
Published in the Material Texts series of the University of Pennsylvania Press, Pier Mattia Tommasino’s *The Venetian Qur’an* is an exemplary work of textual scholarship and a fascinating exploration of the political, religious, and literary milieu of sixteenth-century Italy. Remarkable both for its impressive erudition and refreshing readability, this monograph delves into the history of the (presumably) first translation of the Qur’an from Arabic into a European vernacular language. Although disclosed in its time as a fraudulent work (the book was actually a translation of the 1143 Latin translation of the Qur’an by Robert of Ketton) and banned by the Catholic Church in 1564, *Alcorano di Macometto* was, nevertheless, further translated into German, Dutch, Hebrew, and Spanish and widely circulated in Europe and beyond, contributing to the spread of Italian Orientalism and of a positive image of Islam. In an account reminiscent, at times, of Umberto Eco’s gripping historical prose, Tommasino describes the intricate history of the manuscript’s genesis, production, and dissemination, the context in which it emerged, and the agents involved in its publication.

*Alcorano di Macometto* was printed in Venice in 1547 by the publisher Andrea Arrivabene and, as described by Tommasino, it was “a very readable encyclopedia, a pocket handbook, a short yet exhaustive companion to Islam, Islamic history, and the contemporary Ottoman Empire” (69). This anonymous volume contained an introduction that rewrote several contemporary sources on Islam, a first book that contained a chronological recomposition of the medieval Arabic-Latin text, and two more books that contained a much-condensed version of the Qur’an. Tommasino investigates the origins of this text and compellingly demonstrates that the companion was translated and edited by Giovanni Battista Castrodardo, a history aficionado, poet, and editor of Dante’s *Comedy*, whose historical and literary interests significantly influenced his rendition of the text in Italian. The author is at his best when conveying the historical context in which the book was born and the figures involved in this process: Arrivabene’s and Castrodardo’s profiles, for instance, or that of Gabriel Luetz D’Aramon, the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (1547-1553) and the dedicatee of the *Venetian Qur’an*, are vividly rendered in a prose brimming with fascinating
historical details about the political alliances between Venice, England, and France and the ongoing conflict between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs during the time. Although the wealth of details and the large number of figures discussed could be overwhelming at times (a glimpse at the Index, solely comprised of the names of these historical figures, is telling of the author’s breadth of knowledge), Tommasino always provides concise statements of the relevance of these narratives and summaries of his findings that help readers see how they fit into the broader argument of the book. This makes his monograph a valuable read not only for an audience of scholars familiar with the topic but also for students and other readers interested in the cultural history of the period.

Another one of the book’s strengths is its close readings of both the text and the paratext of Arrivabene’s Quar’an: the title page, the dedicatory letter, the opening poem dedicated to D’Aramon, the polemical annotations, the book’s frontispiece, and the abridged translation of the main text itself are attentively analyzed and contextualized. To give an example, the author’s delving into the insertion into the Quar’an of the story of Muhammad’s ascension to heaven (mi’rağ) and Castrodardo’s stylistic choices in rendering it in Italian leads Tommasino to conclude that the translator “proceeded in his work buoyed by his fresh knowledge and understanding of Dante, and he interwove the episode with words clearly taken from Dante’s Comedy” (104). Such close textual analyses allow the author to then discuss debates over the alleged Islamic sources of the Comedy and highlight the complex relationship between Islam, anti-Islamic polemics, and the literature of early modern Europe. Another suggestive example is Castrodardo’s depiction of Prophet Muhammad as a military leader and founder of a law that would lay the foundations of the Ottoman Empire, a portrait which Tommasino compellingly argues that was influenced by Bernardo Giustiniano’s De Origine Urbis Venetiarum and Machiavelli’s political theory. This claim is based both on textual comparisons of Castrodardo’s, Giustiniano’s, and Sergius the Monk’s orations and on a close analysis of the frontispiece of the Alcorano, which presents the prophet as a Caesar-like figure addressing the crowd with a book and a sword in his hands. This analysis is carefully placed within the historical context of the book’s production, inferring the existence of covert pro-Ottoman political messages in Castrodardo’s text.

Finally, I must give due praise to Sylvia Notini, whose superb translation fully preserves the
flavor of the original. However, one issue this reader found challenging was the choice to not always translate into English the longer quotes from Latin, Spanish, or Italian that abound in the sections dedicated to the close analysis of the Qur’anic text—either in the endnotes or, as I would have preferred given the reason for using them in the first place (that is, to compare different translations of the same passage), in the main text itself. This was particularly needed in the section discussing the birth of the space of the purgatory, where Robert of Ketton’s translation of the Qur’an is compared to Castrodardo’s, Mark of Toledo’s, Giles of Viterbo’s, and Bibliander’s to make a case for the Christian Church’s attempt to assert its universality by “Catholicizing” the Muslim hereafter. This issue, however, does not take away from the value of this fascinating study into the origins, production, and dissemination of a text that played an essential role in shaping opinion about Islam in the sixteenth century and beyond.

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