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***Sapientia vincit Malitiam. Informing and deforming knowledge. Dante's Inferno XXVIII and the anti-Muhammad legend of the bull and the holy book: a schismatic.... in the realm***".

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GIUSTIZIA MOSSE IL MIO ALTO FATTORE;  
FECEMI LA DIVINA PODESTATE,  
LA SOMMA SAPIENZA E 'L PRIMO AMORE (*Inf. III, 4-6*)

In *Inferno* XXVIII (T. J. Cachey Jr., 2010; K. Mallette 2007; C. di Fonzo 2001) Muhammad is placed among schismatics and sowers of discord. He reveals himself to the pilgrim Dante as divided in two:

Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,  
com'io vidi un, così non si pertugia,  
rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla (*Inf. XXVIII, 22-24*)

It has long been claimed that Muhammad's divided body in Dante's hell stems from the wrong conviction that the prophet converted Christians to Islam, thereby dividing the unity of the Church; or that he was himself "a Christian whose schismatic behavior took the form of founding what Dante considered a rival sect rather than a new religion, Islam. Thus Mohammad reveals himself as divided in two" (R. Hollander - J. Hollander 2000, 48). It is well known that Muhammad converted pagans and not Christians to Islam. As for Christianity, Vincent de Beauvais (ca. 1190-1264?), Alexandre du Pont in his *Roman de Mahomet* (1258), Pietro

Alighieri in the first redaction of his *Comentum* (1340-1350) and Francesco da Buti (1324-1406) all claim that Muḥammad knew the Old and the New Testament (R. Morosini 2005)<sup>1</sup>. For Du Pont, Muḥammad knew the teachings of Jesus Christ, knew and read the Bible; but as is well noted,—in pre-muslim Arabia, the two monotheistic faiths, the Jewish and the Christian, were primarily known orally and Muḥammad would not have had directly read the Holy Scriptures, since he hardly knew how to read and write (G. Walter - F. Gabrieli 1965, 89). Gabrieli's thesis about Muḥammad's illiteracy is supported by the introduction into the anti-Muḥammad legend of a wicked instigator, Sergius or Niccolao who, according to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century commentator Guiniforto delli Bargigi (or Barzizza), looked for somebody to alienate these peoples from the Christian faith, establish a new order, and obtain from them whatever he wanted. As I argued in a previous study (R. Morosini 2012)<sup>2</sup>, the commentators on canto XXVIII attribute the division that occurred with the foundation of Islam to Niccolao, a fraudulent counselor who was angry with the Church and wanted to take revenge by manipulating the young Muḥammad, provoking a division with the Church. Sometimes Sergius is kept hidden by Muḥammad, who wants to learn about the Old and New Testament and later claim to the crowd that the angel Gabriel revealed those prophecies to him. But in the *Tractatus* the simple and honest hermit *Bahayra* [sc. Baḥīrā] instructs Muḥammad to keep him away from the cult of idols (A. d'Ancona 1994<sup>3</sup>). In the *Otia de Machomete* by Gautier de Compiègne (ca. after 1137)<sup>3</sup>, and Du Pont's *Roman de Mahomet*, where responsibility for the new law is attributed to Muḥammad alone, polemical Christian biographers of the prophet transmitted the image of a scoundrel, pervert, magician, heretic who founded a new religion (J.V. Tolan 1996; T. Barolini 2011), dividing the Church.

If Muḥammad founded a new religion, why is he not among the heretics in Dante's *Inferno*? If a fraudulent advisor, Sergius or Niccolao, is responsible, why is Muḥammad, and not they, among the heretics or schismatics? Finally, if schism is punished in pit 9 of the eighth circle of Malice, which is synonymous with Fraud, what kind of fraud did Muḥammad commit? In the attempt to provide an answer, I turned to two anti-Muḥammad legends concerning the life of the Prophet: one tells of a dove trained by the fraudulent advisor to peck on Muḥammad's ears, so everyone believes it is the holy spirit proclaiming him a new prophet; the other, less known and never mentioned by commentators to *Inferno*, maintains that a bull, trained by Muḥammad himself, shows up at a signal to carry the holy book. As the calf has been trained to eat from his lap, it seems to the astonished crowd, to kneel to Muḥammad, to whom it delivers the new law [Fig. 2]. I will focus on the legend of the bull and its relations with the punishment suffered by Muḥammad in Dante's *Inferno*.

The aim of this study is to show that Dante follows Du Pont's anti-Muḥammad tradition which attributes the responsibility for the new faith to Muḥammad alone and not to a fraudulent advisor, and that he is punished among schismatics not for founding Islam, but for reasons related to rhetoric and poetry, namely the role played by the holy book in the legend of the bull.

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<sup>1</sup>All quotes from commentaries to Dante's *Inferno* are from the Dartmouth Dante Project [<http://dante.dartmouth.edu>].

<sup>2</sup> I study the role of the wicked counselor who, in some versions of the same legend, is kept prisoner by Muḥammad, so that he could later claim to receive prophecies from the angel Gabriel.

<sup>3</sup> The date of composition of the *Otia* is still moot. Y. Lepage - R.B.C.Huygens (1977) 83 maintain that the *Otia* could only be composed after 1137.

The mutilations and divisions characterizing the canto from the start with the dismembered bodies of soldiers and punished schismatics, become, in Mu□ammad’s case, emblematic of his sin, which is the deformation of the Book.

Within this perspective and the law of the *contrapasso*, Mu□ammad reveals himself to the pilgrim Dante truly as a volume, a “libro che si squaderna,” using Dante’s verse in *Paradiso* XXIII (85-87), a torn and lacerated book<sup>4</sup>, just as he lacerated and mutilated the Book by fabricating a new book made of a mixture of fables and doctrines, Jewish, Christian and new laws. To make himself credible as a prophet, he used an image familiar to believers: the episode in *Exodus* (*Ex.* 31, 12-40) when Moses receives the laws as a tangible sign from God of his election to prophet: God gave Moses on Mount Sinai two tablets of stone written by the finger of God (*Ex.* 31, 18) [Fig. 3]. So, Dante believes that the fraud committed by Mu□ammad is an ethical and civic problem of trust, rather than a religious heresy.

By counterfeiting a new law, I argue that he mutilated and deformed the Book, a keeper of the wisdom of the prophets. As a consequence Mu□ammad, the character in *Inferno* XXVIII, becomes the opposite of the poet Dante: if the aim of the poet is “to make” (*poiesis*) and give form, Mu□ammad with his “lacerated writing” (Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* XXIII 52), deformed and corrupted the unity of the volume. The schism is ultimately provoked by the new law, the Book, that divided not the the Church as an Institution, but rather the civic community.

Let’s start from the location of Mu□ammad in the geography of Dante’s hell (T. Cachey, 2010): in *Inferno* XXVIII Mu□ammad is among those who commit the sin of malice, among the fraudulent, in pit nine who “scommettono,” who disjoin and divide (*Inf.* XXVII, 136), who provoked a schism and scandal. Although Mu□ammad converted the pagans, not the Christians to Islam, it was a common belief that Mu□ammad had provoked a schism within the Church. Dante portrays Mu□ammad cut with his intestines and all their filth spilling out [Fig. 1]. The mutilation is cyclical as a the evil closes the wounds and cuts them again in the circular journey.

Since the schismatics are plotters of fraud, Mu□ammad, according to Dante, would have planned a fraud to convince people to follow him. What kind of fraud did he commit to provoke the schism? For Benevenuto da Imola schismatics lived with a poison tongue (“cum eorum *lingua venenosa*. Quamdiu vixerunt in mundo”) and Mu□ammad is accused of being a false prophet who brought about the schism with his “lingua venenosa.” That would explain the cut that divides Mu□ammad from the chin: “nota quod vulnus istius incipiebat a gutture, *ubi est lingua, cum qua iste commisit pessimum scisma*.” Benvenuto links sin to wound as there is no sword sharper than a “lingua maligna”. Giovanni Colonna (1298-1340?) in his *Mare historiarum*, explicitly attributes the prophet’s success to his “fallacibus verbis”: “Eius autem

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<sup>4</sup> I noticed now that Andrea Celli, although he showed strong disagreement with my reading of the canto in terms of mutilation and laceration of the Book at the symposium on *Lives of Mu□ammad* (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, March 2013), in a recently published article, takes up the two main points of my talk and the handout, in the same terms as I did, namely when he writes that “Maometto è libro che si squaderna” to the pilgrim Dante and that the key to access Mu□ammad’s sufferings among schismatics and may be to the entire canto is in Della Lana’s commentary to canto XXVIII (A. Celli 2013, 184).

fallacibus verbis suffragabatur tam incantationum eius prestigia quam calliditatis ingenia copiosa” (M. di Cesare 2008, 26). We see the relation between the false prophet accused of creating schism with his words and the punishment he suffers in hell, but we still need to explain the fraud by which he made people believe he was a new prophet. Furthermore, we need to assess the consequences of that fraud on the community.

The point of departure is Virgil’s explanation in canto XI: among the sinners of malice are the “counselors of fraud,” from Ulysses in the eighth pit to the falsifiers of metals in the last pit right after the schismatics. Virgil explains that there are two kinds of plotters of fraud, those operating at the expense either of people who trusted them or who did not trust them.

La frode, ond’ogne coscienza è morsa,  
può l’omo usare in colui che ’n lui fida  
e in quel che fidanza non imborsa.  
Questo modo di retro par ch’incida  
pur lo vinco d’amor che fa natura;  
onde nel cerchio secondo s’annida  
ipocresia, lusinghe e chi affattura,  
falsità, ladroneccio e simonia,  
ruffian, baratti e simile lordura (*Inf.* XI, 52-60)

In Muḥammad’s case it is a fraud plotted against those who would not have trusted him. What would have been so effective as to make them believe?

The answer is provided by the 14<sup>th</sup>-century commentator Iacopo della Lana (1324-1328): Muḥammad counterfeited a new law:

In lo presente capitolo intende l'autore trattare di quelli peccatori, li quali seminano zizzania tra li uomini nel mondo, e scisma, ed eziandio di quelli che similmente per scisma si parteno dalla unione della santa madre Ecclesia Cattolica, confingendo nuova, legge, usanza e tenere, e dispregiano la veritade e li canoni fatti nei concilii del sommo apostolico. [...] E perciò a mostrare l'autore che quelli peccatori peccanno in quello peccato di disingere l'uno uomo dall'altro seminando scisma, come disingere sè medesimi dalla santa Ecclesia, si li punisce così impiagati e digiunti. E perciò dice Isidoro in libro *Ethimologiarum: Nomen schismatis a scissura animorum dictum est: scissio autem unitati opponitur*. Or elli è da sapere ch'elli è differenza da infedeltà a scisma; chè la infedeltà si oppone alla vertude della fede; scisma si oppone alla virtù della carità alla unione della Chiesa. Or si potrebbe far dubitazione quale è maggior peccato o la infedeltà o la scisma; e parrebbe esser maggiore la scisma, imperquello che, sicome dice Aristotile in primo *Ethicorum: Multitudinis bonum est maius et divinum*; e in lo VIII dice: *Maiori malo maius bonum opponitur*. Dunque la scisma si oppone al maggior bene, il quale per sopradetta allegazione è divino e santo, imperquello che la scisma nuoce e corrompe la moltitudine, la infedeltà corrompe pure quello solo in cui ella è: sichè apparirebbe che la scisma fosse maggior peccato (Della Lana, *Inf.* XXVIII, nota).

Two elements to note here: the difference between schism and heresy and the kind of fraud that generated the schism, i.e. the new law, the Book of Islam. Della Lana is one of the few to approach canto XXVIII in terms of schism and infidelity; in the attempt to establish the nature

of both sins and which of the two is worst, he refers to Aristotle's *Ethics*, while for the meaning of schism, he turns to Isidore's *Ethimologiae*.

Thomas Aquinas was the first to associate *scandalum* (scandal) with *schisma* (schism) and to distinguish both of them from heresy (*Summa Theologica* II, ii, q.43). Heresy means *infidelitas* (T.S. Centi 1968, 190, note 2) and is a sin worse than schism since heresy is an offense against God [but it can't hurt God], while schism endangers the unity of the Church.

Dante chose to follow Aquinas only in part but considered schism worse than heresy; in fact he did not put heretics in the lowest part of Hell (*Summa Theologica* II, ii, II, I e 3; II, ii, q.39, art.2). He distances himself from Thomas Aquinas on the definition of heresy and schism, maintaining that the latter is an offense against the community that constitutes the Church, and thus more dangerous than heresy. Also for Dante, schism and scandal go together: both bring about division, dividing brother from brother, one man from another: a serious civic responsibility is involved in schism as its impact affects the community. It is about the civic community more than about religion. As the 15th-century commentator Cristoforo Landino also explains:

[...] Ma sono tra loro differenti: infedeltà, scisma, et heresia. Infedeltà è opposita alla fede, et è non creder quello, che crede la fede in ogni parte et chosa. Heresia è partirsi dalla fede in alchuna parte o fare alchuno mutamento in quella. Scisma è partirsi in tutto dalla fede et dall'unione di quella. Et perchè questo è maggior che e due primi, però finge el poeta che sia punito in questa più bassa parte. Scisma adunque è divisione et seperamento dell'unità della fede et della carità. Ma anchora la divisione nelle città tra parte et parte di cittadini, et anchora tra huomo et huomo, si comprende sobto questo peccato (Cristoforo Landino, *Inf.* XXVIII, 25-33).

The second element to note in Della Lana's commentary is the origin of the "scisma" that he identifies with the fabrication of a new law ("confingendo nuova legge"), which is a key to understanding Dante's choices in canto XXVIII. The fraud for Dante is countefeating, "confingere," simulating and fabricating a new law (the Book), Iacopo da Varazze also uses the verb "confingere" in relation to Muḳammad's making of his own new laws: "Magumethus igitur proprias leges confingens....," (*Legenda aurea*, CLXXVII, 86: ed. G.P. Maggioni 1998, vol. 2, 1414). Colonna too uses the verb "fingere" when he refers to these new laws: "unde ad illum tam Iudeis quam Sarracenis multitudine confluentibus, cepit novas fingere leges de utroque Testamento dictis", as does the historian Paolino Veneto, who explicitly relates the book carried by the bull between his horns as the means Muḳammad used to promulgate his "invented" law:

Cepit exinde novas fingere leges de utroque testamento ut pluribus placeret quedam sub altero interserens dicens eas sibi per Spiritum revelatas. Ut vero mendacium subornaret, eas tauri cornibus aligavit [...], cumque thaurus loquentis vocem audisset famelicus ad eius manus quasi ad presepium cucurrit: illeque de cornibus legem quasi divinitus missam tulit (Paolino Veneto, *Satyrica historia*: ed. M. di Cesare 2008, 13).

In light of these considerations, I believe that the fraud committed by Muḳammad is the fabrication of the new law that coincides with the book which, in the anti-Muḳammad legend, is carried by the bull between its horns. One could ask why I choose to read Muḳammad's

punishment in terms of this legend and not simply as a condemnation of the fabrication of the new laws. After all the Book in the visual imaginary stands and remains a personification of the Church [Fig. 4] that dominates idolatry. The legend shows that the apparently miraculous arrival of a physical book was the ultimate means to convince those who otherwise would not have been persuaded that Muhammad was the new prophet. Christian writers like Vincent de Beauvais and Paolino Veneto attribute the success of the new laws to the fabrication of a book: to “confingere” and “fingere,” faking new laws. The book was intended to appear authentic to the public. In the legend of the bull, the delivery of the new book occurs in the same way as in the episode of the Exodus when Moses received the laws from God on Mount Sinai [Fig. 3]: Muhammad gathers people on a mountain and a bull appears with a book between its horns and kneels in front of the new prophet as a clear sign from God [Fig. 2].

R. W. Southern claims dismissively that “the role of the white bull that terrorized the population and finally carried the new Law between its horns, or the account of the suspension of Mahomet’s tomb in mid-air by means of magnets -belong to folklore” (R.W. Southern 1962, 31). Yet, as Tolan argues about the legend of Muhammad’s coffin suspended in the air at Mecca (J.V. Tolan 2008<sup>2</sup>, 19), we also have to think why this legend of the celestial delivery of the holy book by a bull on a mountain was believed. This legend portrayed Muhammad as a simulator, who in order to persuade the crowd used a fake miracle to parallel Moses receiving the tablets of law directly from God. This is, I believe, the type of fraud committed by Muhammad. Differently from the Ulysses’s “orazion picciola” Muhammad’s fraud affected a larger number of people, the civic community and for that the mutilation of his body carries division conveys the very nature of fraud that - as Virgil indicates- “severs/ the bond of love that nature makes” (*Inf.* XI, 55-57). The mutilation that he did to the Book, which transmits knowledge and wisdom, is now expressed through his deformed body in hell.

We can also ask: why that legend of the bull and not the legend of the dove that was more popular among 14<sup>th</sup>- century writers in Italy and commentators on *Inferno* XXVIII? (Morosini 2005).

Here are some reasons why Dante might prefer the legend of the bull to the more popular one about the dove whispering the new law: Muhammad can thus claim that the book was written by the little finger of God himself:

Or prions a Diu, ki donna  
 Jadis la loy a Moysi  
 En la montagne Synai  
 Que par grant carité envoit,  
 Escrite de son petit doit (Alexander du Pont, *Roman de Mahomet*, vv. 1492-1496),

just as Moses received two tablets written with “the finger of God” (Ex. 31, 18). But “la loi ki par davant est dite, | Que Mahomés avoit escrite, | A en ses cornes atachié” (Alexander du Pont, *Roman de Mahomet*, vv. 1415-1417).

It seems that he convinced everyone through the strategy of the bull which would be familiar to Christians, since it resembled the delivery of the new law to Moses on mount Sinai: the bull seems even to come, spotless as it is, directly from heaven as a skeptical Du Pont claims:

Simple le virent et privé;  
 Il le cuident, tout abrievé,

Lués estre dou chiel descendu.  
 [...]

Qu' est li toriaus  
 Devenus, ki si estoit biaux?  
 Il dist : au ciel en est ralés  
 Dont a nous estoit avalés".  
 Del tout croient a sa parole;  
 Ensi favule il la gente fole  
 Que il cuident bien que la beste  
 Soit de paradys [...] (Alexander du Pont, *Roman de Mahomet* vv. 1559-1561 [...] 1573-1579)

Two other reasons lead us to believe that Dante was not thinking of the legend of the dove: first, the by the dove merely whispers in Muḥammad's ear; the actual book is written later, by a human hand. Second, that legend involves instigators such as Sergius or Niccolao, seeking revenge against the Church that had promised them a promotion to bishop or Pope if they went to the Middle East and converted many to Christianity. If Dante had in mind the story of the dove, he would have had to put Sergius or Niccolao among the plotters of fraud along with Muḥammad.

The legend of the bull does not involve instigators; the trick is Muḥammad's idea. Moreover, although the dove is symbolic, the strategy of the dove was not as effective as the book delivered on a mountain because of the strong allusion to Moses receiving the stone tablets. In fact, De Beauvais dwells at length on the Book that Muḥammad is said to have received from God himself:

Et ut eiusdem missioni ad instar Moysi prodigia quaedam uiderentur testari, populum assignata die conuocauit ad certum locum, quasi legem diuinitus missam in signis et prodigiis accepturum (Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum historiale* XXIII, 40).

Du Pont describes the strong impact that the bull carrying the book between its horns had on people (*Roman de Mahomet* 1427-1436 and 1547-1553). Dante is convinced that Muḥammad lacerated the Book, its unity and shape like Vincent de Beauvais, although the latter was motivated solely by the condemnation of the false prophet. It is not a coincidence that the most redundant verb in De Beauvais's discussion of Muḥammad's book is 'to compose,' in what seems a real debate around Muḥammad's act of writing in Book XXIII

Certe fabulam hanc multo urbanius si quid intelligeret componere potuisset. Sicut et de quodam alio lupo ibi refertur quod cum alloquutus fuisset Veheben filium Heum Elhsmi statim sic factus sarracenus, ubi si leonem pro lupo ille fabularum compositor posuisset, multo elegantior fabula extitisset. (Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, De fabulis ab eo confictis", XXIII, 46).

Qualiter eiusdem scriptura dilacerata sit: Qualiter autem scriptura ista non solum a Iudeis sed etiam ab aliis multis varie incepta, diverse intellecta, multiformiter exposita et tandem tota pene dilacerata sit, ex aliqua parte explicabimus (Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* XXIII, 52).

In the 9<sup>th</sup>-century *Apocalypse of Bahira*, the monk Baḫīrā writes the holy book and he hurries to finish it: Muhammad opened the book and read the first page that witnessed formally its celestial origin” (C. de Vaux 1897, 450; cf. J. Bignami-Odier - G. della Vida 1950). Also Embrico of Mainz in his *Vita Mahumeti* (1100) attributes Muḫammad’s success to the “magic fraud” of the book brought by the bull:

Dum sic Mammutius feritatem mitigat huius,  
Accedunt trepidi mox proceres stupidi  
Scriptaque legerunt propter que plus stupuerunt  
Signis namque nouis frons titulata bouis  
Auro fulgebat carmenque nouum,  
Quod qui uiderunt, tale fuisse ferunt:  
Hunc Deus elegit, qui me seruire coegit,  
Sic ego missus ei sum pietate Dei

(Embricus Moguntinus, *Carmen de fraudibus Mahumetis* VIII, vv. 671-678).

And in the *Gesta dei per Francos* Guibert de Nogent (1032-1124) strongly accuses the “libellum” carried by the bull as the main cause of the spread of the new law to Africa, Egypt, Lybia and even reached Spain which is closer to us (Book III).

So the book, more than the dove, was the tangible and visible sign of the divine election of Muḫammad as a prophet.

One could object that if Dante knew the legend of the bull, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century commentators would mention it, but they only talk about the dove whispering the new law to Muḫammad, as trained by Sergius or a wicked instigator<sup>5</sup>. However, it is hard to believe that Dante was not aware of the legend of the bull. Martino Polono, a best seller in Dante’s time, mentions both stories, the dove and the bull in his *Chronicle of Popes and Emperors*. Commentators to *Inferno* XXVIII, quote Martino Polono as a source, but do not mention the bull. Moreover, even Boccaccio was aware of the legend of the bull, since he transcribed Paolino Veneto’s life of Muḫammad from the *Chronologia magna* in his *Zibaldone*<sup>6</sup>. An account of the holy book attached to the horns of the bull is also in a XIV century life of Muḫammad kept at the library of Santa Caterina in Pisa where the outcome of the appearance of the bull is division and scandal: “scandalum” generates the “divorcium” (“unde et inter eos periculosum factum est divorcium”) and the division among people in the community, in fact “ab ea sunt velociter divisi” (Anonymus of Pisa, *Vita Mahometi*, ed. A. Mancini 1935, 334-335). Scandal and divorce are the same words that accompany the representation of Muḫammad in hell, among schismatics and sowers of discord, with the same consequences on the civic community (not on the Church), as in the Pisan manuscript. The anonymus writer of the life of Muḫammad in the Pisan manuscript, Martino Polono and later in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Paolino Veneto and Boccaccio were familiar with this legend of the bull; it is hard to believe that Dante did not know it.

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<sup>5</sup> Only Vincent de Beauvais and the commentator Guido da Pisa attribute all the responsibilities to Muḫammad himself and not to an instigator, Sergius or Niccolao.

<sup>6</sup> The life of Muḫammad in the *Chronologia magna*, published for the first time in *Ancora sul ‘De Mahumeth*. See also Boccaccio “*secundum Venetum*.”



Finally, I aim to show how Dante maintains that only knowledge and wisdom can defeat Malice; only through love via the wisdom revealed in the Holy Scriptures and the Books of the ancients, can one reach the exit from the “selva oscura” (“the dark wood”); only through love, can the Book unite what has been divided by fraud scandal and schism.

While Vincent de Beauvais attacked Muhammad and his book for religious reasons, arguing that he was a false prophet, Dante condemns Muhammad first of all for distorting the Book, that is supposed to transmit knowledge, the truths of the prophets.

It is no coincidence that Virgil is Dante’s guide to find the right way out of the dark wood or that Virgil is called “author” (*Inf.* I, 85). Author means authority, a truth that becomes a model to imitate or to quote as a witness, “a person worthy to be believed or obeyed” (Dante’s *Convivio* IV, vi, 5). “Author” refers to God’s divine authority and is also used once to refer to Virgil suggesting that the poet’s authority comes from God. Similarly Dante uses the word “volume” (*Inferno* I, 84) referring to Virgil’s work, and to the Bible in *Paradiso* XXXIII, 86 to the universe as a “volume” bound by love. Pagan or divine, the book and its wisdom frame the poem.

We see a constant reference to the need for poetry to be truthful; the act of writing and the role of the poet, make canto XXVIII one of the most meta-literary of *Inferno*. Describing Geryon, the filthy image of Fraud, Dante recalls the duty of the poet to be truthful even if he sometimes writes what seems incredible:

Sempre a quel ver c’ha faccia di menzogna  
de l’uom chiuder le labra fin ch’el puote,  
però che senza colpa fa vergogna (*Inf.* XVI, 124-126).

Hollander writes about these verses: “Dante has put the veracity of the entire *Comedy* (here named for the first of only two times) upon the reality of Geryon.” (R. Hollander - J. Hollander 2000, 281; cf. Cachey 2001).

The opening of canto XXVIII introduces the reader to the dismemberment of the sinners. The poet is the one who gives shape and unity to what is disintegrated and fragmented. The division and mutilation here refer not only to the division caused by Muhammad with the fraud of the book to the body of citizens, but also to Muhammad’s abuse of the office of the poet whose duty it is to inform: both to give shape and to transmit knowledge. By mixing fables with doctrines, he did the opposite of what the poet should do. So, the title of this study “informing and deforming” refers to how the mutilation of the bodies and the divisions suffered by Muhammad in canto XXVIII are associated with the mutilations to the civic community who trusted him thanks to the fraud of a celestial delivery of the holy book, and the laceration of the Book as a vehicle of knowledge.

Dante uses the verb “inform” in the sense of ‘give shape’ (“moveti il lume che nel ciel s’informa”, *Purg.* XVII,17)<sup>7</sup>. It is Guido da Pisa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century who, for the first time, uses the verb as ‘to give news’ (*Fiore d’Italia*, I 252, Muzzi 1824).<sup>8</sup> Muhammad in hell is punished for having deformed, instead of informing, as the poet should do, since he distorted with fables the Old Testament in order to deceive.

Iacopo della Lana’s commentary (1324-1328) calls Muhammad’s punishment: “isformare”, deforming. And that’s Muhammad’s sin: his book deformed instead of informed:

<sup>7</sup> A. Maierù (1970), vol. 3, 438.

<sup>8</sup> See also *Decameron* II 7. More on the verb “informare” as to give news in Morosini (2004, 141 and ff).

fu a questo Maometto medesimo che molto li credea perch'elli era uomo di buona fede e di grande coscienza e feceli a credere come Dio l'aveva fatto suo messo per predicare sua novella ed isformòe la fede cristiana in ogni cosa (Iacopo della Lana, *Inf.* XVIII, 28-31).

In this sense, Muḥammad is the anti-poet and the connection as in a distorting mirror between the poet and the anti-poet is established in the following verses:

Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,  
guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,  
dicendo, "or vedi com'io mi dilacco!  
Vedi come storpiato è Maometto! (*Inf.* XXVIII, 28-31)

The act of looking is reciprocal and suggests a distorted and deforming mirror. In fact, as Maria Piccoli notes, also in the *mi 'rāg* for the sowers of discord "it appears a punishment that involves the act of seeing" (M. Piccoli 2010, 97).<sup>9</sup> The poet mirrors himself in what he will never be, while Muḥammad calls his attention, "see how I rend myself, see how mangled is Mohammed!" (*Inf.* XXVIII, 31).

In canto XXIX Dante continues his meditation on the veracity of the poet. There the falsifiers are punished with leprosy and look like the victims of Ovid's story; however, Dante insists on the veracity of what he relates as truth, not a fable.

Dante entrusts not just to a poet but to "a poeta delle armi" (*Vulgari Eloquentia* II II 9) as Bertran de Born (1140-1215), the only explanation of the *contrapasso* in hell (v.142).<sup>10</sup> He is in *Inferno*, as Claire Honess says (*Salus, Venus, Virtus, poetica, politica ed etica tra De vulgari eloquentia e la Commedia*, 2010) as "a bad poet": "Bertran è qui raffigurato non solo come uomo peccaminoso ma anche, cosa ancora peggiore agli occhi di Dante, come cattivo poeta." (C. E. Honess 2010, 15) His sin is not only to divide the father (Henri II of England) and his son but, as he says in one of his *vidas* to use poetry to divide them: "ades se penava e-is percassava ab sos sirventes de desfar la patz".<sup>11</sup> He now carries his head, the place of the inspiration of poetry, (P. Harris 1991, 194)<sup>12</sup> like a lantern, two in one and one in two, gives the idea of separation and re-conjunction that occurs in poetry. Following the study of Asin Palacios on Dante and Islam, it

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. in canto XXVIII the acceleration of the verbs related to the act of 'seeing' in the encounter with the sinner: "veggia", "vidi" and in particular the contemporary looking and being looked at of the pilgrim who looks at Muḥammad ("mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco" *Inf.* XXVIII, 28) while Muḥammad looks at him ("guardommi e con le mani s'aperse il petto" *Inf.* XXVIII, 29).

<sup>10</sup> Bertran is celebrated as the "poeta delle armi" and remembered for his liberality in *Convivio* (IV XI 14). He is also one of the 5 non latin poets mentioned in *De vulgari eloquentia* II, 2.

<sup>11</sup> I owe the quote from one of Bertran's *vidas* to Honess (2010, note 55, p. 22).

<sup>12</sup> According to Patricia Harris, Bertran's head, a place for the poetic inspiration, is separated from the rest of his body to convey the separation brought about by his poetry: see P.S. Harris (1991, in particular p. 194). More specifically on Bertran de Born's poetry and *contrapasso* in *Inferno* XXVIII see M. Picone, *I trovatori di Dante: Bertran de Born*, in *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 19, 1979, pp. 71-94 and J. Steinberg, "Dante's Justice?: A reappraisal of the *contrapasso*," *L'Alighieri*, LIV, 44, 2014, forthcoming.

has suggested that Dante's *contrapasso* for Bertran could be of Islamic origin.<sup>13</sup> Maria Piccoli in her studies of Dante's *Commedia* and Ibn 'Abbās's tale of the journey of the prophet of Islam in the afterlife, seems to suggest that it cannot be a coincidence that Dante himself uses for the first time the term *contrapasso* "per bocca di Bertran de Born, punito per aver aver seminato discordia tra consanguinei."<sup>14</sup>

Finally, to convince us that Muḥammad's mutilated body in hell could be attributed to the mutilation he did to the Book and to his abuse of the poet's office, is the word *risma*, "ream" in canto XXVIII, 39. Dante is the first to use the term in its modern meaning, as the ancient commentators to *Inferno* had fully understood: Della Lana identifies the "compagnia" of sinners with "risma" (Iacopo della Lana, *Inf.* XVIII, 37-39). The term "compagnia" is more eloquent of what is conveyed by the word "ream," as opposed to the scattered nature of the schismatics. It is not necessarily pejorative and in fact "compagnia" together with "sorte" were interchangeably used, together with the word "cuaterni" (generally twenty but also twelve), bound to each other. The sinners are made into a group of *cuaterni* that is 'cut,' therefore, "scompaginato," scattered. Even Francesco da Buti insists that the binding of the XII quires signifies the group of sinners that he calls a "sect": "*Rimettendo ciascun di questa risma; cioè di questa setta: risma si chiama lo legato delle carte della bambagia di XII quaderni, e qui si pone per la setta*". A century later Barzizza says:

sogliono i cartolari gran moltitudine di quaderni di carta partire in pigne, ossia legature di venticinque quaderni l'una, e chiamarle *risme*, così in proposito nostro, essendo nell'inferno gran moltitudine di peccatori separati e distinti in diversi circoli, gironi e bolgie, usa qui Macometto di questo vocabolo risma a denotare squadra di peccatori (Guiniforto delli Bargigi, *Inf.* XXVIII, 37-42).

The word *rizma* in Arabic referred to bunch of cloth or fabric and in romance languages to a ream of paper, brought to Europe by the Muslims in Spain (see Della Lana who talks about "carte della bambagia"). Is it a coincidence that the word 'risma' is an Arabic word that refers to the world of the book? The verb that precedes "risma" is "rimettere," which means to bring order, as well as cutting the papers to make a compact volume (*Enciclopedia Dantesca*, vol. IV, p. 977).

Also in *Paradiso* XII 121-123, "volume" and its "fogli" intend to represent unity, although ironically since S. Bonaventura use the term here to blame the decline of the Franciscan order:

Ben dico, chi cercasse a foglio a foglio  
nostro volume, ancor troveria carta

<sup>13</sup> M. Asín Palacios, *Dante e l'Islam, l'escatologia islamica nella Divina Commedia*, ed. R. Rossi and Y. Tawfik, Net: Milan, 2005, pp. 138-74.

<sup>14</sup>M. Piccoli, *Viaggio nel regno del ritorno*, p. 98. Piccoli states: "Anche la letteratura islamica conosce bene il contrappasso, e lo usa di frequente con grandi variazioni di temi e immagini, e se Dante ha conosciuto il *Liber Scalae* non è un caso che la definizione di contrappasso sia enunciata proprio nel medesimo canto che narra l'incontro del poeta con Maometto e Ali," and she adds that "contro le affermazioni di Asin Palacios, questo principio non si trova solo in ambito islamico. Esso compare in Gregorio Magno, quando Pietro, colpevole di aver vessato i peccatori, è a sua volta schiacciato da un peso enorme," p. 99 and V. Dornetti, *Il diavolo in pulpito. Spettri e demoni nelle prediche medievali*, Xenia, Milano, 1991, p. 90.

u' leggerebbe 'l' mi son quel ch'i' soglio'

A ream of “cuaterni” bound one to the other is opposed to scattered quires. Dante talks about the universe that “si squaderna” in what Benvenuto calls a “pulchra metaphora de quaterno et volumine” (Benvenuto da Imola, *Par.* XXIII, 85-87). The nature of the Volume/ Book is unity and contrasts with the dispersion of the quires of a ream: love, wisdom binds together the scattered quires of the universe.

The nature of the Volume/Book is unity and contrasts with the dispersion of quires: Love, Wisdom binds together the scattered quires of the universe:

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna  
legato con amore in un volume,  
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna (*Par.* XXXIII, 85-87).

It is only “Somma Sapienza”, that is wisdom supreme e “il primo amore”, that is primal love, that together with Power (“divine power”) accompany Dante the pilgrim in his journey, which unifies and overcomes schism [fig. 5]. As Iacopo della Lana wrote: “scisma si oppone alla virtù della carità alla unione della Chiesa” (Iacopo della Lana *Inf.* XXVIII, nota). Through Muhammad, Dante condemns the mutilation of the Book, the keeper of wisdom. At the same time he also celebrates the poet as a maker who has the duty to inform, that is giving shape and unity while conveying truth and wisdom. Only wisdom that is love can bind the quires into a unified and ordered volume.

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Fig. 1. "Inferno XXVIII", in *Commento alla Commedia di Iacopo Strozzi*, ms Strozzi 152, BML, Florence.



**Fig. 2.** G. Boccaccio, “Moses receives the laws,” in *De casibus*, trans. Laurent de Premierfait, ms. Fr. 226, fol. 8, BnF, Paris.





**Fig. 3.** G. Boccaccio "Muhammad preaching," in *De casibus*, trans. Laurent de Premierfait, ms. Fr. 236, fol. 184, BnF, Paris.



**Fig. 4.** “Personification of the Church”, *Bible historique*, ms. Fr. 4, fol. 22v., BnF Arsenal, Paris.



**Fig. 5.** Guiard des Moulins, "God and Wisdom," *Bible historique*, ms. Fr. 4, fol. 16v., BnF Arsenal, Paris.