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Explorations in George Eliot's Perception of Islam: Arabs, Moors, Muslims, and Islam in *The Spanish Gypsy*

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Abstract

This article proposes to explore George Eliot's perception of Islam and Muslims in *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868). It argues that Eliot showed prejudiced views against this religion and its followers at the time she was writing this poem. This will be demonstrated through her use of typically stereotyped racial characterization and persistent ostentatious religious iconography amid a narrative context exacerbated by violence and cruelty as shown in the story of the poem set in the fifteenth-century al-Andalus' (Moorish Spain) holy war. In order to clearly determine Eliot's attitude to Muslims as the alien others, the article will equally explore and compare her view with other ethnic and religious communities involved in the historical course of events described in the poem, notably Gypsies, Jews and Christians.

Keywords: G. Eliot, Victorian, Islam, Spanish Gypsy, Moor.

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Résumé

Cet article propose d'explorer la perception que George Eliot a de l'islam et des musulmans dans The Spanish Gypsy (1868). Il soutient qu'Eliot a montré des préjugés contre cette religion et ses adeptes au moment où elle écrivait ce poème. Cela sera démontré par son utilisation d'une caractérisation raciale typiquement stéréotypée et d'une iconographie religieuse ostentatoire persistante dans un contexte narratif exacerbé par la violence et la cruauté, comme le montre l'histoire du poème se déroulant dans la guerre sainte d'al-Andalus (Espagne mauresque) au XVe siècle. . Afin de déterminer clairement l'attitude d'Eliot envers les musulmans en tant qu'étrangers, l'article explorera et comparera également son point de vue avec d'autres communautés ethniques et religieuses impliquées dans le cours historique des événements décrits dans le poème, notamment les gitans, les juifs et les chrétiens.

Mots clés: G. Eliot, victorien, islam, gitan espagnol, Andalousie.

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى استكشاف نظرة الكاتبة البريطانية جورج إيليوت إلى الإسلام و المسلمين في كتابها الغجري الإسباني. إذ يبرهن أن لهذه الكاتبة وجهة نظر مسبقة في ما يخص هذه الديانة و متبعيها تتجلى بوضوح من خلال استعمالها لسمات عنصرية و رموز دينية سلبية في وصفها للشخصيات الرئيسية في قصيدتها الروائية التي تدور أحداثها في الأندلس في القرن الخامس عشر وسط حرب دينية بين مسلمي الأندلس و المسيحيين الأسبان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ج. إيليوت، العصر الفيكتوري، الإسلام، الغجري الإسباني، الأندلس.

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In 1854 Eliot reviewed in *The Leader* Reverend N. Davis' *Evenings in My Tent* and revealed, in the introduction, the mental picture of the Arab that she had constructed from her childhood readings over the years, and which was particularly fascinating and "magical":

> How little do we still know of Africa. In our childhood, its name exerted a mysterious power over our imaginations, dating from that terrible 'African Magician' of the Arabian Nights … In riper years, poetry and romance peopled this grand stage with fitting actors, — with the lofty, generous Arab, dwelling like a patriarch of old, in his goat-skin tent; scouring the sands on his matchless horse, yielding but to numbers, incapable of deceit or treachery. It must be owned that either the spell of the African magician still somewhat blinds our eyes, or these simple and noble sons of the Desert have degenerated strangely. (330)

Modern travelers, she then tells us, draw a picture of the Arab that is totally different than that of her childhood and her "riper years": "singularly cunning, rapacious, and cowardly, apparently incapable of truth, and sunk in abject superstition; in fact, as exhibiting all the vices of an oppressed race" ("Evenings in My Tent" 330). Although Eliot did not clearly decide whether the picture of the lofty, generous and noble Arab from her "riper years" should be updated in the light of fresh information by modern travelers, she nevertheless admitted that his vices were those of an oppressed race. She chooses, however, to say nothing about the real identity of the oppressor.

Ten years later, after this review, Eliot would re-encounter these two opposed portraits of the same Arab when she started writing her poem *The Spanish Gypsy* in 1864. This time, however, the dual mental picture she had constructed of him materialized somehow in the actual, real historical figures of two Muslim Moorish emirs, Boabdil and El Zagal, the former being the latter's nephew and declared enemy who usurped his uncle's throne and caused a bloody civil war during the last few years before the fall of Granada in 1492. In her depiction of these two royal characters, Eliot drew on a reliable historical source: Al-Makkari's *The History of The Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*[1].

El Zagal's nephew, Mohammed XII (commonly known to Europeans as Boabdil), was the twentieth emir of the Beni Nasr dynasty of Granada and last emir of the same town whose fall marked the end of the Spanish Reconquista. Boabdil rose against his father, and was first proclaimed at Granada in 1482. In 1483 he was taken prisoner by the Spaniards, and was replaced by his uncle el Zagal, but he was soon restored to his liberty and his throne in 1487 after a raging civil war against his uncle and decisive help from the Spaniards. Five years later, he was ultimately compelled — by these same Spanish allies — to surrender and leave Granada in 1492 for the town of Fez, in Morocco, where he settled until his death in 1536. In Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, Boabdil incarnates the "cowardly" Arab, capable of "deceit" and "treachery", and "apparently incapable of truth" ("Evening in my Tent" 330) as described in her review of Rev. Davis's book: "Not Boabdil the waverer, who usurps / A throne he trembles in,

and fawning licks / The feet of conquerors," (*The Spanish Gypsy* 4). He apparently matches the picture of the "noble son[s] of the Desert" who has "degenerated strangely" ("E in my T" 330). It is true that Boabdil's unwise management of the political situation that led to the eviction of Muslims from al-Andalus[2] at the time brought upon him bitter reproach from most Muslim chroniclers, yet Eliot's criticism of this historical character sounds much harsher and turns, in her own words, to utter humiliation when she makes him literally "lick the feet of" Christian "conquerors" — an expression that serious historians known for their objectivity, like al-Makkari, never used in their historical accounts. Eliot's blatant, uncompromising condemnation of the last emir of Granada makes her directly involved, as a writer, in expressing her own personal views on characters that are in no way fictitious, but all the more real and historical. Indulging, thus, in transmitting non-factual information, through prejudiced idiom, makes Eliot prejudice the reader against one of the major Muslim political figures in the history of al-Andalus. Throughout the eight-century history of Moorish Spain, and particularly during the last one when the pressure of the Spanish Reconquista was getting greater, many Muslim emirs struck deals and even made alliances with Christian kings against each other, but this was obviously part of the political game. This is also true of el Zagal, Eliot's somewhat favorite Muslim royal character in the poem, who surrendered to King Ferdinand and made a political deal with him.

El Zagal, Boabdil's uncle and political rival for the throne of Granada, is officially known as Mohammed XIII, the twenty-first emir of the Beni Nasr dynasty of Granada. He first rebelled against his brother, and was proclaimed at Granada in 1483 to be dethroned four years later, in 1487, by his nephew Boabdil. El Zagal retreated to Guadix until 1489 when he surrendered to King Ferdinand who "gave him the investiture" of all his former dominions "on condition that he would do him homage for that" (Al-Makkari 383). El Zagal went then to war against Boabdil who was assisted by Christian troops. When he saw that the situation was becoming hopeless el Zagal decided, shortly after 1490, to cross over to North Africa. In fact, Eliot respected to the letter el Zagal's exile itinerary given by al-Makkari: the emir first sailed to Oran, and from there headed to Telemsan (both in present day Algeria), "where he settled and where his descendants are residing to this day; being well known under the appellation of (the sons of the Sultan of Andalus)" (Al-Makkari 386). In *The Spanish Gypsy*, el Zagal's men are accompanied by Fedalma's gypsy band to whom the emir had promised "a grant of land / Within the Berber's realm" (201) for their military assistance against the Spaniards.

El Zagal is portrayed by Eliot in completely opposite terms to his nephew. In contrast to the "trembling", "fawning" "waverer" Boabdil, el Zagal is metaphorically portrayed as a "fierce lion" (*TSG* 4):

> … but that fierce lion
> Grisly El Zagal, who has made his lair
> In Guadix' fort, and rushing thence with strength,
> Half his own fierceness, half the untainted heart
> Of mountain bands that fight for holiday, (4)

Up to this point in *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot clearly shows her preference for the "brave" uncle (180). In doing so, she is true to her childhood mental image of "the

lofty, generous Arab … scouring the sands on his matchless horse, yielding but to numbers, incapable of deceit or treachery" ("E in my T" 330) that she depicted ten years earlier. El Zagal, too, was true to his word when he promised his allied Gypsies safe exile in North Africa. He honored his written pledge to the Gypsy chief Zarca and his community, and never deceived them.

Yet, these highly distinguishing qualities are also clearly attenuated, if not negatively counterbalanced, by the choice of a different vocabulary that equally reveals Eliot's disapproving criticism of the Muslim warring character. Thus, "brave el Zagal" (*TSG* 180), "rushing thence with strength" (*TSG* 4) turns into a "grisly" warrior, or "a besom of destruction" (*Life & Letters* 32) with extreme, barbaric cruelty when he "wastes the fair lands that lie by Alcala" (*TSG* 4), or when he wreathes his "matchless … horse's neck with Christian heads" (*TSG* 4). This "noble son of the Desert" has finally "degenerated strangely" in Moorish Spain ("E in my T" 330), though in a way different than his "cowardly" nephew Boabdil. Eliot's literary imagination finds its source in the common stereotyped images of the cruel, barbaric Muslim Turk[3] or Arab widespread in Victorian culture. There is not one single line in the whole poem that describes Spanish Christian kings or princes, for instance, with the same selective words suggesting the same degree of unjustified violence and cruelty in their war against Muslim Moors. It is true that the heroic figure of the Spanish saint Santiago is described with similar pugnacity, yet his horse's neck is not wreathed with Muslim heads.

Although el Zagal is a major historical character in Eliot's story, she barely allots him a walk-on role in her dramatized poem. He neither gets directly involved in narrative action nor takes part in dialogues, although he is the Gypsies' sole ally and protector against the Spaniards. Without el Zagal, Eliot's fantasized solution for the Gypsies to create both a state and a nation in Muslim North Africa would indeed amount to nothing. Even so, the "brave" Moorish emir — a man of his word till the end of the story — is not allowed to utter the slightest line or word while other somewhat minor Christian or Jewish characters largely take part in rather long dialogue exchanges, like the five men in the tavern by the beginning of the story among whom Blasco and Lorenzo, to cite just these two as an example. In contrast, it is striking to note that in the whole poem not one single Moor is allowed by Eliot to verbally intervene in the story and take part in the dialogues to express his thoughts, his opinions or his feelings. There is not one single scene in which the Gypsy Zarca meets with his Muslim ally el Zagal; the only instance when the two chiefs are allowed to communicate is by means of written correspondence — a letter that Zarca wrote to el Zagal to discuss the military details of the attack against the Spanish stronghold of Bedmar, and to remind him of the pledge he had made to grant the Gypsies a land in North Africa in return for their loyal services (*TSG* 175-6). Compared to the representatives of the other three ethnic communities — Gypsies, Christians and Jews — involved in the story and whose presence is *physically* and *verbally* largely noticeable in the five Books of the poem, the total absence of the Moorish, Muslim element (in both physical and verbal terms) is simply strange, striking and noteworthy. Muslims are obviously denied access to either action or expression in Eliot's dramatized version of historical events in which they were, in fact, historically involved as major actors. Only sparse comments made by other Christian or Gypsy characters, together with the narrator's revelatory thoughts about the course of events, remind the reader now and then of the Muslim presence in the story. Apart from that, Eliot totally excludes and marginalizes any Muslim actor from the extensive casting list of the characters involved in her story — probably because they were now no longer "fitting actors" to the "grand stage" ("E in my T" 330) of her romanced and poetic drama. And, when there is any mention of the Moors

in the poem, their representation is proposed to the reader in rather disapproving terms and through stereotyped characterization, revealing an unquestionably prejudiced attitude.

Eliot equally resorts to racial stereotypes to characterize Arabs in the poem when she makes Zarca try to convince his daughter that his gypsy dream of a land and a nation of their own is possible in North Africa, thanks to el Zagal's pledge. Zarca cites Arabs as an ideal example of the possibility to fulfill such a dream as a very few number of them, very much like Zarca's own small gypsy band, first "clustered round their prophet" and later managed to found a great nation and, even "twice", a great empire:

> Why, vagabonds who clustered round one man,
>
> Their voice of God, their prophet, and their king,
>
> Twice grew to empire on the teeming shores
>
> Of Africa, and sent new royalties
>
> To feed afresh the Arab sway in Spain.
>
> My vagabonds are a seed more generous, (*TSG* 121)

Although Zarca uses the same word to indistinctly designate both Arabs and Gypsies, "vagabonds" is nonetheless a disapproving and inappropriate term to characterize the former. Arabs' traditional way of life is unquestionably nomadic, like many other ethnic communities around the world. However, they can in no way be mistaken for or compared with "vagabonds" — as the term is defined in the dictionary. Vagabonds have no home, no land of their own; they keep wandering from place to place. Arabs, however, do have a homeland, originally known as Arabia or the Arabian Peninsula. Eliot's idyllic representation of "these simple, noble sons of the Desert" and of "the lofty, generous Arab, dwelling like a patriarch of old, in his goat-skin tent; scouring the sands on his matchless horse" ("E in my T" 330) a decade before she started writing *The Spanish Gypsy* is directly generated from "poetry and romance" as she herself admits, although it partly matches the geographical reality of the Arabian desert and the traditional Arabian nomadic way of life. Gypsies and Jews were in Victorian times considered as "homeless" or "landless" communities whom Eliot, out of sheer human sympathy (among other reasons), had chosen to respectively restore in *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Daniel Deronda* as nations with sovereign states — though both of these states remained fictional and never saw the light of day in either book. While Eliot, in her review of Rev. Davis' colonial account of his travels in Tunisia, Libya and the Sudan, depicts the Arab as "lofty" and "generous", Zarca considers his vagabond Gypsies as "a seed more generous". Be the Arab generous or not, where does Eliot draw the information from to make Zarca affirm that his people are more (or even less, for that matter) generous than Arabs? This picture of a "more generous" Gypsy is not supported by any familiar cultural or racial cliché among Victorians. Eliot's need of arousing sympathy for Gypsies by gifting them the moral grandeur they obviously lack is done at the expense of Arabs who are forced a step lower down the moral scale of generosity whose standards are apparently fixed by Eliot as a writer.

By the end of Book Five, which is also the end of the poem, another occurrence of the same racial characterization, based solely on the religious factor, is subtly used by Eliot's off-stage narrator when describing the hectic activity of both Fedalma's Gypsies and Muslim Moors on board the ships about to sail to el Zagal's "Promised Land" in North Africa from the Spanish port of Almeria:

> Hither and thither, grave white-turbaned Moors
> Move helpfully …
> Others aloof with folded arms slow-eyed
> Survey man's labor, saying, 'God is great';
> Or seek with question deep the Gypsies' root,
> And whether their false faith, being small, will prove
> Less damning than the copious false creeds
> Of Jews and Christians: Moslem subtlety
> Found balanced reasons, warranting suspense
> As to whose hell was deepest, — 't was enough
> That there was room for all. Thus the sedate. (*TSG* 270)

Although Eliot makes el Zagal keep his promise to the Gypsies of safe exile in North Africa, both this safety and el Zagal's word are nonetheless questioned at the end of the story. "Moslem subtlety" prefigures a doomed future for the Gypsies as they would definitely end up in Hell — whatever the religious nature of it — rather than in the idyllic Tunisian Carthage. "Moslem subtlety" here connotes such negative or derogatory moral characteristics as "suspicion", "cunning", "malice", which in turn is associated with the religious character of the Muslim community. "Moslem subtlety", here, is the mild, attenuated form of Muslim "viciousness". Despite the fact that they are chosen by Eliot as the Gypsies' allies in the poem, Muslims eventually turn into potential enemies not only of Zarca's people, but also of Jews and Christians, simply because they are racially stereotyped as "singularly cunning, rapacious … in fact, as exhibiting all the vices" ("E in my T" 330). Eliot, at this point, seems to have made up her mind as to which image of the Arab she would adopt: that of "the lofty, generous Arab" of her childhood, or the one depicted by modern British adventurers and explorers. In the closing lines of *The Spanish Gypsy*, she apparently decided to adopt and trust the latter.

The reader of *The Spanish Gypsy* may wonder why Eliot's narrator refers to other religions at the very end of the narrative, as the two main actors involved in that final scene are solely Moors and Gypsies. As regards Jews, it is a historical fact that thousands of them crossed over to North Africa with Muslims and settled in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia for many centuries after the fall of Granada in 1492. Why does the narrator generalize the Muslim's moral and religious judgment of the Gypsies' "small", "false faith" to include the Jews' and Christians' "copious false creeds"? Eliot makes this same narrator end his criticism of Muslims with an ironic tone when she writes: "'t was enough / That there was room for all" (*TSG* 270) in either hell of these religions, whatever its depth — which implies that the Garden of Eden is exclusively reserved for Muslims. Ending *The Spanish Gypsy* on such a "crusading" note clearly "mirrors" Eliot's own Victorian culture (Carroll 221) and prejudiced attitude to Islam and Muslims, while exacerbating at the same time racial and religious tensions when she has apparently found a fictional solution for Zarca's gypsy national project in present day Tunisia, and when the religious war in Spain has historically ended by the return of Muslims and most Jews to North Africa while Spanish Christians have finally re-conquered their land after eight long centuries of Muslim occupation.

It is noteworthy that George Borrow, a missionary for the British and Foreign Bible Society, whose popular book about the Gypsies of Spain Eliot used as an almost exclusive source of information (Kurnick 504) on her protagonists in the poem, holds similar views about North African Muslim Moors, Berbers and Bedouin Arabs. Moroccan Berbers are depicted by Borrow as "the most untameable and *warlike* of mankind, and at the same time the most *suspicious*, and those who entertain *the greatest aversion to foreigners*" [emphasis added] (Borrow 32). As for the Bedouins, they are likewise "*warlike*, *suspicious*, and *cruel*" [emphasis added] (Borrow 32). While visiting Tangier, Morocco, Borrow was invited for dinner by the British consul who asked him what he thought of the native Moors. As the former replied that he was pleased with what he had seen of them so far, the consul corrected him saying that "no people in the world were more *false* and *cruel*; that their government was one of the *vilest* description … as it invariably acted with *bad faith*, and *set at nought the most solemn treaties*" [emphasis added] (Borrow 232). Suspicion, bad faith and cruelty are also recurrent racial characteristics that Eliot's narrator or characters in the poem frequently resort to in their representation of Muslim Moors and Arabs, be they anonymous characters like the ones depicted in the final scene at the port of Almeria, or more prestigious ones like Boabdil or, even still, Eliot's somewhat favorite emir el Zagal. Yet, while Eliot portrays the Gypsies in dramatic, romanced terms that express her sympathetic[4] attitude to them Borrow, however, does not spare them from harsh, racist criticism when he describes them as: "a set of Thugs, subsisting by *cheating* and *villany* of every description ; *hating the rest of the human species*" [emphasis added] (Borrow 88).

Besides using Borrow's book to document both Gypsies and Moors, Eliot might also have found in it convincing pseudo-historical reasons to make the former side with the latter against their common enemy: Spanish Catholics. Borrow justifies this alliance on the grounds that there is affinity of "wild" character between the two and, of course, "a better prospect of gain": "as it was a far easier matter, and afforded a better prospect of gain, to plunder the Spaniards than the Moors, a people almost as wild as themselves, they were, on that account, and that only, more Moors than Christians, and ever willing to assist the former in their forays on the latter" (Borrow 31). However, the only fictional reasons for this alliance in the poem are the oppressive, racist and punitive treatment of Gypsies by the Spanish Catholics, their killing of Fedalma's biological mother Lambra shortly after childbirth (*TSG* 107), and the racial ties that bind the three Oriental communities — Muslims, Gypsies and Jews — together against a common enemy. This racial solidarity against the Spanish Catholics is plainly expressed by Zarca when he addresses both the Moors and Hebrews of Bedmar as "Our kindred by the warmth of Eastern blood" (*TSG* 249). Borrow, too, is utterly anti-Catholic; he abhors Papists and even prefers Mahomet's religion to theirs (Borrow 223-24), which he keeps repeating in his book. In *The Spanish Gypsy* Juan equally shows his abhorrence of the Catholic Prior Isidor when he portrays him "As a black eagle with gold beak and claws" (23). Zarca, likewise, shows an outburst of hatred for Catholics when he retorts to Don Silva, Fedalma's Spanish Catholic fiancé:

> You Spanish Catholics,
>
> When you are cruel, base, and treacherous,
>
> For ends not pious, tender gifts to God,
>
> And for men's wounds offer much oil to churches:
>
> We have no altars for such healing gifts

As soothe the heavens for outrage done on earth. (*TSG* 219)

Lou Charnon-Deutsch also points to this Anti-Catholic feeling in *The Spanish Gypsy* when he affirms that "Some of the racist images were a product of the poem's conspicuous anti-Castilian bias" which "reflected general British views of the Spanish clergy" (119). Much more relevant to the argument defended in this article is Charnon-Deutsch's revelatory insight into Mr. and Mrs. Lewes' theoretical background with regard to their views on race and racial inheritance. He first argues that Eliot and her husband were initially influenced by the German school's theory which makes of climate a preponderant cause in determining racial characteristics. Then Charnon-Deutsch expresses the possibility that "intellectuals like Eliot came under the influence of the group of British and French physiologists who were beginning to discard or at least de-emphasize the theory of climatological determinism along with the environmental influences of religion, government, and economic status, in favor of other explanations based on biological determinism" whose "most renowned spokesman", Robert Knox, "lectured extensively in England on his theory" (121) at the time Eliot was painstakingly working on her poem. According to Knox, race is determined by inherited biological characteristics: "With me, race, or hereditary descent, is everything; it stamps the man" (13). To him "The Saxon of England", who is Protestant, "is deemed a colonist" (41), and the Celt, who is always Catholic, "cannot too soon escape from under Saxon rule" as "bayonet governments" seem to Knox "the only suitable ones for the Celtic man" (27). Eliot's following representation of the French in *The Spanish Gypsy* barely hides a hostile attitude, which is in many ways quite similar to Knox's who abhors the French Celtic catholic:

Is it France most Christian,
Who with his lilies and brocaded knights,
French oaths, French vices, and the newest style
Of out-puffed sleeve, shall pass from west to east,
A winnowing fan to purify the seed
For fair millennia harvests soon to come? (*TSG* 7)

Pointing to the Gypsies' racial purity, Knox believes that they have preserved the distinctive characteristics of their race simply because "they do not intermarry with other races … To Saxon and white races they have the same horror that the Saxon has for the Negro" (104). Mentioning a personal anecdote about a leprous British gypsy girl, Knox eventually points to the fact that "races, no doubt, have their peculiar diseases, which although they may not afflict them exclusively, are yet of more frequent occurrence than in other races" (106). In "Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*" in her *Life and Letters*, Eliot expresses views that are apparently related to Knox's theory about "hereditary descent" that "stamps the man", hereditary diseases and his disapproval of race mixing through intermarriage when she explains the reasons that made her choose "that moment in Spanish history when the struggle with the Moors was attaining its climax, and when there was *the gypsy race* present under such conditions as would enable me to get my heroine and the *hereditary claim on her* among the gypsies. I required *the opposition of race* to give the need for *renouncing the expectation of marriage*" [emphasis added] (508). In *The Spanish Gypsy*, Zarca assures his wondering daughter that she is "Of a blood / Unmixed as virgin-wine juice" (108). Eliot has miserably treated the dark Gypsy Fedalma when she compelled her to

renounce marrying the white Spanish Catholic Silva in the name of hereditary claims. Citing some examples from the long list of "the commonest inherited misfortunes" any individual — a woman in this case — may be born with, Eliot echoes Knox's assertions in many ways: "she may be lame, she may inherit a *disease*, or what is *tantamount* to a disease: she may be a *negress*, or have other marks of race *repulsive*" [emphasis added] (*Life & Letters* 510). While Fedalma is neither a "negress" nor a woman who has inherited a disease, she nonetheless belongs to the dark Oriental race whose place is not in white Christian Europe, but in the East — the land of Otherness.
Alongside her recurrent use of stereotyped racial characterization of Muslims in the poem, Eliot also makes of religious iconography an ostentatious tool to draw clear lines of biased demarcation between warring communities. The mosque rarely stands apart in the narrative; it is often represented in contrasted, opposed terms with the church or the cross. Such representation is legitimate, of course, in view of historical facts. But Eliot's intentional reference to religious symbols in such opposed terms, and the language she chooses to describe them, seems to echo a "crusading" discourse that tends to depreciate Muslim icons, and praise Christian ones:

> Or is not Spain the land of chosen warriors? -
>
> Crusaders consecrated from the womb,
>
> Carrying the sword-cross stamped upon their souls
>
> By the long yearnings of a nation's life,
>
> Through all the seven patient centuries (*TSG* 8)

Eliot depicts the religious war (she calls it "Holy War") that was raging in Moorish Spain at the time through accentuated opposition between the Christian victorious, re-conquering Cross and Church, and the defeated Mosque. Christian domination and victory are conspicuously contrasted with Muslim submission and defeat. Eliot's insistence on this opposition makes her forget that the alien others in the story she has chosen to write are not the Muslims, but rather the Gypsies — her main heroic protagonists doomed to be evicted from Spain, together with the Muslim and the Jew — who in Zarca's words are "a race / More outcast and despised than Moor or Jew" (*TSG* 108). In fact, this Christian-Muslim opposition is more radically, and more intensely, emphasized in *The Spanish Gypsy* than the Christian-Gypsy or the Christian-Jew ones. The cross and the church, for example, are cited more than twenty times in the poem; the mosque three; the synagogue not even once. Bedmar, where most important events take place in the story, "was Moorish long ago / But now the Cross is sparkling on the Mosque / And bells make Catholic the trembling air" (*TSG* 4). When Eliot intends to use the words "cross", "church", and "mosque" as ostentatious religious symbols, she often capitalizes their initial letters. In the following excerpt from *The Spanish Gypsy*, the Mosque is replaced by other Muslim symbols: "The silver cross / Glitters o'er Malaga and streams dread light / On Moslem galleys, turning all their stores / From threats to gifts" (4). Architectural Muslim symbols are not spared either, like the famous Moorish palace of Alhambra in Granada "strong and ruddy heart / Of glorious Morisma, gasping now, / A maimed giant in his agony" (*TSG* 4). Sometimes both cross and sword are as one — a sword-cross — as in the aforementioned excerpt, or are at work together as in this much violent scene depicting, in barely veiled "crusading" terms, Apostle James, known as Santiago the patron saint

of Spain and its legendary religious hero who miraculously helped the Spanish in their war against Muslims:

> … the imaged saint,
> Apostle, baron, Spanish warrior,
> Whose charger's hoofs trample the turbaned dead,
> Whose banner with the Cross, the bloody sword,
> Flashes athwart the Moslem's glazing eye,
> And mocks his trust in Allah who forsakes. (*TSG* 42)

The final line in the excerpt quoted above is, so far, a new element in the Christian-Muslim contrasted imagery whose impact Eliot deliberately seeks to intensify with recourse to ostentatious religious and racial icons. This is the first time that the name of the Muslim god appears in the poem. All the elements delineated in this scene, like "the charger's hoofs trampl[ing] the turbaned dead"; or "the bloody sword [that] flashes athwart the Moslem's glazing eye" are actually visible to any viewer of such common heroic and patriotic popular images of the Spanish saint. What is absolutely invisible, however, and which obviously needs interpretation on the part of both reader and viewer is the saint's "bloody sword" that "mocks [the Moslem's] trust in Allah who forsakes". This extra metaphorical line, deliberately added to the physical image of the crusading Spanish saint, is utterly provocative and, for a Muslim, definitely "blasphemous" as Allah is believed to be the One who never forsakes his creatures. This encounter that opposes the Christian saint and the Muslim god will be repeated in other occurrences in the poem when, during battle, the Muslim cries "Help us, Allah!" and the Spaniard "Heaven's chosen, God and Santiago" (*TSG* 166), or "pale fear is Allah! God with Santiago" (167).

The second time Allah is cited in *The Spanish Gypsy*, it is in completely reversed terms to those mentioned above — which is justified by the object of Zarca's request. In the closing lines of a letter he sends to his ally, the Moorish emir el Zagal, Zarca subtly reminds the latter of the promise made to the Gypsies of safe exile in North Africa:

> Let the Moor, too, be faithful and repay
> The Gypsy with the furtherance he needs
> To lead his people over Bahr el Scham
> And plant them on the shore of Africa.
> So may the King El Zagal live as one
> Who, trusting Allah will be true to him,
> Maketh himself as Allah true to friends. (176)

In these last two lines, therefore, Eliot is obviously compelled to restore both the Muslim's trust in his god and Allah's duty to be true to the people who trust him. Moreover, the subtlety of these lines equally reveals her well-documented knowledge of the Muslim's faith and the relation of "trust" that intimately binds him to his god, which she deliberately chose to break when she made Allah "forsake" his worshippers.

The third time Allah is cited in the poem, he seems to be at a safe distance from the Christian sword as he stands "unconquered", "still" bestowing his blessing upon the

Muslim stronghold of Guadix, home to el Zagal — but for how long yet, as is subtly implied by the *time* adverb "still" ? The Moslem god seems to have only been given a suspended sentence for the time being as he is protected by the Moors' "dark arms" and "dark breasts". Very often in *The Spanish Gypsy* both religious and racial stereotyped characteristics intersect as is shown in the following excerpt where dark skin (as opposed to white) stigmatizes the Muslim other. In the rest of the poem, it indistinctly connotes Muslims, Jews and Gypsies alike:

> Where the meridian bends lies Guadix, hold
> Of brave El Zagal. This is Moorish land,
> Where Allah lives unconquered in dark breasts
> And blesses still the many-nourishing earth
> With dark-armed industry. (180)

The last time Allah is mentioned in *The Spanish Gypsy* he is, in Zarca's words, "bruised" by the repeated assaults of the Spanish Christian Reconquista, foreshadowing his inevitable defeat like that of the "maimed giant", Alhambra, "gasping now … in his agony" (244). Yet, however "bruised" he is, Allah still "keep avenging stores / Of patient wrath" (*TSG* 244). Even the Muslim prophet is not spared such prejudiced treatment as is clearly shown by this excerpt from a Spanish soldier's song in the poem: "The sword be red forever / With the blood of false Mahound" (166), or by this other excerpt: "Since first Pelayo and his resolute band / Trusted the God within their Gothic hearts / At Covadunga, and defied Mahound; / Beginning so the Holy War of Spain" (*TSG 8*). It is worth noting at this point that in a letter to her teacher Miss Lewis on 21 May 1840, the then Calvinist young Mary Anne Evans (a.k.a George Eliot) put forth her project to draw a chart of ecclesiastical history, but which she intended not to continue beyond the year 606 because "mahommedanism became a besom of destruction in the hand of the Lord, and completely altered the aspect of ecclesiastical history" (*Life & Letters* 32). Twenty years later, in *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot's opinion on Islam and the Muslim prophet does not seem to have changed much.

With this conspicuous use of religious iconography, Eliot frequently associates images of extreme violence and barbaric cruelty, usually suggested by the sword, blood[5], and beheaded bodies as has already been made clear from Eliot's depicting of the Muslim el Zagal (*TSG* 4), or the "turbaned dead" trampled by the horse of the Christian saint Santiago (*TSG* 42). Extreme violence, connoting both racial and religious prejudice, is also suggested by such words as "purging" and "cleansing": "The sacred places shall be purged again / The Turk converted" (*TSG* 7); Granada "cleanse[d] from the infidel" (*TSG* 174); the mosque, too, "is cleansed" (*TSG* 18). As Daniela Flesler points out: "There is a long history of accusing Spain of being 'impure' in racial, cultural, and religious terms because of its connections to oriental and African elements and the mingling of Christians with Jews and Arabs" (20). In present times, "purging" and "cleansing" are frequently used by the media to talk about a country in which ethnic or religious extermination is taking place; the word's Latin etymon "purgare" needs no explanation as it unambiguously denotes the act of "purification", whether of race or religion.

Moreover, Eliot's off-stage narrator and other voices in the dramatized poem relay to the reader prejudiced views against Islam and Muslims — whatever their appellation: Moors or Arabs — by means of a markedly biased discourse. Both their stereotyped

racial characterization in the poem and the ostentatious religious iconography used to represent warring communities in Moorish Spain present Muslim suspicious, vicious and barbaric character in marked contrast with the heroic Spanish "crusaders consecrated from the womb" (*TSG* 8) or the crusading heroism of their saint alternating, at the same time, images of the Cross "sparkling on the Mosque" (*TSG* 4) with those of a "bruised" Allah "who forsakes" his trustful believers. The ostentatious religious and racial character of this iconography is eventually reinforced by the extremely violent acts of "purging" and "cleansing" of Christian sacred places, Moorish towns like Granada, and even mosques from any trace left by impure Muslims.

At the time Christian Spain is being "purged" and "cleansed" from "Moslem infidels", and the holy war getting closer to its end, Eliot is urged to find a solution for her Gypsy protagonists: a land where they should be able to found a nation and a state of their own. The problem, however, proves much more difficult and complicated than the Jewish one in *Daniel Deronda*, as Gypsies have no historical claim to any land, and no God to guarantee a "Promised" one, either. So, Eliot turns to her oft-repeated claim of sympathy for and compassion with oppressed minorities[6] to settle the matter. She eventually decides to send Fedalma's people to Muslim land, in North Africa where, in fact, they do not historically belong at all. Ironically, it is Muslim gratitude for Gypsies' loyal services that finally grants the latter a piece of land in Tunisia; it is also "grisly" Muslim el Zagal who makes Eliot's utopian solution possible in the poem. The "dark" Moorish and Gypsy races are evicted from European land — as "Europe is come to her majority / And enters on the vast inheritance / Won from the tombs of mighty ancestors" (*TSG* 5) — and ultimately return to the East where they originally came from. Apart from a romanticized picture from her readings, Eliot has no real knowledge about North Africa[7], which she exotically associates with the East, and sends the Spanish Gypsies to the ancient Punic capital Carthage, a desolate two-millennium old heap of ruins. Even so, it is Muslims and their Muslim land that allow Eliot a somewhat dignified exit that enables her to extricate herself from the deadlocked fifteenth-century racial and religious conflict she had purposefully chosen as a historical setting for her poem. From this perspective, Eliot has apparently failed both to achieve nationhood and statehood for the "Pariah" of nineteenth-century Europe whom she sympathizes with, and to convince her reader of the usefulness of "the consolatory elements in *The Spanish Gypsy*" (*Life & Letters* 511). *The Spanish Gypsy* fails, therefore, to address the expectations of a landless, stateless community whose national tragedy endures to the present day. It succeeds, however, in leaving the reader with a prejudiced view of the suspicious, vicious and extremely cruel Muslim other.

Notes

[1]. Ahmad ibn Mohammed al-Makkari was born in Tlemcen in 1577 (referred to as Telemsan in both Gayango's translation and George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*) and died in Cairo in 1632. His History of al-Andalus or Moorish Spain was originally entitled *Nafh al-tib min ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib*. Its Arabic version was printed in eight volumes in Beirut, Lebanon in 1968.

[2]. When Eliot was questioned about her use of the term "Andalus" for "Andalusia" she replied that she "had a sufficient authority for that in the *Mohammedan Dynasties*, translated by Gayangos." (*Life & Letters* 526)

[3]. Eliot apparently makes anachronistic reference to the Turk in the poem when she writes: "The sacred places shall be purged again, / The Turk converted" (*TSG* 7).

[4]. In "Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*" Eliot explains both her interest in and sympathy for people born with "the commonest inherited misfortunes" (*Life & Letters* 510), such as Gypsies: "Love, pity, constituting sympathy, and generous joy with regard to the lot of our fellow men, comes … enormously enhanced … by an imagination actively interested in the lot of mankind generally" (*Life & Letters* 511).

[5]. Blood, in *The Spanish Gypsy*, is used as a symbol of both violence and race. As a universal symbol of racial ties within a community, Eliot indistinctly uses it for Christians, Jews, Gypsies and Muslims alike.

[6]. Nancy Henry does not miss the point when she writes: "There is irony in romanticizing and ennobling the conflict of races in Moorish Spain and the heroism of the warrior Gypsies after denying Thornie's wish to fight for the Poles and minimizing his engagement with the Basutos" in Africa where he settled with his brother as colonists (176).

[7]. As Eliot herself admits when she wrote to her friend Bodichon about her visit to Spain in 1867: "Perhaps if I had been in Africa, I should say as you do that the country reminded me of Africa: as it is, I think of all I have read about the East" (*Life & Letters* 490).

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