The Moslem Enemy in Renaissance Epic: Ariosto, Tasso, and Camoens

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The Renaissance produced many tracts and descriptions dealing with Moslems, such as those by Ogier de Busbecq and Phillipe du Fresne-Canaye,\(^1\) which remain the main source for gauging western attitudes toward Moslems, but these can be supplemented by popular literature which reflects, forms, and gives classic expression to the ideas and stereotypes of a culture.\(^2\) This study examines and compares the image of the Moslem in the three greatest epics of the sixteenth century, Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, and Camoëns’s *Os Lusiadas*.\(^3\) All three epics enjoyed wide popularity and present Christian heroes struggling against Moslem enemies.

Ludovico Ariosto, courtier to the d’Este lords of Ferrara, first published *Orlando furioso* in 1516 but continued to polish and expand it until 1532. With 38,728 lines, it is the longest poem of the Renaissance, perhaps of western literature, to attain wide popularity. It describes the defense of Paris by Charlemagne and his knights against the Moors of Spain and Africa. This was traditional material already developed by the medieval *chansons de geste* and by *Orlando innamorato* of Matteo Maria Boiardo, who preceded Ariosto as court poet at Ferrara. The tone is light-hearted and the structure episodic and loose-jointed. Ariosto owes more to medieval romances than to classical epics. Except for the shadowy figure of Charlemagne, the characters and story are wholly fictional. Ariosto’s casual attitude toward history is illustrated by his remark that Syrian armor in Charlemagne’s day was modelled on that of the French crusaders in the Holy Land.\(^4\) Religion plays little role, but *Orlando furioso* abounds in magic and wonderment.

Very different is Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, 15,728 lines long, which was completed in 1575 and published in 1581. Filled with literary self-doubt and religious scruples, Tasso later recast it into the leaden
Gerusalemme conquistata. Gerusalemme liberata describes the capture of Jerusalem by the first crusade. Some events and characters are historical, but most episodes hark back to Vergil and Homer or flow from Tasso’s idyllic imagination or religious conviction. Neither of the Italian epics has a nationalist thrust, but Tasso like Ariosto glorifies the fictional ancestors of his d’Este patrons.

The Lusiads of the Portuguese Luis de Camoëns is a shorter, more coherent national and historical epic that describes the voyage of Vasco da Gama to Calicut, which began Portuguese political and commercial power in the Indian Ocean. The poet inserts into this story the history of the Portuguese struggle for freedom from the Moors and for empire in Asia. Most of the Lusiads, published at Lisbon in 1572, was written in Asia during the author's years as a soldier and adventurer.

The three authors show more knowledge of the geography and diversity of Moslem peoples than of their culture and religion. Epic convention, going back to Homer’s catalogue of ships and Vergil’s list of Italian tribes, led them to include lists of Moslem kings, nations and places. These are fairly accurate, but there are slips; for example, Ariosto makes the Tartars Moslems centuries before their conversion. The three epics never contrast eastern and western clothing, food, architecture or even military equipment and strategy. They display no interest even in Moslem polygamy but rather extrapolate western customs to the east. Thus Moslem women enjoy all the freedom and status of their western sisters. There are no references to veils and purdah. Indeed all three epics present Moslem women warriors fighting alongside their men; Marfisa in Orlando and Clorinda in Gerusalemme liberata are leading Moslem paladins. In part this most un-Islamic characterization recalls the amazons of the Iliad and Camilla of the Aeneid, in part it adds spice to the stories. In general both the Italian epics present Moslem and Christian societies as similar, although both are romanticized. For this reason the poems reveal no prejudice based on a sense of the superiority of western culture over oriental civilization. Nor indeed were western technology and politics in the sixteenth century such as to allow Europeans a feeling of cultural superiority. Neither is anti-Moslem sentiment based on racism, for these epics have no trace of a sense of European racial superiority over Turks and Arabs. Thus Ariosto can present the Saracen Ruggiero as the founder of the House of d’Este, his patrons.
The shapelessness of Moslem culture in the Italian epics, at least, flows from ignorance. The treatment of Moslem religion adds positive distortion to ignorance. There is no effort to stress the real common elements of Christianity and Islam—both are revealed, ethical monotheisms founded by men sent from God, whose teachings are contained in sacred books. Both urge prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. The Koran shows great respect for Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist. On these points the epics are silent. Indeed, they equate Moslems with pagans. Paradoxically they follow medieval tradition in conceptualizing Islam as similar to Christianity in areas where the two religions have little in common. Thus Ariosto invents a Moslem clergy after the western pattern. The *chansons de geste* fabricated a Moslem trinity of Mohammed, Tervagant and Apollin; vestiges of this surface when Ariosto describes Moslems as worshipping Mohammed and Tervagant. We are spared medieval calumnies against Mohammed, for instance, that he fell drunk and was devoured by hogs. In general the role of the prophet is assimilated to that of Christ. Thus Moslems make vows to Mohammed, they invoke his help in battle, and even worship him. When faced with defeat, they call upon him and vow temples, shrines and altars. Some Moslem customs are recorded correctly: circumcision, the prohibition against wine, and against the use of religious statues; but to judge from these poems, the main purpose of the mosques is to display the armor and trophies of defeated Christian heroes. The only reference to the content of the Koran incorrectly asserts that it sanctions the Turkish practice of carrying off Christian youths to become janissaries. Although the epics mention political differences among Moslems and squabbles among their leaders, they never advert to the religious divisions within Islam. Indeed, the only reference to Protestantism serves to contrast Christian religious diversity with Moslem unity—"sempre unidos." Most likely this remark of Camoëns comes from a desire for rhetorical effect rather than from ignorance of long standing western efforts to play off Shi’ite Persia against the Sunni Turks. Moslems also engage in unlikely behavior. Thus in *Orlando furioso* Medor, who is otherwise presented sympathetically, prays to the moon as the pagan triple Diana. In *Gerusalemme liberata* Ismeno the wizard and Aladine, King of Jerusalem, steal an icon of the Virgin Mary and install it in a mosque as a talisman.

The three poems endow their Moslem protagonists with many favorable
qualities, partly because the nature of epic demands this. Hector’s prowess only enhances Achilles’s victory. In the two Italian epics the Moslem paladins are uniformly brave and mighty in arms. Most of these champions fall into two groups. Some are scheduled for conversion to Christianity, for instance Ruggiero, Marfisa, Sobrino, Clorinda; these are paragons of all knightly virtues. Another group is destined to fall before Christian arms. They are praised for their fame and prowess, which they demonstrate by defeating Christian knights of the second rank, just as Hector defeats Patroclus. Nevertheless, the valor of Ariosto’s Rodomonte, Mandricardo and Sacripante, just as that of Tasso’s Argante, Solimano, and Tisaferno, is flawed by ferocity and pride. Several episodes present Moslem cruelty, but this is balanced by instances of Christian cruelty, as in the sack of Jerusalem. Several Moslems appear as able rulers or wise counsellors. Ariosto especially credits the Moslems with compassion and with loyalty to their lord at great cost to self. The Moslems at Mozambique received da Gama’s men in friendly fashion until they realized that they were Christians; the rival Moslem king of Malindi and his people got along splendidly with the Portuguese despite differences in religion. Some Moslems are sincere and even saintly in their own faith.

There are no charges against the Moslems of laziness, sensuality, or lustfulness.

The knights and sailors of these epics are far from home, but they seldom give thought to the women they have left behind. Love between man and woman is usually across religious lines. Partly this is a convention which goes back to the chansons de geste. In most cases love leads to religious conversion. It is usually Moslem women who fall in love with Christian knights (Fiordiligi loves Brandimarte, Isabela loves Zerbino, Erminia loves Tancred, Arminda loves Rinaldo), but there are variations. Bradamante, the Christian amazon, marries the ex-Moslem Ruggiero. Infatuation for Armida leads Rambaldo to renounce Christianity.

Tasso and Camoens stress Moslem vice more than Ariosto. Thus the Portuguese epic frequently portrays Moslems as cowards in battle. More serious, Tasso and especially Camoens charge them with treachery and trickery, vices totally opposed to the knightly ideal. Instances of magic are common in both Italian epics. For Ariosto there is no difference in the nature and function of Christian and Moslem magic, which merely increases the wondrous
and imaginative quality of his poem. Not so with Tasso. Magic appears as a favorite weapon of the Moslems, and in their hands it is sinister rather than merely marvelous. The leading Moslem wizards, Ismeno and Idraote, employ diabolical help. Associated with them is the witch Armida, Idraote’s niece. In contrast, the Christian hermit-seer who helps frustrate Armida’s charms expressly rejects diabolical help and attributes his magic to the close study of the stars and the hidden powers of natural objects. Not unexpectedly, Tasso has the devil helping the Moslem cause.

During the sixteenth century, conversions from Christianity to Islam surely outnumbered those in the opposite direction. Ariosto mentions without bitterness fifteen thousand Christian renegades living in Cairo. Tasso presents three renegades: Ismeno, Rambaldo and Emireno. The first is totally hateful, but the other two at least fight courageously for their new faith. More central to these epics are the Moslems who become Christians: Ruggiero, Marfisa, Sansonetto, Brandimarte and Sobrino in Ariosto; Clorinda and Armida in Tasso. In *The Lusiads* the Moroccan Monçaide joyfully joins da Gama’s expedition in Calicut and saves it by warning the Christians of a Moslem plot. He then converts to Christianity. All these converts except Armida are virtuous and amiable both before and after their conversion. The joy our poets take in securing their conversion again suggests a religious basis of their attitude toward Moslems.

Unlike the *chansons de geste*, these epics do not engage in crude libel; they do not give Moslems ridiculous names, picture them as afflicted with physical deformities, or stress their cruelty. Ariosto shows the least prejudice even though his subject and style comes closest to the *chansons*. Much of his bias seems a mere vestige of that tradition. He does not take himself too seriously and strives to entertain rather than teach or edify. The opening incident exemplifies the tone of *Orlando furioso*. The Christian Rinaldo and the Moslem Ferràù happen on Angelica, the fair princess of Cathay. As they fight over her, she escapes. Realizing this, Ferràù suggests that they both mount his horse in pursuit. Ariosto comments:

Oh gran bontà de’ cavallieri antiqui!
Eran rivali, eran di fé diversi,
e si sentian degli aspri colpi iniqui
per tutta la persona anco dolersi;
e pur per selve oscure e calli obliqui
insieme van senza sospetto aversi.\textsuperscript{33}

Tasso and Camoëns are more bitter toward Moslems. We have noted how Camoëns stresses their cowardice and Tasso their treachery. Both dwell on the obdurate hatred of Moslems for Christians. Like their paladins both poets feel entitled to match blow for blow. "Love thy enemy" never enters the picture. The Moslem is hateful because he has always been hated by Christians and has hated them. The poets hate Islam because it is false and because Christianity is true.\textsuperscript{34} Ignorance prevents them from effective argument against Moslem beliefs and practice; indeed, their tendency to assimilate Islam to Christianity made criticism dangerous because it might also undermine Christianity. Personal experience may have sharpened their hatred. In 1559 Turkish corsairs sacked Tasso's hometown of Sorrento, killing and enslaving most of the inhabitants. During the sack young Tasso was with his father in Venice, but for weeks his sister Cornelia, who became lost fleeing to the hills, was counted among the missing.\textsuperscript{35} Camoëns lost an eye while campaigning as a young soldier against the Moors in Morocco. His best years, 1553 to 1570, were spent in Asia where he fought on the Red Sea and the Malabar coast. From da Gama to Camoëns's own generation, the Portuguese built their eastern empire in the teeth of Moslem opposition.

During the years when Tasso and Camoëns were writing, hostility between Christians and Moslems was steadily rising. The years 1559 to 1565 were characterized by Turkish supremacy in the Mediterranean. This was checked by the Turkish failure to capture Malta in 1565. The next year the Turks broke their long truce with the Hapsburgs in Hungary. In 1569 the Turks tried to take Kazan and Astrakhan from the Russians, and the Moriscos of Granada revolted from Philip II, who crushed them without mercy. Meanwhile the militant kings of Algiers occupied Tunis, a Spanish satellite. The next year the Turks attacked Venice both in the Balkans and by a successful invasion of Cyprus. Venice, Philip II and Pius V replied by forming the Holy League. In 1571 the League fleet under Don Juan of Austria destroyed the Turkish fleet off Lepanto in the largest galley battle in naval history. The Sultan tried to brush off the loss as a singed beard and rebuilt his fleet. The war dragged on until 1577, but Venice could not stand the financial strain
and soon dropped out. The Sultan was worried about the Sophy and in-
creasingly turned his interest to the Persian frontier, while Philip II had the
bleeding sore of the Netherlands to attend. The Lusiads, published in
1572, and Gerusalemme liberata, completed in 1575, surely reflect the tension
and exaltation of the Lepanto era.

All three epics demand new crusades against the Moslem. Given Ariosto’s
serene and secular outlook and the Italian preoccupation with the Wars of
Italy when he was writing, his plea for a crusade comes as a surprise. It
would be convenient to dismiss this passage as conventional piety, but
Ariosto seems terribly earnest. Nowhere else does he speak so directly and
passionately to his own generation. It is the destruction of Italy and the
mutual slaughter of Christians that leads him to direct their arms against
the Turk. Tasso’s plea for renewed crusades is more distinctly religious
and depends less on direct statement than on his whole subject matter and
treatment. For Camoëns the Moslem remains the inveterate and predest-
tined enemy of Portugal. The prologue of his epic urges King Sebastian, to
whom the poem is dedicated, to strike new terror into Moslem hearts and
win new lands to the true faith. The whole world will tremble and the Moor
will gaze in terror at the exploits of Portuguese arms in Africa and the seas
beyond. Again and again he extolls the medieval Portuguese kings who de-
feated and expelled the Moslems. When da Gama’s expedition is about to
leave Lisbon, Camoëns brings forward a patriarchal figure who speaks for
the poet in criticizing empire building in the Indies and in urging war against
the Moslems in Africa. The final verses of The Lusiads invite Sebastian to
level the fortifications of Morocco. When the King accomplishes this,
Camoëns’s muse will sing his exploits so that all mankind will recognize him
as the second Alexander. Unlike the first Alexander, Sebastian will not need
to envy Achilles for having Homer to immortalize his deeds.

The sequel is well known. Sebastian rewarded Camoëns with a small
pension, but he did not need the poet to urge a crusade. His limited in-
telligence and quixotic imagination were fixed on a Moroccan campaign. He
ignored the cautions of his advisors and of Philip II, the prudent king. Sharif
‘Abd al-Malik answered the crusade with jihad. Poorly led, hungry, exhausted by
the desert sun, the Portuguese went down to total defeat at Alcazarquivir on
August 4, 1578. Sebastian perished on the battle field with half his army; the
survivors were enslaved or held for ransom. Two years later Camoëns died, and Philip II asserted his hereditary claims to Portugal. The last crusade suggests that great poetry has no claim to wise policy.


3. For the enormous bibliography on Ariosto, Tasso, and Camoëns, see the entries under their names in the annual MLA International Bibliography. Henceforward the notes will abbreviate *Orlando furioso* as OF, *Gerusalemme liberata* as GL, and *Os Lusiadas* as L; reference numbers are to canto and octave.

4. OF 17: 73.


6. OF 14: 30.

7. The attitude toward black Africans shows traces of racism. In *Gerusalemme liberata* Clorinda is the daughter of the Ethiopian king and his black but beautiful queen. Clorinda turns out white because the decorations around the marriage bed depict a beautiful white girl. Tasso’s curious biology goes back to Quintillian (12: 13-14). The black Christians of Ethiopia are viewed fairly favorably (12: 21-26), but African Moslems are a black and ugly lot (17: 32). The leading blacks of *Orlando furioso* are the Nubians who help the Christian attack on Bizerta (38: 35-64). Da Gama’s sailors fight a skirmish with black Africans, whom they rather unfairly accuse of treachery (L 5: 28-36).


17. OF 16: 24-25; GL 1: 87, 19: 29-30; L 3: 64.
20. OF 41: 43; L 7: 33-36.
27. OF 15: 64.
33. OF 1: 22.
37. OF 17: 73-79.
38. GL 17: 93-94.