

# GLOBAL TURK:

## The Muslim as the Familiar Unknown in the Global Epics of the Renaissance



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*“Global Turk” examines the representation of Muslim figures in Luis Vaz de Camões’ Os Lusíadas and Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata. In these works, Muslims are not represented as unfamiliar and alien, but rather as well-known, almost familiar antagonists – they are instances of the supposedly well-known Other. The article argues that this happens for historical reasons – both Camões and Tasso wrote in a period where the Ottoman Empire loomed large in the European imagination – but also for reasons of genre. In these two late-renaissance epics, Muslim Others are modelled after the narrative conventions of the classical (and pagan) epic tradition, leading to strange, hybrid figures especially in Gerusalemme Liberata. The article also argues that the figure of the Muslim becomes a way of familiarizing the descriptions of otherwise strange and unfamiliar parts of the globe – the details of Indian society in Os Lusíadas, for instance.*

Luis Vaz de Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* from 1572, which historically has been considered the national epic of Portugal, traces the story of Vasco da Gama and his crew, who in 1498 became the first Europeans to reach Asia following the southern coast of Africa. In the seventh canto of the epic, they finally reach their destination, India, whose spices they intend to buy in order to increase the wealth of Portugal. The ships cast anchor outside of the South Indian city of Calicut – a city that has served as the heart of the spice trade since Antiquity. An envoy thus sets out to introduce himself at the court of the local ruler:

As the fleet anchored off this rich domain,/ One of the Portuguese was  
dispatched/ To make known to the Hindu king/ Their arrival from such  
distant shores./ He left the estuary for the river,/ Where the like never  
having been witnessed,/ His pale skin, his garments, and strange air/  
Brought crowds of people hurrying to stare.

Among those who came running to see him/ Was a Mohammedan born  
in Barbary,/ That region where in ancient times/ The giant Antaeus held  
sway./ Either he knew it as a neighbour,/ Or was already marked by its  
swords,/ But Portugal he knew at all events/ Though fate had exiled him  
a long way thence.

Catching sight of the envoy, he exclaimed/ In delight, and in fluent Castilian/ – ‘Who brought you to this other world/ So far from your native Portugal?’/ – ‘Exploring,’ he replied, ‘the vast ocean/ Where no human being ever sailed;/ We come in search of the River Indus;/ To spread the faith of Christ is our purpose.’<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, the quoted passage pulls in two directions. On the one hand, it highlights the difference between European Portugal and Asian India. The envoy, with his pale skin and peculiar clothing, is something wholly new to the natives, and India is referred to as “this other world”. On the other hand, the first person to speak to the envoy is precisely not a foreigner, but a Muslim from the southern Mediterranean coast. Monsayeed, as his name is revealed to be, speaks and understands Castilian, and for the rest of *Os Lusíadas*, he becomes the assistant of the Portuguese expedition in the foreign land. In the penultimate canto of the epic, he converts to Christianity. In the midst of the unknown, a familiar figure appears, but so does a familiar conflict: Christians against Muslims. This specific instance of the conflict is resolved through Monsayeed’s conversion, but Camões spends the rest of *Os Lusíadas* showcasing a much more violent struggle between Europe and Islam.

Presenting the unknown as something at once familiar and new occurs in other parts of *Os Lusíadas*, and also in the Italian writer Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* from 1581, the other major successful attempt from the Late Renaissance at updating the classical genre of the epic. In both works, the Muslim serves a twofold purpose, being at once the antithesis of the Christian hero and the figure that makes the unknown familiar.

This is in part due to the two writers’ choice of genre. On the one hand, the understanding of the epic that we find in the Late Renaissance demands that the works be historically accurate. For Camões especially, this meant that *Os Lusíadas* had to be constructed on a matrix of historical sources and events that had a decidedly non-epic flavour. On the other hand, the texts inscribe their historical material in a cosmic order and a narrative structure – the opposition of epic hero and adversary, the existence of divine beings aiding

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<sup>1</sup> Camões: *The Lusíads* 1997, canto VII, stanzas 23–25. “Chegada a frota ao rico senhorio,/ Um Português, mandado, logo parte/ A fazer sabedor o Rei gentío/ Da vinda sua a tão remota parte./ Entrando o mensageiro pelo rio/ Que ali nas ondas entra, a não vista arte./ A cor, o gesto estranho, o traje novo,/ Fez concorrer a vélo todo o povo.// Entre a gente que a vê-lo concorria,/ Se chega um Mahometa, que nascido/ Fora na região da Berberia,/ Lá onde fora Anteu obedecido./ (Ou, pela vezinhança, já teria/ O Reino Lusitano conhecido,/ Ou foi já assinalado de seu ferro;/ Fortuna o trouxe a tão longo desterro).// Em vendo o mensageiro, com jocundo/ Rosto, como quem sabe a língua Hispana,/ Lhe disse: – “Quem te trouxe a estoutro mundo,/ Tão longe da tua patria Lusitana?”/ – “Abrondo (lhe responde) o mar profundo/ Por onde nunca veio gente humana;/ Vimos buscar do Indo a grão corrente,/ Por onde a Lei divina se acrescenta.”” (Camões 1972, canto VII, stanzas 23–25).

in turn the hero and his adversary – both of which were shaped by the tradition of the classical epic and could be used, although not without some consequence, in the portrayal of the struggle between Christians and Muslims. Finally, this unique presentation of the exotic as something at once unknown and familiar is due in part to the fact that the understanding of the world in these epic works is viewed through what late 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe perceived as the greatest global conflict: the struggle between Muslims and Christians. If one is to understand not just how these works present the Muslim as the adversary of the Christian, but also how they use him as the structuring principle in the portrayal of a non-European world, all of these factors (genre, historical sources, ideology) will have to be taken into account.

### Epic and history

As a genre, the epic has always been filled with exotic travels and strange creatures. Odysseus traversed a simultaneously mythical and historical Mediterranean Sea, Aeneas travelled from the Near East along the southern coast of the Mediterranean and through the underworld in order to reach Rome, where he would lay the founding stones of a future empire. It therefore comes as no surprise that the attempts at reviving the ancient epic found in the Renaissance abound with traveling heroes and foreign cultures. At the same time, however, the tradition branches out. In the first offshoot, which we find in attempts from the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century at turning medieval chivalric romances into epic poetry (most famously with Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516/1532)), a playful, ironic and not entirely realistic depiction of the world is developed.

In Ariosto's branching and digressive narrative, the siege of Paris carried out by the Moors can be seen as the story's missing centre, but in most parts of the tale he lets his wandering knights travel to Japan, India, Ethiopia – even the moon! – with the aid of wizards, flying ships and, in one case, a Pegasus. The journey from one place to another is almost completely hassle-free, as if traveling from one end of the world to the other posed no practical problem whatsoever. Strangely, the knights encounter the same things everywhere they go: other knights, giants, wizards, sorceresses, a whole gallery of faces from the chivalric romances. The outside world in these texts appears purely as decoration. Realistically speaking, there is little difference between here and there.

The other, later offshoot arises from the 16<sup>th</sup> century's somewhat selective reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>2</sup>. Following the conquest of Byzantium by the

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<sup>2</sup> This claim is based on Werner 1977; Dionisotti 1967, especially the chapter "La letteratura italiana nell'età del concilio di Trento".

Ottoman Empire in 1453, a group of scholars versed in Greek fled to Italy. In their possession were transcripts of the original Greek of the *Poetics*, which until then had only been known in Europe through Latin translations of Averroes' Arabian retelling. In Italy, the first translation into Latin was printed in 1498. Inspired by the *Poetics* a group of predominantly Italian critics and poets started accusing Ariosto and his chivalric romances for being unrealistic and incoherent. His works might have amused their audience, but they failed to live up to the ideals of the epic form. More accurately, they lived up neither to the ideal of credible presentation of historical events, which was inferred from Aristotle's idea of *mimesis*, nor to the ideal of unity of story that was transposed from his discussions of the tragedy into the ideals of the epic form of the day. The ideal epic poem – that which could elevate works written in the vernaculars to (or possibly even surpass) the level of Homer and Virgil – should be written in the high style, should live up to the demand for a coherent narrative, and should live up to an idea of probability, which in this case also meant that the works should treat documentable events, preferably related to war and the fate of the political community. The works of both Tasso and Camões belong to this latter historical branch of the epic of the Renaissance.

The change in focus from the adventures of the wandering knight to epic tales of fateful historical events – anachronistically: from a private to a public story – naturally led to an increased focus in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century on the battle against Muslims. For Catholic Europe, the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by two historical events: The Counter-Reformation and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire to the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. The Battle of Lepanto in 1571 brought with it a certain hope that the Christian rulers would be able to resist the threat from the East, if only they could stand together – indeed it is no coincidence that both *Os Lusíadas* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* encourage the rulers of the day to cease warring with each other and instead fight the Turk. Even if it would be an exaggeration to suggest that the differences between Christians and Muslims did not exist in the early knightly epics, there is still a considerable distance from the introduction to Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), wherein Christian and Saracen knights sit side by side at the court of Carl the Great, to the epics of Tasso and Camões, where the focus is directed towards a global conflict between Christians and Muslims – a conflict that, especially in the writings of Tasso, grows to cosmic proportions. In both his and Camões' writings, the Muslim is repeatedly cast as the other – not in the sense of the culturally different, but as the antagonist, the epic adversary, the enemy of the Christian kingdoms and heroes.

### Camões – the transformation of India

However, the demands required by the post-classical epic often pulled in different directions. Often, there was a considerable gap between the principal demands of the epic in the Late Renaissance: the models and typical scenes that were inherited, so to speak, from the epics of Antiquity; the characters and narratives found in the historical material; and the notions and events from the works' own time, which they of course also drew on and related to. In *Os Lusíadas* especially, we see clearly the tensions between the demands of the genre and the historical material.

On the one hand, Camões sticks rather closely to the sequence of events that is laid out in all the available sources on the travels of Vasco da Gama. Just as Camões recounts, da Gama set out from Portugal along a somewhat familiar route following the African west coast, veered out into the Atlantic so as to not meet the headwind when sailing towards the southern tip of Africa, followed in the footsteps of the old explorer Bartolomeu Dias around the Cape of Good Hope and from there on sailed up along the eastern coast of Africa, where he repeatedly came into conflict with the local Muslim rulers. Camões also tells us that da Gama was prescient enough to have with him fluent speakers of Arabic, just as it is clear that he, during the final part of his voyage from East Africa to India, was aided by a presumably Indian guide. Put briefly, the epic shows that Vasco da Gama was the first to sail from Europe south of Africa to India, and that only 7 weeks out of the 10 months the voyage took was spent in unknown waters. Finally, we see in the work that da Gama's time in India was in fact relatively short and could only be considered a minor success, since he failed to establish diplomatic agreements and bring home the trade samples, which were the stated goals of the journey.

On the other hand, we find a number of displacements. A series of less heroic events, detailed in the diary or travelogue titled *Roteiro da Viagem de Vasco da Gama*, written by one of the members of da Gama's crew, are conspicuously missing in *Os Lusíadas*, such as when da Gama tortures a Muslim guide for mistaking an island for the African mainland; when da Gama blackmails the ruler of Malindi by holding a Muslim merchant hostage; when da Gama is humiliated for not bringing impressive enough gifts for the ruler of Calicut; or when a large part of the ship's crew die from scurvy on their way home from India. Instead, da Gama's voyage is inserted explicitly into a framework in which any kind of resistance or opposition is met with a kind of double explanation. Within the workings of the epic, the (according to stories passed down from Antiquity) Indian-born Bacchus opposes the Christians' journey of discovery. Conversely, we see Venus playing the role of aid to and defender of the Portuguese. From time to time, the two members

of the Greek pantheon ally themselves with other figures from the Greco-Roman mythology. The entire world in *Os Lusíadas* is structured by an epic order inherited from the classical tradition – one which Camões himself nevertheless pulls the rug out from under in the last cantos of his epic. On a different (primarily political and historical) level, any kind of resistance is explained away as Muslim conspiracies against the invading Christians, just as da Gama's voyage is painted exclusively as part of the Christian conquest of the world. Paradoxically, this results not just in increasing the distance between da Gama and the foreigners, but also in a familiarisation of the latter that is without historical basis. In short, they cease appearing as exotic aliens and rather come to be cast as helpers or adversaries of the epic hero.

Let us return to the scene from *Os Lusíadas* where the Portuguese envoy encounters a Castilian-speaking Muslim in Calicut. This scene is modelled on a passage from *Roteiro*. The first envoy of the Portuguese is directed to two Muslims, perhaps because the locals believe him to be a Muslim as well:

And he was taken to a place where there were two Moors from Tunis, who knew how to speak Castilian and Genoese. And the first greeting that they gave him was the following: – The Devil take you! What brought you here? And they asked him what he had come to seek from so far; and he replied: – We came to seek Christians and spices. And they said to him: – Why do the King of Castile and the King of France and the Seignory of Venice not send men here? And he replied that the King of Portugal did not permit them to do so. And they said that he did well. Then they welcomed him and gave him wheaten bread with honey, and when he had eaten, he came back to the ship. And one of those Moors came back with him, who as soon as he entered the ships, began to say these words: – *Buena ventura, buena ventura!* Many rubies, many emeralds! You should give many thanks to God for having brought you to a land where there are such riches!<sup>3</sup>

The differences between these two takes on the same scene are worth noting. As the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam notes in *The Career and Legend of*

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<sup>3</sup> The English translation is quoted from Subrahmanyam 1997, 129. “[...] e aquelas com que elle hia levarano honde estavam dous mouros de Tunez que sabiam fallar castellano e januês, e a primeira salva que lhe deram foy esta que se ao diante segue: – Al diablo que te doo: quem te traxo aquã? E preguntaram-lhe que vinhamos buscar tam lonje, e elle lhe rrespondeo: – vimos buscar christãos e esperciaria. – Elles lhe disseram: – porque nom manda quã elrey de Castella e elrey de França e a senhoria de Veneza? – e elle lhe rrespondeu que elrey de Portugall nom queria consentir que elles quã mandasem, e elles disseram que fazia bem. Emtam o agasalharam e deramlhe de comer pam trigo com mell, e depois que comeo vêose pera os navios e vêo com elle huum daquelles mouros, o quall tanto que foy em os navios começou de dizer estas palavras: – boena vemtura, boena vemtura: muitos rrobis, muitas esmeraldas: muitas graças devês de dar a Deus por vos trazer a terra honde ha tanta rriqueza.” (*Roteiro da Viagem de Vasco da Gama* 1861, 51).

*Vasco da Gama*, this and numerous other passages from *Roteiro* showcase how the reception of European travellers in India and Africa were determined by complex and ever-shifting alliances between the non-European peoples. For example, the two Muslims seem to regard the Christians neither as infidels nor as competing merchants, but rather as people who, as opposed to the alien, local population, come from home and therefore should be aided and treated with hospitality. The final remark by one of the Muslims – “You should give many thanks to God” – seems to negate any conflict between Muslims and Christians altogether.

The statement “We come to seek Christians and spices” spoken by the envoy points to the two primary motives of the Portuguese seafarers. By directing an expedition south of Africa, the Portuguese King Manuel I desired to locate an alternative trade route to the familiar, which ran via Venice through the Middle East to India and were problematic for the European kings. At the same time, there was a desire to uncover a Christian kingdom, one which was supposed lie far to the east and which would be an important ally in the war against Muslims. The goal, then, was not so much to act as missionaries or to uncover an unknown world, but to (re)locate the connections between the different Christian nations spread across the globe. One of the aspects of da Gama’s voyage that seems oddest to contemporary eyes is thus how he and his crew believed the population of Calicut to be Christian. When in *Roteiro* we later hear of the conflicts between da Gama and the Muslim merchants in Calicut, we frequently see the Portuguese threatening to seek protection under the wing of the Christian ruler of Calicut – who was in fact Hindu<sup>4</sup>.

Events are portrayed differently in *Os Lusíadas*. Though the epic work clearly states that the goal of the voyage was to establish a new trade route, Camões repeatedly reminds us that da Gama’s journey should be seen as a key moment in the Christian conquest of the world. According to Camões this conquest began with the *reconquista* of Spain and Portugal, seamlessly continued with the Portuguese raids in North Africa and culminated in the establishment in the 16<sup>th</sup> century of Portugal’s maritime, Asian empire. We see this, among other places, in the retrospective view on the history of Portugal found in cantos three to five, which in fact urges Christian Portugal to regard the explorations as the continuation of the battles fought on the Iberian Peninsula. The shifts towards a more aggressive, mission-like and imperial mentality are also evident in a comparative reading of the encounter in Calicut as Camões portrays it and the version found in the logbook. In the quote from da Gama’s logbook, the envoy is *led* to the Muslims, while in

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<sup>4</sup> *Roteiro da Viagem de Vasco da Gama*, 1861, 70–71. See also Rubiès 2000, 164cc.

Camões' version, it appears as if he accidentally bumps into Monsayeed while finding the way to the ruler of Calicut *on his own*. In a similar fashion, he stresses in his greeting how the expedition has braved unknown waters "Where no human being ever sailed" in order to reach India. On a more general note, Camões tends to downplay how India was not exactly familiar, but on the other hand not a completely unknown land in 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe – how else could a plan to sail to Calicut in order to buy spices and other goods have been conceived?<sup>5</sup>

The notion of India as an unknown land infected with well-known Muslims is present in several parts of *Os Lusíadas*. In the anonymously authored, handed down *Roteiro*, it appears clearly how da Gama as a foreigner attempts to find his place within an established and complex economic and diplomatic system in India – according to the logbook, the primary conflict of the Portuguese in Calicut occurred when they refused paying taxes for the trading goods in the cargo of their ships. At the same time, the logbook is clear about India and especially West Africa being located in the remotest regions of the known world – difficult places to locate, difficult to navigate inside of once located, and full of strange customs. In the writings of Camões seventy years later, da Gama's journey is painted as an orderly quest of discovery and conquest, opposed in vain by Bacchus and his Muslim henchmen – and yet (and in heroic fashion) da Gama discovers the way to an unknown continent<sup>6</sup>. Here, it is the Muslim advisers and merchants (and behind them, at the level of the epic scheme, Bacchus) that makes the ruler of Calicut turn against da Gama, rather than his own lack of discretion. Finally, Camões recounts how the Portuguese leave without having achieved anything:

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<sup>5</sup> Joan-Pau Rubiés details a series of eye-witness accounts from India including ones from before 1500, authoritatively concluding: "Southern India, especially the Malabar coast and the kingdom of Vijayanagara, received many European visitors during the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times" (Rubiés 2000, x). In all likelihood, the Portuguese king had already before the voyage of Vasco da Gama received information about India by Pêro da Covilhã, an Arabian-speaking, Portuguese explorer who in 1487 was dispatched to Asia and Africa to locate "Prester John", the mythical Christian king who was rumored to live in a kingdom to the east or south, and who might become an important ally in the battle against the Muslims. Covilhã traveled to both Calicut and Goa, where he discovered that, theoretically, it was possible to sail south of Africa. Later, he traveled to Mecca, arrived at the court of the Ethiopian king – a Coptic Christian – in 1492, and was kept there in captivity until his death in 1530. See Disney 2009, vol. 2, 43–44.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Hampton (Hampton 2009) examines the formal demands of the epic concerning its hero: "Camões poem depicts an epic journey that may or may not also be a diplomatic embassy. Or, we can reverse the formulation and say that it depicts a diplomatic embassy that may or may not also be an epic journey. But how can one write an epic poem whose hero is a diplomat?" (p. 102) – going on to demonstrate how Camões consequently downplays the diplomatic failures of the real Vasco da Gama.

He had laboured in vain for a treaty/ Of friendship with the Hindu king,  
To guarantee peace and commerce;/ But at least those lands stretching/  
To the dawn were now known to the world.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we see da Gama presented as someone who makes an unknown world familiar – not as the discoverer of a new trade route to a known, albeit strange part of the world. In *Os Lusíadas*, however, there is little doubt that the residents of Calicut are not Christians, but rather the diametric opposite of the Christians: Muslims and Hindus.

### Inner tensions

However, the accounts that we find in *Os Lusíadas* of non-European people and places are marked by a confusing ambiguity. In fact, the alien other is presented rather consequently in two different modes. On the one hand, Muslims, Hindus and African populations are placed within the conception of a mytho-historical past based on the stories from European Antiquity. In this regard, it is emphasised how these people were vanquished in the past and will be vanquished in the future. In some passages, however, the imperial tone is overruled by an inquisitive, almost scientific curiosity regarding natural phenomena, the appearances of foreigners, clothes and customs. Oftentimes, we find descriptions in Camões' writing focusing entirely on concrete and observable – in a sense superficial – details, rarely possessing a historical depth or other kind of deeper contemplation<sup>8</sup>.

The voice of the epic narrator in the beginning of the seventh canto thus declares India a poly-religious continent: "It is ruled by different kings/ Of various faiths; some follow Mohammed,/ Some worship Idols in their strange tongue,/ Some even the animals they live upon."<sup>9</sup> Later, the now converted Monsayeed informs Vasco da Gama of the national caste system and of the Brahmins who are disciples of the teachings of Pythagoras and who refuse to kill any living thing (canto VII, stanzas 37–40). However, when da Gama subsequently heads through the city in the company of its ruler Samorin, they stop at a temple where unknown Hindu deities are described only to be compared to known figures from Greek mythology. And on the outer wall of the castle of the local ruler, da Gama finds a depiction of the history of India

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<sup>7</sup> Camões 1997, canto IX, verse 13. "[...] em vão co' o Rei gentio trabalhava/ Em querer dele paz, a qual pretende/ Por firmar o comércio que tratava./ Mas como aquela terra, que se estende/ Pela Aurora, sabide já deixava." (Camões: *Os Lusíadas* 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Raman 2002, 29 cc., suggests that Camões' epic depicts the world based on the antique notion of the cosmos, as well as on the early modern idea of the world as a homogenous and essentially empty space for the individual explorer to uncover.

<sup>9</sup> Camões 1997, canto VII, stanza 17, verses 5–8. "Jugo de Reis diversos o constringe/ A várias leis: alguns o vicioso/ Mahoma, alguns os Idolos adoram,/ Alguns os animais que entre eles moram." (Camões 1972).

(canto VII, stanzas 51–54). As it turns out, it consists of three conquest expeditions from the West: The original conquest of India by Bacchus; the army of the Assyrian queen Semiramis, also believed to have conquered India; and the conquest of India by Alexander the Great. A blank part of the frieze suggests, as the herald of the local king explains, that a new conquest – by the Portuguese – is imminent:

Other conquests are fast approaching/ To eclipse these you are looking on;/ Fresh legends will be carved here/ By strange peoples yet to appear./ For so the pattern of the coming years/ Has been deciphered by our wisest seers.

And their mystic science declares/ Further, that no human resistance/ Can prevail against such forces,/ For man is powerless before destiny;/ But the newcomers’ sheer excellence/ In war and peace will be such, they say,/ Even the vanquished will feel no disgrace,/ Having been overcome by such a race.<sup>10</sup>

The myths of Antiquity foretell the imperial ambition of Portugal. The Portuguese repeat and carry out a conquest of the world in an echo of their ancient predecessors – da Gama simultaneously repeats and surpasses the travels of Odysseus, Aeneas and the Argonauts – just as Camões both imitates and outdoes the epics of Virgil and Homer.

If we hear another voice in *Os Lusíadas* than this epic tone of imperialism, it would be wrong to try to attribute it to those of the characters in the work who actively resist the imperialist ideology, such as it has been suggested by David Quint in his important book *Epic and Empire*. As Quint himself points out, there is a long-standing tradition within the epics of Antiquity of the “adversaries” making themselves heard, cursing their victorious enemies or engaging in lengthy speeches explaining their motives<sup>11</sup>. Neither should the opposite of the epic voice be connected, as is also done by Quint, to the digressive, non-teleological narrative strategies of the chivalric romance. While scenes inspired by this tradition can be found in a few places in *Os Lusíadas*, such as in the tale of the twelve Portuguese knights (canto VI, stanzas 42–69) and the Portuguese sailors’ final reward on the bewitched island of Venus, these scenes rather serve as light-hearted celebrations of the

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<sup>10</sup> Camões 1997, canto VII, stanzas 55–56. “Tempo cedo virá que outras vitórias/ Estas que agora olhais abaterão./ Aqui se escreverão novas histórias/ Por gentes estrangeiras que virão;/ Que os nossos sábios magos o alcançaram/ Quando o tempo future especularam.// E diz-lhe mais a mágica ciencia/ Que, para se evitar força tamanha,/ Não valerá dos homens resistência,/ Que contra o céu não val da gente manha;/ Mas também diz que a bélica excelência,/ Nas armas e na paz, da gente estranha/ Será tal, que sera no mundo ouvido/ O vencedor por glória do vencido.” (Camões 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Quint 1993, 106 ff; see also Meihuizen 2007, 82.

valour and achievements of the Portuguese. On the contrary, opposing voice should be located in those passages in *Os Lusíadas* which, if only momentarily, become preoccupied with concrete details.

One example is found in the first canto. da Gama and his crew reach Mozambique, encountering three foreign ships. Historically, this marks the moment where da Gama comes into contact with the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, but the focus is directed elsewhere. The epic narrator declares:

Our people were overjoyed and could only/ Stare in excitement at this wonder./ – ‘Who are these people?’ they kept exclaiming/ ‘What customs? What beliefs? Who is their king?’

Their craft, as we could see, were built/ For speed, being long and narrow;/ Their sails were made of a canvas/ Skillfully fashioned from palm leaves.<sup>12</sup>

No symbolism or deeper meaning should be read into these sails woven from palm leaves. One should not attempt to place them in relation to the myths of Antiquity, and they do not confer upon the natives some unique position – superior or inferior, as adversaries or helpers – in relation to the travellers from Europe. Soon they are replaced by descriptions of coloured clothing and striped loincloths (canto I, stanza 47), odd musical instruments (canto II, stanza 96), a tornado over the sea and women riding on cattle (canto V, stanzas 61–64). Phenomena such as these are mentioned without solidifying into a unified sense of a world, that is to say, without being placed in a more general conception of how the world is connected historically, culturally and geographically. They are present in the text because they simply were there when the journeys to India were undertaken.

This ability to register and maintain such simple observations can be seen as a result of the influence of the Portuguese empirical humanism on Camões<sup>13</sup>. It might also be caused by Camões himself having travelled from Portugal to India, where he stayed from 1553 until the late 1560s, thus being the first canonised European author to take up residence outside of Europe for an extended period of time. In any case, these are but brief glimpses.

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<sup>12</sup> Camões 1997, canto I, stanzas 45–46. “A gente se alvoroça e, de alegria,/ Não sabe mais que olhar a cause dela./ Que genta sera esta? em si diziam/ Que costumes, que Lei, que Rei teriam?” As embarcações eram na maneira/ Mui velozes, esteritas e compridas;/ As velas com que vem eram de esteira,/ Dumas folhas de palma, bem tecidas.” (Camões 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Disney 2009, 165; see also Klein 2011. As Klein points out, the description of da Gama’s voyage by Camões begins and ends with presentations of a cartographical view in which Europe is seen from above. The voyage itself, however, is described in a different mode (p. 245): “The global expanse triumphantly mapped in the final canto thus only comes into existence as an effect of the ship’s transit through that very expanse; it is a hard won, physically exhausting space, the result of tireless experiment and risky improvisation.”

Tellingly, it does not take long for Bacchus in the first canto to convince the local ruler to try and kill the Portuguese, giving the Europeans an opportunity to demonstrate their superior methods of warfare. Such is the general pattern in *Os Lusíadas*. The focus of the historical sources on the existing trade routes and diplomatic entanglements are replaced by a presentation where the encounters with the unknown might begin as an inquisitive gathering of data from exotic continents, but ends up being embedded in a easily recognisable narrative about the Christian discovery of a new world: the familiar epic tale of exploration, resistance and conquest in which the Muslims time and again are cast as adversaries.

Another important tension in *Os Lusíadas* occurs between how the epic work praises the expansion of Christianity and how, in its epic form, it naturally inherits classical, which is to say heathen, notions and characters. The most obvious (and somewhat comic) example of this duality is exhibited in the way the Muslims in *Os Lusíadas* might be the enemies of the Portuguese Christians, but are coaxed on by the ancient god Bacchus. The establishing of an epic machinery filled with heathen divinities, as well as the numerous references in *Os Lusíadas* to antique epics and ancient mythology, leads to a kind of rift between a cosmic and a historical plane in the work.

This rift is recognised within *Os Lusíadas*, which contains two separate explanations of the use of classical mythology. In canto IX, stanza 91, the epic narrator declares the mythical figures and gods of Antiquity to be human beings, who, because of their heroic actions, have become immortalised. And in canto X, stanza 82, verses 3–4, Thetis declares both herself and the antique gods to be “mere fables/ Dreamt by mankind in its blindness”. However, the establishing and subsequent “unveiling” of an epic machinery is not without consequences for the portrayal of Christianity and Islam. The conflict between the two is confined largely to the level of secular history, with the battle against Islam being presented as a political and (modern) historical conflict. This is especially clear in da Gama’s retelling of the history of Portugal, which we find in cantos III and IV.

Conversely, the work is almost completely devoid of any references to Christian theology, myths or eschatological notions. Put differently, the presentation of Christianity is surprisingly secular – not in the sense that a confrontation with the Christian faith takes place, but rather in how the view on Christianity pertains largely to this world. The idea of a Christian supremacy is tied not to Rome or Jerusalem, for instance, but to the way in which Christian rulers expand their power, in particular the king of Portugal. The Christian duty to act as missionary is mentioned briefly, such as in the quote at the beginning of this article, but it is soon drowned amid the noises of battle for political and territorial power. In a similar fashion, the battle for

Christianity tends to transform into a praise of the history of Portugal and its glorious future: the reclaiming of the Iberian Peninsula; the expansion into North Africa; the prophecy of a future empire. Tellingly, Camões' vision of a cosmic order climaxes with a prophecy enumerating the places in India Portugal will conquer. Camões takes advantage of the fact that the work takes place in 1498 (the prophecy is given by the nymph Tethis to da Gama in that year), but that the epic is written in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, he has access to the future of the past, allowing Tethis to prophesise with uncanny precision.

The consequence, then, is that the Christian conquest of the world tells a story and takes place in a geographical framework, both of which are only vaguely related to a Christian cosmos. Or, as the epic narrator declares, in one of those moments where he is clearly speaking from the 1570s and not 1498, complaining that the divide between Catholics and Protestants makes it impossible for the rulers of Europe to battle the threat from the Ottoman Empire:

But while in your blind, insane frenzy/  
You thirst for your brothers'  
blood in Christ,/ There will be no lack of Christian daring/  
In this little house of Portugal./ In Africa, they have coastal bases,/ In Asia, no one  
disputes their power;/ The New World already feels their ploughshare,/ And if fresh worlds are found, they will be there.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that *Os Lusíadas* is not a Christian work – it is – but that Camões' way of administering the epic genre results in a secularisation of Christianity. It is used as a political marker, indicating which side different actors belong to in a global conflict. But this also makes way for a representation of the conflict with Islam that focuses exclusively on the material world. And it ends up presenting the world as a more or less homogeneous space of continents, now available for (Christian) Portugal to discover and conquer. In this work, one finds no visions of the Apocalypse or any Christian miracles, no Christian *Heilsgeschichte* illuminating the world.

### Jerusalem, the centre of the world

Therein lies perhaps the greatest difference between *Os Lusíadas* and the Italian writer Torquato Tasso's epic work *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), the other major example of the Late Renaissance attempting to revive the antique epic genre. In Tasso's work, the epic machinery and the material world are

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<sup>14</sup> Camões 1997, canto VII, stanza 14. "Mas, entanto que cegos e sedentos/ Andais de vosso sangue, ó gente insane,/ Não faltaram Cristãos atrevimentos/ Nesta pequena casa Lusitana./ De Africa tem marítimos assentos;/ E na Asia mais que todas soberanas;/ Na quarta parte nova os campos ara;/ E, se mais mundo hougera, lá chegara." (Camões 1972).

not so rigorously divided, and it shows the battle between Muslims and Christians taking place in a geographical space that is permeated by Christian ideas. Here we find characters conquering Jerusalem rather than evangelising in India, and their actions are defined as Christian actions rather than Portuguese, French, German or Italian. On the whole, however, the two works have more than a few features in common. Both try consciously to revive and modernise the epic genre by engaging with events which they perceived as defining for the history of modern Europe. Both portray the struggle between Christianity and Islam as a global conflict. And both complain audibly of the way in which divisions within Europe weakens the battle against the real enemy, the Ottoman Empire.

Unlike Camões, Tasso succeeds in forging a surprisingly homogeneous work from the rather diverse demands for his epic work. Beneath the surface, however, the legacy of the Christian tradition, the chivalric romances, the classical epics and the historical material coalesce in startling ways. The siege and conquest of Jerusalem during the first crusade in 1099 might readily be understood as a metaphor for the conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Tasso's own time, but the event had to be reworked and manipulated thoroughly in order to provide material enough with which to fill an entire epic<sup>15</sup>. The divine machinery of the classical epic is replaced by the battle between God and Satan, who nevertheless possess character traits and narrative purposes similar to those attributed to the gods of Antiquity in the writings of Homer and Virgil<sup>16</sup>. For instance, God and Satan pay great attention to and intervene directly in the events taking place in Jerusalem. The wandering knights and courtly love from knightly poetry is integrated here as a way of tempting the heroes; love is a destiny of which they must free themselves before Jerusalem can be conquered. Similarly, the necessity of a united Christianity is mirrored in the epic events: In Tasso's retelling, the decisive challenge for the Christian leader Goffredo is not the battle against the Muslims, but keeping his own army together.

In a couple of highly successful books and essays, the Italian literary historian Sergio Zatti has argued *Gerusalemme Liberata* is structured by an opposition between a Christian unity, which is associated with discipline and control of the self, and a Muslim, or perhaps heathen, multitude who remain at the mercy of passion, sensuality and a labyrinthine world<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Zatti believes the opposition to be determined by the epoch – linking the Christian unity to the Christian re-armament during the Counter-Reformation and the passionate multitude to the supposed individualism and worldliness

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<sup>15</sup> Murrin 1994, 103 cc.

<sup>16</sup> See Gregory 2002; Nexø 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Zatti 1983; 1996; 1998.

of the Renaissance – as well as by genre, or at least to be tied to the way in which Tasso assimilates aspects of chivalric romance and subjects them to the demands of epic poetry. Finally, he argues that it is possible in the “heathen moments” of the work, such as when Satan gives a speech to his devils in canto IV, to trace a counter-current beneath the more general, ideological aim of presenting history as a teleological realisation of divine justice and, more tangibly, letting the rulers of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century see themselves mirrored in the first crusade, thus uniting them to combat the Ottoman Empire.

However inspiring it might be, Zatti’s reading applies more convincingly to the internal conflicts of the Christian army than it does to the depiction of the Muslim warriors found in *Gerusalemme Liberata*. In fact, the portrayal of the epic adversary found here is characterised more by local allusions than any global, ideological structure, making it more complex, even contradictory, than Zatti’s interpretation lets on. These allusions are not just, in fact not even primarily, related to Ariosto’s reworking of chivalric romance, but to a Greco-Roman literary legacy. In this case, a more prominent feature, it might be noted, is the lack of connection between the Muslim heroes and any higher powers. While they are aided by Satan, they are done so only in secret: whereas the Christian knights seem permeated by God, their adversaries remain rooted in this world. When Soliman, the Muslim ruler of Jerusalem, overlooks the final battle, he does not see the actions of divine providence, but rather the instability of secular history: “As on a stage or tourney-ground, he saw/ the bitter tragedy of human life/ horrors of death, attack, retreat, advance,/ and the great game of Destiny and Chance.”<sup>18</sup>

One episode from the final canto can both illustrate this secularisation of the Muslim and show how the battle against the Muslims in *Gerusalemme Liberata* is used to homogenise the representation of the non-European world in its entirety. The Christian army already having conquered most of Jerusalem, an army of infidels, led by the ruler of Egypt, nevertheless come to the aid of the Muslims of Jerusalem. Before the armies collide, Goffredo gives a speech to his men:

He halted where the mightiest/ and noblest squads were gathered, peer  
on peer,/ and standing on a great height he addressed/ the host, while  
rapture seized on every ear./ As in great torrents from an alpine crest/  
the melted snows rush down, so swift and clear/ poured from his lips,  
loud and magnificent,/ the words of his resounding argument:

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<sup>18</sup> Tasso 2009, canto XX, stanza 73. “mirò, quasi in teatro od in agone,/ l’aspra tragedia  
de lo stato umano;/ i vari assalti e ‘l fero orror di morte,/ e i gran giochi del caso e de la sorte.”  
(Tasso 1983).

'O Scourge of Jesus' enemies! O you,/ my army, tamers of the East!  
Behold!/ The final day is here, the goal in view/ That all of you so long  
yearned for of old./ Now Providence permits His rebels to/ Unite  
against us in a single fold./ Here all our foes are gathered and we go/  
To finish many wars with one great blow.'<sup>19</sup>

The speech given by Goffredo is permeated by a religious vocabulary: what unites the army is the battle against the enemies of Christianity without any reference to the nationalities of the Christians. Furthermore, the passage points rather explicitly towards a Christian eschatology, with the final moment in the battle described in religious colours. Finally, the speech shows how the global conflict is gathered into one point, and that this point, so to speak, is illuminated from above: Goffredo is elevated above his troops, his words descending to them. The last point is underscored by the light falling on Goffredo in the following stanzas appearing as a kind of halo around his forehead (canto XX, song 20). And not just in his case, but in *Gerusalemme Liberata* in general, all light seems to shine on Jerusalem. While the rest of the world is registered, it appears in a sort of half-gloom. Countries and cities of Europe are mentioned only insofar as the Christian knights pass through them, and Asian and Africa are defined predominantly as the places of origin of their enemies. Reclaiming Jerusalem from the Muslims, then, is presented as the equivalent of conquering the entire world.

When Jerusalem comes to appear as the centre of the world, it is in part because the Egyptian army literally encompasses all of the (non-European) people of the old world. As the Christian spy Vafrin exclaims upon seeing the army: "All Africa is here, and every race/ of Asia has converged upon this place."<sup>20</sup> Not just Egyptians are present here, but Syrians, Persians and the kings of India with their men too, along with black people from Ethiopia. The leader of this army, the renegade Emiren, addresses his troops before the battle as well. He does not speak to them from high above, though, and not as a whole, but rides about addressing them individually:

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<sup>19</sup> Tasso 2009, canto XX, stanzas 13–14. "Al fin colà fermossi ove le prime/ e più nobili squadre erano accolte,/ e cominciò da loco assai sublime/ parlare, ond'è rapito ogn'uom ch'ascolte./ Come in torrenti da l'alpestri cime/ soglion giù deriver le nevi sciolte,/ così correan volubili e veloci/ da la sua bocca le canore voci.// – O de' nemici di Giesù flagella,/ Campo mio, domator de l'Oriente,/ Ecco l'ultimo giorno, ecco pur quello/ Che già tanto bramaste omai presente./ Né senza alta cagion ch'il suo rubella/ Popolo or si raccolga il Ciel consente:/ Ogni vostro nimico ha qui congiunto/ Per fornir molte guerre in un sol punto." (Tasso 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Tasso 2009, canto XIX, stanza 58, verses 7–8. "Qui l'Africa tutta/ translata viene e qui l'Asia è condotta." (Tasso 1983).

He says to one: 'Why look so diffident/ my man? Why fear? How can one of these curs/ withstand a hundred? Surely they will fly/ at our mere shadow or our battle-cry.'

To another then: 'Brave fellow, wear that face/ when you reclaim what they have seized in prey!'/ In one man's mind he makes the fancy trace/ his homeland's very shape, who seems to pray,/ a frightened suppliant, for his native race/ and all his kin, in terror and dismay./ 'Think', said he, 'that your Country on her knees/ Pleads with you through my tongue in words like these

Defend my laws, keep safe my temples, and/ let not my blood the holy thresholds douse./ Preserve the virgins from the infidel's hand/ and the ancestral ashes of your house./ Lo! Mourning spent youth, all the old men stand/ and show you their white hairs. Behold! Your spouse/ shows you the cradle, shows the children fed/ by her chaste breast, shows you the nuptial bed.'<sup>21</sup>

One could analyse the varied speech of Emiren through Sergio Zatti's concept of pagan multiplicity – he literally goes from soldier to soldier, adapting his words to each individual. But his words do not in any way connect the non-Christian to sensuality, courtly love or individualism. Rather, Emiren draws upon a patriotic vocabulary modelled on a Roman example – more specifically on a passage from canto VII (stanzas 369–380) of Lucan's republican epic *Pharsalia*. The notions of the laws, the temple, the hearth and the chaste wife all point to the republican tradition of ancient Rome, and perhaps to the revitalisation of this legacy in the Italian Renaissance.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the continuity of the material world is highlighted. The soldiers are greeted by the previous and the following generation alike.

There is something bizarre about this: the soldiers in Emiren's army do, quite literally, not defend their own homeland, but come to the aid of Jerusalem. The speech, however, makes perfect sense as a kind of antithesis to the one given by Goffredo. Against the divine powers and the holy, Christian knights stands a secular patriotism, gaining its strength from the

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<sup>21</sup> Tasso 2009, canto XX, stanzas 24–26. "Talor dice ad alcun: – Perché dimesso/ mostri, soldato, il volto? e di che temi?/ che pote un contra cento? io mi confido/ sol con l'ombra fugarli e sol co 'l grido. –// Ad altri: – O valoroso, or via con questa/ faccia a ritôr la preda a noi rapita. –/ L'immagine ad alcuno in mente desta,/ glie la figura quasi e glie l'addita./ de la pregnante patria e de la mesta/ supplica famigliuola sbigottita./ – Credi – dicea – che la tua patria spieghi/ Per la mia lingua in tai parole i preghi:/ "Guarda tu le mie leggi, e i sacri tèmpi/ fa' ch'io del sangue mio non bagni e lavi;/ assecura le vergini da gli empi,/ e i sepolcri e le ceneri de gli avi."/ A te, piangendo i lor passati tempi,/ mostran la bianca chioma i vecchi gravi,/ a te la moglie le mammelle e 'l petto,/ le cune e i figli e 'l marital suo letto." (Tasso 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Viroli 1995, 18cc.

defence of a worldly, political community. And in opposition to the Christian strike from above, we see a world, the contours of which follow a medieval map, but whose primary function here is that of a multitude of non-Christian lands and peoples. The speech, it might be mentioned, resembles other passages in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, where the adversaries of the Christians briefly make themselves heard and where the events portrayed are seen from their perspective. A similar feature can be located in the speech delivered by Satan to his demons in canto IV. This is another speech modelled after an antique example, namely that given by Juno in the first canto of the *Aeneid*.<sup>23</sup> And there, too, the crusaders are depicted as Christian conquerors of the Orient, with the demons being called upon to defend the established kingdom of Satan on Earth.

If the Muslims are portrayed as secular and modelled after classical role models, they come to appear as not particularly Muslim at all.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Islam seems not to play any real role in *Gerusalemme Liberata*. It is cast as the great foe, while at the same time lacking any characterising description – it is not even described as a heretic deviation from the true faith. We find almost no descriptions of the features of Islamic faith, of minarets or mosques or of Middle-Eastern customs. Tellingly, the cosmic battle in Tasso's work is not between God and Allah, but between God and Satan; the Muslims are depicted as non-Christians, but not as members of a historically specific faith with its own unique features. Here, too, then, the non-European foreigners are represented in a way that casts them as the simultaneously familiar as well as the opposite of the familiar. Contrary to Camões account, however, this does not entail a secularisation at the level of the epic narrative. On the contrary, the world is registered in accordance with a religiously determined topography, that, while bringing a secular world into focus, nevertheless connects the life of the material world, its countries and historico-political universe to the enemies of Christianity.

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In the writings of both Tasso and Camões, the presentation of Muslims is coloured by the historico-ideological horizon within which the works are embedded: The Catholic Counter-Reformation and the war against the Ottomans. However, it is also marked by the attempts of both writers to revive the classical epic. In both of their works, the epic offers a narrative form wherein the Muslims seem to take up a natural position as the adversary of the epic hero. At the same time, the works showcase how the attempt to write

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<sup>23</sup> Nexø 2002; Murrin 1994, 206cc.

<sup>24</sup> Godard 1990, 325cc.; 378.

epics based on the conflict between Christians and Muslims is complicated both by the historical material, which only barely allowed itself to be adapted to the demands of the epic genre, as well as by features inherent to the genre itself. The attempts are complicated especially by the epic tradition of having the opposing parties in the epic conflict be supported by a set of deities. In any case, rather than making possible an understanding of the world outside of Europe, the Muslim in both *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Os Lusíadas* works predominantly as a figure of homogenisation, transforming the exotic and unknown into a familiar foreigner.

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