic names and etymologies within Dante's text. Turning the pages of the Italian epic, the Arabic translator will encounter words which are *already in Arabic*, "loan-words" which have been transliterated from Arabic and introduced into Italian usage. The presence of such etymologically Arabic words raises the complex question as to the most appropriate way of rendering nomenclature in a source text which originally belongs to the target language; are we required to "translate" such lexical items, or may we merely "restore" them to their original language, "re-transliterate" them back into Arabic?

The fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, with its census of the inhabitants of Limbo, is the initial location in the *Commedia* where this decision between "translation" and "transliteration" must be made. The Arabic translator is confronted in this episode with several names which are Arabic in etymology; surveying the landscape of Hell's first circle, the Pilgrim is introduced to personages such as "Saladino" (line 129), "Avicenna" (line 143), and "Averoìs" (line 144). In each of these cases, 'Uthmān elects to return these Italianized Arabic names back to their original language, effectively reversing the Arabic-Italian transliteration process. Dante's "Saladino" thus becomes 'Uthmān's "صلاح الدين" ("Salāh ad-Dīn"); "Avicenna" becomes "ابن سينا" ("Ibn Sīna"); while "Averois" becomes "ابن رشد" ("Ibn Rushd").[25]

Although this substitution of original Arabic for transliterated Italian seems an obvious choice in this context, it may be of worth for us to ask whether such "reverse transliteration" adequately fulfils the requirements of a "translation"; are we to understand the "Saladino" of Dante's fourth canto, for instance, as immediately identifiable with the "صلاح الدين" ("Salāh ad-Dīn") of 'Uthmān's Arabic version?[26] This question as to the efficacy of transliteration is posed not only by the text of 'Uthmān's *Commedia* translation, however, but also by the titles which he appends to Dante's poem. In order to render "*Paradiso*"—the name of Dante's third book—'Uthmān provides "فردوس" ("*Firdaws*"), once again supplying a transliterated Arabic equivalent for Dante's Italian, rather than a wholly distinct lexical item.[27] "Paradise", a word of Persian etymology, is widely shared by both Near Eastern and European languages, hence its appearance in both

[25] The three Italian names are to be found in *Commedia*, II:73; II:75; and II:75 respectively, while the three Arabic names are to be found in *Kūmīdiyā*, I:117; I:118; and I:118.

[26] Due in particular to the decisive role which he played in the 12th-century crusades, we may expect there to be a discrepancy between the "Saladino" of the European imagination, and the "Salāh ad-Dīn" of the Middle Eastern. It is also of consequence to note that while the Arabic name "Salāh ad-Dīn" actually means "Righteousness of Faith", the significance of this title would not be apparent to the European who simply reads the transliterated "Saladino."

[27] *Kūmīdiyā*, III:1.

Italian ("Paradiso") and Arabic ("فردوس").[28] This word is also to be found, however, in both the Christian and Islamic scriptures, belonging to the eschatological vocabulary of both the New Testament and the Qur'ān.[29] The simple transliteration of Dante's title into Arabic thus functions to change the title of the *Commedia*'s third section to the name reserved in Qur'ānic Arabic for the final abode of the Muslim believer; it is "فردوس" ("*Firdaws*", "Paradise"), which the Qur'ān promises as the rightful inheritance to the faithful followers of the prophet Muhammad.[30] It would seem that the substitution of "*Firdaws*" for "*Paradiso*", the mere transliteration of Italian into Arabic, possesses the remarkable potential to shift not only the linguistic medium, but also the theological nuance, of Dante's epic.

The *Commedia* raises problems unique for the Arabic translator not only by comprising Arabic etymologies and cognates, however, but also by including an entire line which may represent Dante's effort to compose an Arabic verse. Although still a subject of debate within Dantean criticism, the first line of the *Inferno*'s seventh canto—"*Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*"—has been identified by several Dante scholars as garbled Arabic, as the Italian poet's faulty imitation of an Arabic sentence.[31] In encountering this verse, the Arabic translator is required initially to decide whether this line should indeed be treated as faulty Arabic, and if so, whether Dante's imperfect imitation should be merely transliterated as it is, or if it should be "ameliorated" into intelligible Arabic. 'Abbūd Abū Rāshid, in his 1933 *Commedia* translation, elects this latter course, substituting the garbled words of *Inferno* 7:1 for his own "corrected" Arabic version; in place of Dante's "*Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*", Abū Rāshid provides the Arabic "*Bāb al-shaytān. Bāb shaytān, Ahlibu*" ("The door of Satan, the door of Satan, Proceed downwards!").[32] Although 'Uthmān makes reference to the tradition of interpreting *Inferno* 7:1 as Dante's attempt at constructing an Arabic verse (citing Abū Rāshid in particular), he is much more cautious in his own reception, claiming that the verse is "incomprehensible" ("غير مفهومة").[33] Accordingly, 'Uthmān elects to merely

[28] Both the Italian "paradiso" and the Arabic "فردوس" ["*firdaws*"] trace their origins to a common Old Persian source, "paridaēza," a word signifying "enclosure" and "garden." See "Paradise," *OED*, 1983 ed.

[29] The Greek "παράδεισος" ["*paradeisos*"] appears in the New Testament in Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4; and Revelations 2:7. The Arabic "فردوس" ["*firdaws*"] appears in the Qur'ān in 18:107; and 23:11.

[30] In both of the verses which "**فردوس**" ["*firdaws*"] appears in the Qur'ān, it is promised as the future reward of Muslim "believers" ("المؤمنون").

[31] *Commedia*, II:109. Scialhub (1938) suggests that "*Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*" should be read as the Arabic "باب الشيطان باب الشيطان ألب" ("*Bāb ash-Shaytān, Bāb ash-Shaytān Alibbu*", i.e. "The door of Satan, the door of Satan, Stop!"). See Scialhub 7 and ff.

[32] For Abū Rāshid's "corrected" Arabic version of *Inferno* 7:1, and its English translation, see Hitti (1934).

[33] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:161. Although his own view is that this verse is "incomprehensible," 'Uthmān does also note that Abū Rāshid's Arabic translation construes *Inferno* 7:1 as signifying "**باب الشيطان ، تابعا نزول**" ("The door of Satan, Proceed downwards").

transliterate Dante's mysterious line into Arabic script, leaving the opening to the seventh canto as incomprehensible in the Arabic version as it is in the Italian original.[34]

Of all the words of Arabic etymology which must be addressed by the *Commedia* translator, however, it is the word "Arab" itself which poses some of the most interesting difficulties. In his treatment of Dante's single use of this term, 'Uthmān deviates from his tendency to transliterate the words of Arabic origination in the *Commedia*, preferring to "translate" this term with a wholly different designation. The term "Aràbi" makes its sole appearance in Dante's epic in the forty-ninth line of *Paradiso*'s sixth canto; the beatified Justinian, recounting the bellicose history of Rome, characterizes the defeat of "Hannibal" as bringing down "l'orgoglio de li Aràbi" ("the pride of the Arabs").[35] When the reader reaches this same line in 'Uthmān's Arabic *Commedia*, however, they encounter a slightly different characterization: "وإلى الأرض هوى بكبرياء القرطاجنيين", i.e. "To the ground it brought low the pride of the *Carthaginians*" (my emphasis).[36] Here the Egyptian translator has effectively "amended" Dante's text, replacing the Italian "Aràbi" ("Arabs") with the Arabic "القرطاجنيين" ("Carthaginians"). This substitution of a national epithet for Dante's ethnic designation evidences 'Uthmān's recognition that this line of the *Paradiso* is historically incorrect; Dante's assertion that Hannibal's troops were "Arabs" reflects the Italian poet's anachronistic understanding of the ancient inhabitants of North Africa.[37] However, it is interesting that 'Uthmān feels that this clarification of Dante's "error" must take place within the *Commedia* text itself, and not just appear in one of the many footnotes which are appended to this canto in the Arabic version. Through choosing to translate, rather than transliterate, this word of Arabic etymology, 'Uthmān effectively redacts Dante's historical slip, refusing to allow the Italian defamation of the "Arabs" to remain in this Arabic text.

From *Qur'ān* to *Commedia*: Islamic Language in Dantean Translation

Due to their shared Abrahamic origins, there exist striking parallels between the scriptural traditions of Christianity and Islam; the canonical texts of these two monotheisms narrate many of the same episodes, they celebrate many of the same prophets and patriarchs.[38] And although we may expect such scriptural

[34] 'Uthmān's transliteration of Dante's curious verse reads as follows: "پاپی ساتان ، پاپی ساتان ألیپی" (*Kūmīdiyā*, I:155). In his 1938 study, Scialhub also suggested that the sixty-seventh verse of the *Inferno*'s thirty-first canto ("*Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi*") should be construed as garbled Arabic. In treating this line, 'Uthmān once again merely transliterates Dante's incomprehensible verse, but also notes the tradition of interpreting it as Arabic (see *Kūmīdiyā*, I:394 and I:400).

[35] *Commedia*, IV:89.

[36] *Kūmīdiyā*, III:142.

[37] For Dante's anachronistic usage of "Arabs" to denote "Carthaginians", see Alighieri (1965), 656.

[38] Both the Christian and Islamic scriptures, for example, include narrations which feature Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Jonah, Job, Mary, John the Baptist and Jesus.

correspondence to help facilitate the translation of a text from one faith into the language of the other, we also find that it poses problems for inter-religious translation. While parallels between the Biblical and Qur'ānic narratives ensure that Christians and Muslims partake within a shared context of scriptural reference, the correspondences between these two religious traditions are not, of course, exact; although the Bible and Qur'ān mention many of the same figures, significant discrepancies exist between the theological and spiritual import ascribed to such figures by the two scriptural traditions.[39] It is this concurrent similarity *and* difference between the two Abrahamic religions which poses a unique problem for the Muslim translator of a Christian text: should the names of Biblical figures in a (Christian) source text, for example, merely be replaced by their Qur'ānic "equivalents" in a (Muslim) translation? Should the Christian nomenclature in the Italian *Commedia* simply be rendered with corresponding Islamic nomenclature in the Arabic *Commedia*?

'Uthmān's translation of the Italian epic answers such questions in a variety of ways, at times electing to replace Biblical names with their Qur'ānic counterparts, and at other times explicitly refusing to parallel the two religious traditions within his Arabic rendition. Most frequently we find the scriptural identities included within Dante's *Commedia* assuming the names which they are given in the Islamic scripture: Dante's "Noè" thus becomes the Qur'ānic *Nūh* ("نوح"); "Moïsè" becomes *Mūsa* ("موسى"); while "Abraàm" becomes *Ibrāhīm* ("إبراهيم").[40] It is also clear, however, that 'Uthmān resists such an equivalency when addressing the more theologically implicated characters within Dante's poem; in rendering figures which are shared by Christianity and Islam, and yet significantly differ within these two traditions, 'Uthmān refuses to employ Islamic nomenclature. The most conspicuous example of such refusal may be found in 'Uthmān's translation of the Dantean "Mary." Rather than providing the Islamic name for the Virgin, (i.e. "مريم", "*Maryam*"), the Arabic *Commedia* simply transliterates her Italian name, thereby rendering Jesus' Mother as "*Māriyā*" ("ماريا").[41] Although Mary is deeply revered in both Catholicism and Islam, the spiritual station she assumes in the two traditions contrasts starkly; in the former, she is venerated as the Mother of God, while the latter explicitly forbids such veneration.[42] Thus, while 'Uthmān perceives

[39] A prominent example of such discrepancy may be found in the divergent accounts of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, known in Hebrew as the "Akedah." In the Judeo-Christian scripture, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19); according to most Islamic sources, however, it is Ishmael who was required (the Qur'ānic account may be found in chapter 37, verses 101–108).

[40] For the appearance of these prophets and patriarchs in Dante's epic, see *Commedia*, II:63; II:64; and II:64 respectively; for their appearance in 'Uthmān's Arabic, see *Kūmīdiyā*, I:115. *Nūh* ("نوح") first appears in the Qur'ān in its 3rd chapter, verse 33; *Mūsa* ("موسى") first appears in the Qur'ān 2:51; while *Ibrāhīm* ("إبراهيم") first appears in the Qur'ān 2:124.

[41] The nineteenth chapter of the Qur'ān is named after the Virgin Mary (i.e. "مريم", "*Maryam*"), and she accordingly features prominently in this chapter. For instances of 'Uthmān's transliteration of Dante's "Maria" as "ماريا" ("*Māriyā*"), see *Kūmīdiyā*, II:190; III:117; III:413; and III:539.

[42] See, for example, Qur'ān 5:116–118 which condemn the deification of both Mary and Jesus.

no difficulty in rendering Dante's "Noah" with the Qur'ānic "*Nūh*", he refrains from transforming Dante's "Maria" into the Qur'ānic "*Maryam*"; in the Arabic *Commedia*, Mary must retain her Christian appellation through transliteration, rather than acquire her Islamic appellation through translation.

In order to negotiate the problems posed by the imperfect correspondence between Christian and Islamic identities, 'Uthmān not only alternates between the translation and transliteration of scriptural names, but also makes use of his extensive critical apparatus to qualify the theological parameters of Dante's poem; in reading the footnotes appended to each canto of the Arabic *Commedia*, the reader will find dozens of caveats which clarify the central disparities between Christian and Muslim belief. Although both religious traditions, for example, revere Jesus as Messiah, they strongly differ as to his divinity; while Catholicism regards the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as the foundational mysteries of faith, Islam regards such teachings as erroneous and heretical.[43] Accordingly, we find that each time Jesus' Godhood is recognized in the Italian *Commedia*, 'Uthmān's footnotes identify such recognition as a merely Christian interpretation; when Dante's epic explicitly ascribes divinity to Christ, 'Uthmān invariably appends parenthetical provisos such as "according to the Christians" or "according to Christian doctrine," thereby preventing such ascriptions to stand without condition.[44] Although the text of the Arabic *Commedia* accurately translates passages which profess a Trinitarian faith, the annotations of the Arabic *Commedia* function to qualify such profession, as well as dissociate the Arabic translator from this Italian Trinitarianism.

While the critical apparatus appended to his Arabic *Commedia* evidences 'Uthmān's concern to distinguish his Muslim belief from Dante's Christianity, it is of interest to note that the poetic text of the Arabic translation at times succeeds in reconciling, rather than differentiating, the sacred languages of these two religious traditions; as Christianity and Islam share a common scriptural heritage and vocabulary, 'Uthmān occasionally finds that it is the Arabic of Islamic scripture which qualifies as the best substitute for the Italian of Dante's Christian epic. This type of Qur'ānic echo in 'Uthmān's *Commedia* translation may be found in the very first tercet of Dante's poem:

Dante:	
Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita	[In the middle of our life's way
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,	I found myself in a dark wood
ché la diritta via era smarrita[45]	for the straight path was lost]

[43] Rejection of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation may be found in the Qur'ān, 2:116; 3:59; 4:171; and 5:72–75.

[44] For examples of 'Uthmān's inclusion of the parenthetical statement "according to the Christians" ("عند المسيحيين"), see *Kūmīdiyā*, III:136; III:163; III:209; III:212; III:235. For his inclusion of "according to Christian doctrine" ("فى اعتقاد المسيحيين"), see "*Kūmīdiyā*, III:166; III:167; III:235.

[45] *Commedia*, II:3.

'Uthmān:

فى منتصف طريق حياتنا	[In the middle of our life's way
وجدت نفسى فى غابة مظلمة	I found myself in a dark wood
إذ ضللت سواء السبيل[46]	for I lost the straight path]

'Uthmān's initial lines of translation are judicious, conveying the meaning of Dante's introduction through clear Arabic prose. Of particular interest here, however, is the rendition of Dante's "la diritta via", i.e. "the straight path." This phrase, which is a common metaphor within the Abrahamic religions, is shared mutually by the three monotheisms, and is to be found in the Hebrew Bible, in the Greek Testament, and also in the Qur'ān.[47] Reading the first tercet of 'Uthmān's *Commedia* rendition, we find that Dante's biblically inspired "la diritta via" is translated with the Arabic "سواء السبيل", ("*sawā' as-sabīl*"), a phrase which not only signifies "the straight path," but also qualifies as a direct quotation from the Islamic scripture. The Arabic "*sawā' as-sabīl*" is to be found in four different passages of the Qur'ān, appearing in Islam's sacred book as a characterization of the pathway to be followed by the righteous Muslim.[48] At the very inception of Dante's epic, therefore, the Arabic reader may be surprised to find this Christian poem infused with Islamic diction, to hear Qur'ānic phraseology in the mouth of the most celebrated poet of Catholicism.

The *Commedia* presents challenges unique to the Muslim translator not only through featuring prophetic characters and religious language common to Islamic scripture, but also by making direct reference to adherents of the Islamic faith. Indeed, it is the *Commedia*'s allusions to Muslim believers which are subject to some of the most interesting revisions carried out by 'Uthmān upon the Dantean text. The difficulty confronting an Arabic translator in rendering references to Muslims within the Italian epic is constituted in the terms which Dante employs; the Islamic faithful are not identified as "Muslims" within the *Commedia*, but rather as "Saracens"—a distinctly pejorative name, signifying not only "follower of the prophet Muhammad," but also "Infidel."[49] Although the word "Saracen" may originally be of Arabic etymology (being derived from the Arabic "*sharaq*," i.e.

[46] *Kūmīdiyā*, I:82.

[47] See, for example, Proverbs 4:11; Psalms 27:11; Matthew 3:3; and the Qur'ān 1:5.

[48] For occurrences of "سواء السبيل " ("*sawā' as-sabīl*", "the straight path") in the Qur'ān, see 2:108; 5:12; 28:22; and 60:1.

[49] "Saracino" is defined by the *Dizionario Etimologico Italiano*, for instance, as "musulmano, pagano, infedelo" ("Saracino," *Dizionario Etimologico Italiano*, 1968 ed.). The primary definition of "Saraceno" given by the *Grande Dizionario Della Lingua Italiana* is "Arab Muslim" ("Saraceno," *Grande Dizionario Della Lingua Italiana*, 1994 ed.); the dictionary also cites Dante's *Inferno* 27:87 as one of its primary sources for this definition.

"East"), we should not be surprised to find that this Italian word has no equivalent in Arabic lexis.[50] As it signifies both "Muslim" *and* "Infidel," the Italian "Saracino" comprehends two meanings which are wholly contradictory within the perspective of an Islamic language; "Saracino" effectively marries two connotations which refuse to be reconciled within the lexicon of a Muslim vernacular. The first time the Arabic translator is faced with this highly problematic term is in the twenty-seventh canto of the *Inferno*, where Pope Boniface VIII is described as:

Dante:

Lo principe d'i novi Farisei,	[The Prince of the new Pharisees
avendo guerra presso a Laterano,	waging war near the Lateran
e non con Saracin né con Giudei[51]	and not against the Saracens or Jews]

'Uthmān:

إن أمير الفريسيين الجدد	[The Prince of the new Pharisees
ـ وقد أعلن الحرب على مقربة من لاتيرانو	- he declared war near the Lateran
لا على العرب ولا على اليهود [52]	not against the Arabs, nor against the Jews]

In his rendition of the initial two lines of the above tercet, we discover 'Uthmān once again translating his source text with precision. When we come to the third line, however, it becomes clear that the meaning of the Italian original has been subtly altered: in order to render Dante's "Saracin" ("Saracens"), 'Uthmān has provided "العرب" ("*al-'Arab*"), i.e. "the Arabs." This substituion of an adjective of ethnicity ("Arabs"), for Dante's religious epithet ("Saracens"), allows 'Uthmān to "half-translate" the Italian original; the Arabic translation here succeeds in suggesting "Muslims" through designating an ethnic community often identified with Islam, but it does not concurrently suggest the idea of "Infidels." The provision of the term "Arabs" in this context thus succeeds in retaining some of the religious distinctions implied by the Italian verses, while at the same time expunging their explicit anti-Islamic connotations.

When confronted by the second occurence of "Saracen" in the *Commedia*, we find 'Uthmān electing to treat this term in a wholly different fashion; in the twenty-third canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*, the immodesty of the Florentine women is unfavourably juxtaposed with that of "barbarians" and "saracens":

[50] The definition of "Saraceno" provided by *Dizionario Etimologico Della Lingua Italiana* traces this word's origins to the Arabic root "شرقى" ("*sharqi*", "from the East"), and defines the word as "musulmano." ("Saraceno," *Dizionario Etimologico Della Lingua Italiana*, 1988 ed.). In its definition of "Saracen," the OED mentions that the Arabic etymology of this word is speculative, though widely acknowledged ("Saracen," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989 ed.).

[51] This quotation comprises lines 85-87 of the *Inferno's* twenty-seventh canto; see *Commedia*, II:463.

[52] *Kūmūdiyā*, I:358.

Quai barbare fuor mai, quai saracine,
Cui bisognasse, par farle ir coperte,
o spiritali o altre discipline?[53]

[What barbarous women, what saracens ever
needed, to make them go covered,
either spiritual or other ordinances?]

A decidedly pejorative view of Islam and its adherents is expressed in Dante's original, Muslim "saracens" being coupled together with "barbarians" within this discussion of societal standards. Considering the content of this Italian tercet, it is clear that 'Uthmān's previous substitution of "Arabs" for Dante's "Saracens" would not succeed in removing the insult to Islamic culture implied in this *Purgatorio* passage; if he were merely to translate "Saracens" as "Arabs" in this context, 'Uthmān would not repudiate this passage's equation of his own ethnic and religious culture with "barbarians." Consequently, the Arabic translator replaces Dante's "saracine" with "وثنيات", ("*wathaniyāt*"), a word which *does* signify "pagans", but *does not* signify "adherents of Islam."[54] Here we see 'Uthmān once again "half-translating" Dante's Italian term; in this *Purgatorio* passage, 'Uthmān refuses to allow "Saracen" to denote "Muslim," while in the *Inferno* passage, 'Uthmān had refused to allow this same term to denote "Infidel." Through replacing the Italian "saracine" with the Arabic "*wathaniyāt*" (a word which simply means "female idolaters"), 'Uthmān not only succeeds in translating Dante's disparagement of "heathen" culture, but also in preventing Islam and Muslims from being implicated in such a disparagement. We thus find 'Uthmān once again inconspicuously reshaping the Dantean text in order to render a *Commedia* which will be both comprehensible and accessible to his target readership in the Arab world. Not only through excising explicit defamations of Islam and its prophet, but also through subtly shifting the semantic spectrum of the original Italian, does 'Uthmān succeed in rendering what could be labelled an Islamic Dante—a Catholic *Commedia* amenable to a Muslim audience.

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[53] This quotation comprises lines 103–105 of the *Purgatorio*'s twenty-third canto; see *Commedia*, III:400.

[54] 'Uthmān's rendition of *Purgatorio* 23:103–105 may be found in *Kūmīdiyā*, II:303. The word "وثنيات" ("*wathaniyāt*") comes from the Arabic root "وثن" ("*wathan*") signifying "idol" or "graven image." Despite his Arabic rendition of Dante's "saracens," 'Uthmān's footnote to this verse does admit that this word may indicate "the Muslims" ("المسلمين"); see *Kūmīdiyā*, II:308–309.

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