The Anti-Islam Narrative in Diderot’s Entry “Sarrasins” for the Encyclopédie (1751-1772)

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The Anti-Islam Narrative in Diderot’s Entry “Sarrasins” for the Encyclopédie (1751-1772)

Philosopher Denis Diderot’s monumental Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers continues to interest scholars and students long after its publication during the French Enlightenment. The Encyclopédie boasted over 74,000 articles, seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of illustrated plates, all overseen by Diderot and his co-editor Jean le Rond d’Alembert. Topics ranged from newly discovered plants, foreign nations, ancient civilizations, architectural manuals, and all aspects of science. It was a best-seller in its day, with an original print run of 4,200 copies. However, not everyone was enthusiastic about the Encyclopédie; King Louis XV and the Catholic Church repressed it severely, and threatened its authors with death sentences for sedition and irreligion. Yet rather than abandon the project, Diderot persisted. The completion of the Encyclopédie in 1772 has been called “a victory for the written word and triumph of the human spirit.” 1 Indeed, the Encyclopédie is unquestionably a progressive document. It promotes Enlightenment values such as equality, tolerance of religious difference, freedom in all its guises, representative government, and human rights. Nevertheless, the Encyclopédie did have its blind spots.2 Non-Europeans, especially Arabs and Muslims, are defined in a pejorative manner. Ironically, though the Encyclopédistes were contemptuous of the medieval period, in his entry “Sarrasins,” Diderot appropriated and perpetuated a decidedly medieval anti-Islam discourse.3

Before we examine Diderot’s article, I would like briefly to discuss a few ways in which one might account for this intolerance on the part of the progressive philosophe. First, it is well known that often when Diderot criticized another religion in the Encyclopédie, his real aim was the Catholic Church; in Old Regime France, it was safer to criticize a Japanese Buddhist bonze for duping the superstitious people. In this way, Diderot and his fellow Encyclopédistes artfully wove criticism of the church and the state into subjects that were acceptable to criticize, namely non-western civilizations. In so doing he could at once fool the censor and wink at readers in the know. Doubtless many of Diderot’s strictures against Islam in “Sarrasins” are really aimed at Catholicism.

It is equally well known that, with regard to his source material for the Encyclopédie, Diderot, like many of his fellow Encyclopédistes, borrowed liberally but cited haphazardly. In “Sarrasins” Diderot lifts entire passages from Jacob Brucker’s Historia critica philosophiae. Thus, one could plausibly argue that it is his source, not Diderot himself, who is anti-Islam; Diderot is merely guilty of careless plagiarism.

This said, I would argue that Diderot’s criticism of Islam in “Sarrasins” is more pointed, more vitriolic, even, than that of his entries on Buddhism, Hinduism and even Catholicism. To account for this phenomenon, I wish to examine critical theory employed by Michael Foucault and Edward Said and recent applications of it by John Lyons and Jonathan Tolan. Then we will be in an informed position from which to approach Diderot’s entry “Sarrasins.”

First, I wish to discuss Foucault’s notions of episteme and discourse. Foucault’s concept of episteme is notoriously elusive in The Order of Things; I will attempt to define it thusly: hierarchical ‘unconscious’ structures ordering, limiting and dictating knowledge and perception, and structures which are ultimately difficult to escape. Gary Gutting helpfully conceives of episteme as the “rules, beyond those of grammar and logic, that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period” (Gutting). If episteme is the source of the structure, discourse is the product emanating from its confines. Foucault is more forthcoming with regard to his concept of discourse, which he explicitly defines in The Archaeology of Knowledge as “the general domain of all statements, … an individualizable group of statements, and … a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Lyons 29). In this way, Foucault’s concepts of episteme and discourse exist synergistically.

Appropriating Foucault’s notion of discourse to understand the Western account of “the Orient,” Said’s seminal Orientalism remains influential. Said
defines Orientalism as the Western justification for dominating the Orient, through exaggerating differences between Western and Eastern peoples, emphasizing exoticism and the distinctively inferior “Oriental” mind:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western Style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Jary 4)

Said cites Foucault’s notion of discourse as essential for understanding the phenomenon of Orientalism: “My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.” (4). Said contends that Western scholarship, including that of the French Enlightenment, is riddled with, and vitiated by, Orientalist discourse.

Said pinpoints Orientalism’s cementing in the eighteenth century, but recently historian John Tolan and sociologist Jonathan Lyons have both argued instead for the medieval origins of Orientalist discourse. In a series of articles and his book Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination, Tolan examines motifs within Medieval texts which have been recycled for centuries in the West. Tolan indicates that prominent writers, theologians and scholars often literally reprinted medieval scholarship on Muslims and Islam up until the seventeenth century! Tolan analyses multifarious texts conveying chronologically indistinguishable ideas regarding Arabs and Islam; the upshot is that one can hardly distinguish documents produced on Islam and Arabs written during the Crusades or the Enlightenment. Updating Said’s concept of Orientalism, Tolan designates a medieval Orientalism, “once timeless and immature; an adolescent orientalism, waiting for the political and social context of modern European Empires” (280).

In a similar vein, frequently citing Tolan, the sociologist Lyons maps out this history through the current day in Islam Through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism. Lyons charts the development of medieval Orientalism to what he calls the adolescent Orientalism of the eighteenth century. Borrowing from what he calls “Foucault’s toolbox,” Lyons argues that discourse is what shepherds medieval Orientalism into its adolescent form and ultimately the eighteenth century’s mature orientalism, a precursor for modern Islamophobia. According to Lyons, considerable power derives from the emotional nature of the anti-Islam discourse, allowing it to remain pervasive. The discourse changes little despite what seems to be societal progress, because it “overssees the production and reproduction of statements as constitutive of knowledge as well as their subsequent transformation into a discipline” (Lyons 29). Lyons traces the formation of anti-Islam discourse back to the eleventh century; in his account, it persisted, omnipresent throughout centuries, dictating what can be explained, observed, experienced and defined with regard to Islam (Lyons 5). Importantly, Lyons points out that the authors responsible for fashioning the initial motifs experienced little to no contact with actual Arabs and made a miniscule effort to formulate a genuine understanding of Islam. Medieval manuscripts interwove “learned” information with popular folklore and conflated disparate groups (Arabs and Muslims), labeling them interchangeably and incorrectly. While Lyons, like Tolan, identifies various themes or motifs in medieval anti-Islam discourse, he also emphasizes its multi-faceted, even contradictory nature.

My reading of Diderot’s Encyclopédie entry “Sarrasins, ou Arabes” highlights five prominent anti-Islam pillars (reminiscent of the five pillars of Islam) or themes, among the many identified by Tolan and Lyons, which surface in Diderot’s “Sarrasins ou Arabes.” The essential pillar is the depiction of Arabs and Muslims as barbarians and savages prone to violence rather than reason. The second condemns Muslims as zealots subscribing to a false religion. The third characterizes Mohammed as a false prophet exploiting Abrahamic tradition. As testimony to the third pillar, the fourth accuses Mohammed of living and promoting a life of sexual immorality, curious behavior for a pious prophet. The fifth is most crucial for Diderot, as it positions Mohammed and Islam as a menace to all rationality and to European civilization itself. In sum, the anti-Islam discourse caricatures Mohammed as a sexually motivated master manipulator, a bloodthirsty pagan who perverted Judeo-Christian doctrine. Gullible followers of his pseudo-doctrine, the fatuous Muslims threaten Western civilization itself. In Tolan’s words, “[Europe’s] deep-seated hostility and ignorance combined in the Middle Ages to bring forth the most negative and pejorative image of Islam and of the person of its Prophet” (163). He adds, “The same aversion and the same prejudices (against Islam) predominated in Christian minds during the modern age [i.e. the eighteenth century] as well. Theologians themselves were not generally better informed, or more nuanced in their criticisms, or more sophisticated in their arguments than their medieval predecessors. In fact, they did not refrain from printing old polemical treatises.” Tolan is speaking of eighteenth-century Christians, but the same medieval Orientalism even surfaces in the work of the atheist philosophe Diderot. My reading scrutinizes the anti-Islam discourse in “Sarrasins ou Arabes,” thus identifying how Europe’s existing narrative influenced Diderot’s portrayal of Arabs and Muslims.

“Sarrasins ou Arabes, philosophie des,” appeared in the fourteenth volume of the Encyclopédie in December 1765 as an installment of what he conceived as the “Histoire de la philosophie” series interspersed throughout the work. Spearheaded by Diderot, who contributed eighteen out of the twenty total articles, each of which was subtitled, “Philosophie des,” the world philosophies series was an effort to define religious and cultural customs differing from those of Western Europe. It is known that Diderot, who often directly copied content, relied heavily on Historia critica philosophiae, written by German philosopher Johann Jakob Brucker, as his main source. According to J. Proust, Diderot wrote “Sarrasins ou Arabes” while enjoying a vacation (perhaps one reason he copied Brucker is because he wanted more leisure time). Le Breton, Diderot’s financier and publisher, harbored reservations with regard to Diderot’s manuscript’s overt criticism of the French Monarchy; unbeknownst to Diderot, LeBreton pre-censored the final version before publication, three paragraphs from the beginning of the article before submitting it to the royal censor. For the sake of feasibility, I use the published “Sarrasins ou Arabes,” knowing that Le Breton doctored the text. Before attempting to substantiate my thesis of the medieval narrative pervading...
the Encyclopédie, I would like to briefly convey several Diderotian style markers in “Sarrasins ou Arabes.”

Diderotian style-markers

Catholic dogma and God

“Sarrasins ou Arabes” is peppered with ambiguous sentences and non-sequiturs, a uniquely Diderotian style-marker, aimed to hide his critique of Catholic dogma and more broadly, the existence of God. Diderot chronicled notable moments in Arab and Muslim history, scholarship, poetry, philosophy, and morals between lengthy paragraphs discussing God and theology. Critique directed at the utter existence and nature of God allows Diderot’s Islam-narrative to lose its historically religious shell and genuinely reflects Diderot’s own anti-religious nature and atheism. Lyons argues that even though Christian identity faded during the Enlightenment, its attendant Western superiority complex still predisposed even progressive intellectuals against non-Western peoples and their religions (Fitzpatrick). As his religious commentary falls away from his critique of the Saracens and Islam, Diderot’s voice takes on a new identity, still that of a Eurocentric-Christian, but God is erased from his narrative (O’Sullivan 170). Diderot does not identify as Christian (he often openly opposes Christianity); however, discourse nevertheless steers his lineage. His sociological DNA traces to a Europe that spent over 500 years creating the European distinction solely for identifying itself against the Arabs for religious and political reasons (Tolan). Diderot’s agenda does not need to be religious for him to use the religious narrative.

It is important to note that Diderot, aware of the royal censors, remains vague when mentioning God. In the thirteenth column Diderot begins his section on Sarrasins theology, and I argue he largely nests his critique of Christianity and God here rather than throughout the entire article. In this section, Diderot allocates four columns to the essence of God. He uses a majuscule G to imply there is only one God, and it is the God shared by both Christians and Muslims. Brillantly, this passage appears pious on the surface, and readers may never detect Diderot’s own atheism. Diderot serenades,

He holds the heavens on his right, the creatures of earth in the palm of his hand; he signified his excellence and his unity through the masterpiece of creation. Il tient les cieux dans sa droite; les créatures sont dans la paume de sa main; il a notifié son excellence & son uniité par l’oeuvre de la création. (14:669)

After he questions, “There is nothing in comparison to this hypothetical man, so we are consequently nothing in comparison to God? Rien par rapport à cet homme hypothétique, que sommes-nous donc par rapport à Dieu?” (14:669),

Diderot undoubtedly critiques God and religion, hardly mentioning Islam or Muslims. Readers are at liberty to pick and choose which aspects of Islam and Christianity Diderot intends to critique. I argue that Diderot’s invocation of the known anti-Islam narrative resonated with readers despite mean whether or not they recognized his veiled criticisms of Catholicism.

Diderot concludes the last four columns of “Sarrasins ou Arabes” with an ambiguous critique aimed neither at Christianity nor Islam but of God and sovereignty. Here, Diderot seizes the opportunity to attack the existence of God under the cloak of Sarrasin cultural inferiority. He succeeds. Diderot’s voice pleads for reasoning—perhaps out of frustration, desperation or sarcasm. He reminds readers that all men arrive at the same location after death: “The impious died in the middle of the living; the pious lives in the same place in death. L’impie est mort au milieu des vivans; l’homme pieux vit dans le séjour même de la mort” (14:676).

He urges fellow readers to break free and rebel against zealous systematic oppression:

When did you intend to abandon these ways? When will you hate them? When, tell me, when? The impious one eventually passes, and only wisdom remains. Quand as - tu résolu de le quitter? Quand as - tu résolu de le haïr? Quand, dis - moi, quand? il passe, & il n’y a que la sagesse qui reste. (14:676)

Diderot concludes “Sarrasins ou Arabes” full circle by copying a popular Sarrasin fable out of Brucker (Proust 94). Surprisingly he portrays this fable positively, stating that this Sarrasin tale is more valuable than fables from “le reste des nations” (14:676-677). In the fable, three travelers stumble upon a treasure but murder one another in a paranoid frenzy so that in the end, the treasure belongs to no one. Perhaps Diderot alludes to the tragedies of religious zeal as a final appeal to his readers.

Outdated Monarchy

Diderot composes a rich, often contradicting narrative of Muslims throughout “Sarrasins” to camouflage his critique of French monarchy and its irrelevance. For example, amid his account of the Saracens before the invent of Islam, Diderot inserts a general critique aimed at his own French culture in the opening paragraph:

It’s the same prejudice throughout time and throughout civilizations, for those who take the risk of criticizing reason. C’est le même pressentiment dans tous les tems & chez tous les peuples, qui a fait hasarder de décrier la raison. (14:664) 14

Later into “Sarrasins,” he condemns the divine authority of God and monarchy, depicting the king as the shadow of an ignorant oppressive god:

The sovereign is the shadow of God, the capable man who does nothing, resembling a barren field never watered. The most dangerous of men, is the worthless man who knows he is worthless. Le souverain est l’ombre de Dieu, l’homme capable qui ne fait rien, est une nuë qui passe & qui n’arrose point. Le plus méchant des hommes, est l’homme inutile qui sait. (14:676-677)

It is undisputable that Diderot considered the absolute monarchy’s power abusive and dated. Diderot, along with other philosophes, desired to guide France into a new and progressive nation. According to Lyons, Diderot’s Encyclopédie sought to specifically curate “Western” progress (Lyons 158). Tolan supports Lyons by explaining the advent of the European sense of superiority thusly:

First, the European crisis of conscience in the wake of the [16th century] Wars of Religion opened the way for a critique of religion, tending more in the direction of deism than of atheism. And second, the progress of the modern state tended to undermine the foundations of the old law-and-order societies. (261)

Europe’s slow but continuous economic growth in the eighteenth century allowed
for a framework to measure the idea of progress: “If progress is movement”, Tolan writes, “then points of reference are needed to measure it” (262). Thus, Europe was able to self-assess its own progress in terms of acquired wealth, knowledge and especially its progression beyond what D’Alembert labeled in the Encyclopédie’s preface, the “barbarism of Gothic times” (iii).

The most logical comparison, according to existing discourse, was to Non-European Eastern societies who proved to be an effective comparison for measuring societal evolution.²¹ Now, it is true as any Middle Eastern studies textbook will tell you, the Arab world was struggling both politically and intellectually in the eighteenth century as the Ottoman Empire sought rather in vain to unite its splintered dynasty, whereas comparatively speaking, Europe was flourishing in its Enlightenment. Contrasting Europe’s intellectual richness during the Enlightenment with what appeared to be a struggling, stunted Arab world, Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot conformed to the medieval narrative that the culprit preventing societal and economic growth was Islam. Lyons seeks to demonstrate “It was to the direct benefit of the philosophes to perpetuate and strengthen the discourse rather than to challenge or question it, even in the face of new evidence, additional information, and further learning” (164).

**Subject Changes and Contrarieties**

Another Diderotian characteristic in “Sarrasins ou Arabes” is his spontaneous subject changes. His most peculiar pivot is in his “la morale des Sarrasins” section. Here Diderot briefly mentions the famous Persian poet, Sādī Shirazi (1210-1292), only then to curiously launch into his own Latin translation of Golestan or The Rose Garden.²² According to J. Proust, Diderot translated the Shirazi passage in Latin as a “romantic trinket” left for his lover Sophie Volland (96). Moreover, he acknowledges Shirazi’s attention to monarchical, religious and Persian cultural traditions:

> He attaches to certain essential points, under which he forms his ideas; his essential points are the traditions of kings and religious men, the benefits of abstinence and silence, love and youth, old age and imbecility, study of sciences, and gentleness in the art of conversation. Il s’attache à certains points capitaux, sous lesquels il rassemble ses idées ; ces points capitaux sont les mœurs des rois, les mœurs des hommes religieux, les avantages de la continence, les avantages du silence, l’amour & la jeunesse, la vieillesse & l’imbécilité, l’étude des sciences, la douceur & l’utilité de la conversation. (14:676)

Without any further explanation, Diderot abruptly ends his Shirazi section noting the poem’s pertinence:

> These are some of the general maxims of Sarrasin morals, which serve as a preliminary summary for what we can decipher in The Rose Garden, the most celebrated wisdom amongst Shirazi’s countrymen. Voici quelques maximes générales de la morale des Sarrasins, qui serviront de préliminaire à l’abrége que nous donnerons du rosarium de Saddi, le monument le plus célèbre de la sagesse de ses compatriotes. (14:676)

Finally, he concludes The Rose Garden with what Walter Rex defines as contrariety. After columns of saying that Muslims are irrational, Diderot contradicts himself when saying the Rosarium doesn’t completely betray rationality: “Le rosarium de Saddi n’est pas un traité complet de morale” (14:676). To the average reader this excerpt appears adventitious, but considering Diderot wanted to impress Sophie Volland, it is apparent that he cared little about the population he was depicting.

**Five Pillars of the Anti-Islam Narrative found in “Sarrasins ou Arabes”**

The anti-Islam narrative pervades “Sarrains ou Arabes” despite being uniquely Diderotian. The first pillar portraying Arabs and Muslims as a society dictated by violence rather than reason appears just after his brief introduction. Diderot abruptly shifts into an eleven-column long history of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties riddled with medieval anti-Islam sentiment. For example, Diderot suggests that the ideas revered by Muslims are idiotic because:

> Muslims consider them [ideas] without doubt, as men absent mindingly dazed from birth, who are naturally under a state of confusion in which their inborn stupidity fosters all bestial and essential functions. Ils les regardent sans doute comme des hommes étourdis de naissance, qui sont naturellement dans l’état de vertige, & dont la stupidité innée suspendant toutes les fonctions animales & vitales. (14:667)

Here Diderot perpetuates the savage barbarians pillar by dehumanizing Muslims as animals and removing their rationality. Diderot is not surprised that the naïve Sarrains fell under Muhammed’s influence because he was just another con-artist. He continues, “We see these movements hatch out a crowd of fanatics, sectarians and impostors. Qu’on en vit éclore une foule de fanatiques, de sectaires & d’imposteurs” (14:668).

Diderot’s readers are left to sift through lengthy accounts of Sarrasin history and determine their own conclusions. I argue that Diderot positions Arabes, Islam and Sarrasins overwhelmingly negative so that readers only refreshed their existing negative perceptions rather than genuine thought provocation.

The second archetype condemns Muslims for their fervent devotion to Islam, a false religion. Diderot argues that faith in Muhammed’s teachings blinds the Arabes to progress and rationality. However, Diderot offers halfhearted mitigated respect for scientific advancements made under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties only to discredit them later. For example, Diderot’s commentary on Averroës praises him:

> Averroës defended the value of reason. He was pious and no one could figure how he reconciled religion with his philosophy of eternity. He studied logic, physics, metaphysics, morality, politics, astronomy, theology, spoken word and music. Il défendit la cause de la raison. Il étoit pieux; & on n’entend pas trop comment il conciliait avec la religion sa doctrine de l’éternité du monde. Il a écrit de la Logique, de la Physique, de la Métaphysique, de la Morale, de la Politique, de l’Astronomie, de la Théologie, de la Rhétorique & de la Musique. (14:667)

Diderot delineates Averroës’s punishment as he advocated for Aristotelian rationality under the reign of Caliph Almanzor and his redemption when Almanzor later acknowledged his misapprehension.²³ It is arresting how Diderot writes fondly of Averroës, who anticipated several Enlightenment values by condemning capital punishment and promoting tolerance and distribution of power. Averroës is an exception. A few paragraphs later Diderot accuses Abbasside scholars of using their philosophy to cover up the ridiculousness of
Islam, “Qu’alors on s’en servit pour pallier le ridicule de l’islamisme.” (14:668)

Diderot continues,

The application of philosophy fathered by Muslims is a type of theosophy the most detested of all systems. Que l’application de la Philosophie à la révélation engendra parmi les Musulmans une espèce de théosophisme le plus détestable de tous les systèmes. (14:668)

“Sarrasins ou Arabes” attempts to credit Arab scholarship in science, medicine and mathematics, but the medieval discourse of Islam as a false religion of irrational Sarrasins extinguishes any claim to legitimacy. Encyclopédistes like Diderot are determined to separate Islam as irrational and Arab science (Joubin 198). However, their depictions are disjointed, as Islam and the scientific advancements go hand in hand.

The third pillar present in “Sarrasins ou Arabes” accuses Muhammad of false prophet-hood through exploiting Abrahamic traditions. This is demonstrated when Diderot explains that Mohammed is accredited with uniting the ‘barbarous’ Arabs into one people, instilling in them the thirst for conquest and blood, yet, indubitably fostering an environment of increasing religious fanaticism and thus ideological domination (Tolan 262-263). For example, amid the Sarrasin philosopher section he interjects:

Mohammed was a fanatic enemy of reason, who fashioned how he was able to have sublime visions based on a few scraps taken from Jewish and Christian books. He put a knife to the throat of those who hesitated to see his chapters as divine works. Mahomet fut un fanatique enmèni de la raison, qui ajusta comme il put ses sublines rêveries, à quelques lambeaux arrachés des livres des juifs & des chrétiens, & qui mit le couteau sur la gorge de ceux qui balancerent à regarder ses chapitres comme des ouvrages inspirés. (14:668)

Despite his personal Atheism, Diderot capitalizes on Medieval Holy War sentiment, a critical element of the anti-Islam discourse, in warning:

Understand that there is no religion the Mahomedians despise more than Christianity, but that the majority of wise men chosen to surround the Califs were Christians. Il faut qu’on sache qu’il n’y a point de religion que les mahométans haïssent autant que la chrétienne; que les savans que ces califes abbassides rassemblèrent autour d’eux, étaient presque tous chrétiens. (Diderot 14: 644)

He capitalizes on the existing anti-Islam narrative so eloquently that his critique would never be challenged during the Enlightenment. O’Sullivan states Diderot is “At his most artful, hiding his critique of Christianity in the shadows of his criticism of Islam” (183).

In comparison to le chevalier Louis de Jaucourt’s (a fellow encyclopédiste) lengthy condemnation of Mohammed’s sexual immoral behavior, Diderot only mentions the fourth pillar of the anti-Islam discourse. According to Diderot, as Islam began to spread, Mohammed manipulated the Sarrasins lustful nature in his ultimatum:

Mohammed know how to profit from these chaotic circumstances by bringing everyone to a religion that left them no alternative but chose between the cult of beautiful women or to be exterminated. Mahomet sut profiter de ces circonstances pour les amener tous à un culte qui ne leur laissoit que l’alternative de choisir de belles femmes, ou d’être exterminés. (14:664)

A mélange of medieval narratives are present here. Mohammed’s manipulation is typical of a false prophet because it contradicts the Christian standard of divine behavior (in comparison to Jesus) by creating an ultimatum — choose the cult or be exterminated. Perhaps Diderot’s personal relationships made him less likely to engage in this element of the anti-Islam discourse.

The fifth pillar accusing Mohammed and Islam of menacing all rationality positions Sarrasins and Arabes as an enemy in proximity (compared to des Chinois or des Indiens). (18)

Furthermore, in “Sarrasins”’ introduction, Mohammed’s teachings against philosophy and arts appear to directly attack Diderot’s Enlightenment values,

Muhammad was convinced of the incompatibility of philosophy and religion, that he declared the death penalty against those who studied liberal arts. Mahomet fut si convaincu de l’incompatibilité de la Philosophie & de la Religion, qu’il décéra peine de mort contre celui qui s’appliqueroit aux arts libéraux. (14:664)

Diderot grimmly concludes his introduction by warning readers that “we can consider Mohammed as the greatest enemy human reason has ever had” (14:664). Diderot needs to champion Enlightenment concepts such as banning corporal punishment, sovereignty, tolerance and rationality sans religion. In Diderot’s eyes, Mohammed’s values challenge his own.

Diderot is not immune to Tolan and Lyons’s critical notion of a “Western superiority-complex,” rooted in a lingering medieval Christian identity. I argue that Diderot succumbs to the Western superiority-complex and is, ultimately incapable of representing non-European cultures, particularly Islam and Arabs, in a neutral light. Additionally, I contend that Diderot benefits to position Arabs and Islam as inferior to serve as a sort of “societal omen,” a dystopian version of Europe if Enlightenment values were not embraced. Rebecca Joubin notes there was a tendency for the Orient to “serve as the Encyclopédistes favorite scapegoat to avoid royal censors.” Even if Muhammad and Islam served to criticize Christ and Christianity, Diderot and his fellow Encyclopédistes nevertheless freely used the existing anti-Islam discourse. The Orient is, in a way, sacrificed (again) to serve their endeavors with obvious lack of concern. This sentiment only demonstrates a European self-implied superiority (197-198).

Mohammed’s teachings and basic understanding of Islamic culture remain locked in the confines of the anti-Islam discourse, but Diderot’s perceptions of non-European civilizations evolved in the last decade of his life after the Encyclopédie. Diderot’s commentary towards the Orient becomes slightly more positive in his article “Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville” and most drastically in his work as a ghost writer for Abbé Raynal’s multi-volume history of European colonialism, Histoire des deux Indes. According to Madeline Double, Diderot is considered neither a champion for the Orient nor an advocate for anti-colonial movements, but his writings indicate a change in how he viewed the Orient. Dobie reminds us that “Diderot’s treatment of these issues was very much a product of its time” (7).

Despite being a product of its time,
much of Diderot’s “Sarrasin ou Arabes” narrative still echoes in modern narratives concerning Arabs and Islam. For example, stereotypes pitting Arabs as violent and irrational and Islam as anti-progressive and overzealous have agency in political and social narratives throughout Europe and the United States. The most prominent example is President Donald Trump’s travel ban targeting Muslim majority countries and augmenting Nationalism in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, Austria and Hungary. I believe that an important step to disarming this anti-Islam, anti-Arab narrative is acknowledging its medieval roots and the means in which it has functioned to benefit different agendas.
Appendix A

D’Alembert’s Pre-Censored Text in “Sarrasins ou Arabes”


[Vol. 14, p. 664]

Car c’est une observation générale que la religion s’avilît à mesure que la Philosophie s’accroît. On en conclura ce qu’on voudra ou contre l’utilité de la Philosophie, ou contre la vérité de la Religion; mais je puis annoncer d’avance que plus il y aura de penseurs à Constantinople, moins on fera de pèlerinages à la Mecque. Lorsqu’il y a dans une capitale un acte religieux, annuel et commun, il peut servir de règle très-sure pour calculer les progrès de l’incréduilité, la corruption, les moeurs, et le déclin de la superstition nationale. Ainsi, parmi les catholiques, dites, sous telle paroisse on consommoit en 1700, cinquante mille hosties, en 1759 on n’en consommoit plus que dix mille; donc la foi s’est affoiblie dans l’intervalle de cinquante-neuf ans, de quatre cinquièmes, et ainsi de tout ce qui tient à l’affoiblissement de la foi. Je ne doute point qu’il n’y ait un terme stationnaire, une année où la marche de l’incréduilité s’arrête: alors le nombre de ceux qui satisfont à la grande cérémonie annuelle est égal au nombre de ceux qui restent au milieu de la révolution aveugles ou éclairés, incurables ou incorrûptibles. Voilà le vrai troupeau sur lequel les ministres de la religion peuvent competer, il peut s’accroître, mais il ne peut diminuer.

[...

Soyez bon, soyez juste, soyez victorieux, soyez honoré au-dedans de vos états, soyez redouté au-dehors, ayez une armée nombreuse à vos ordres, et vous établirez la tolérance générale; vous renversez ces asyles de la superstition, de l’ignorance et du vice; vous réduirez à la condition de simples citoyens ces hommes de droit divin qui s’élevent sans cesse contre votre autorité; vous reprendrez ce qu’ils ont extorqué de l’imbécillité de vos prédécesseurs; vous restituerez à vos peuples les richesses dont ces inutiles et dangereux fainéans regorgent; vous doublerez vos revenus sans multiplier les impôts; vous réduirez leur chef orgueilleux à son filet et à sa ligne de pêcheur; vous empêcherez des sommes immenses d’aller se perdre dans un gouffre étranger, d’où elles ne sortent plus; vous vertez la population et l’agriculture refleurir dans vos provinces; vous aurez l’abondance et la paix, et vous régnerez et vous aurez exécuté toutes ces grandes choses sans exciter un murmure, sans avoir répandu une seule goutte de sang. Mais il faut avant tout que vous soyez bien persuadé que l’amour de vos sujets et le seul appui véritable de votre puissance; et que si dans la crainte que les murs de votre palais ne se renversent en-dehors, vous leur cherchez des étais, il y en a qui tôt ou tard les renverront au crime; le souverain sage et prudent isolera sa demeure de celle des dieux. Si ces deux édifices sont trop voisins, ils se presseront, et il arrivera avec le temps que le trône sera gêné par l’autel, et que portés un jour l’un contre l’autre avec violence, ils chanceleront tous les deux.

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e et convainquit de la fausseté le fondateur de la secte des al-Jobbaiens qu’il avait eu pour maître. La manière dont il s’y prit est subtile, et mérite d’être rapportée. Un père, lui dit-il, eut trois fils; le premier vécut dans la crainte de Dieu, le second dans le crime, et le troisième mourut enfant, quelle sera leur destinée dans l’autre vie? L’al-jobbaien lui répondit, que le premier seroit récompensé dans le ciel, le second châtié dans les enfers, et que le troisième n’aurait ni châtiment ni récompense. Mais, reprit Asshari, si celui-ci disoit à Dieu: Seigneur, il n’a dépendu que de vous que je vécusse plus long-tems et que je fusse aussi dans le ciel à côté de mon frere, cela eût été mieux pour moi; que lui répondroit le Seigneur?...Il lui répondroit, j’ai vû que si je t’accordois une plus longe vie, tu tomberois dans le crime, et que tu mériterois, au tems de mon jugement, le supplice éternel du feu...Mais, ajoute Asshari, n’entendez-vous pas le second qui replique au Seigneur; et que ne m’ôtiez-vous la vie dans mon enfance; pourquoi m’accorder des secours malheureux que vous avez eu la bonté de refuser à mon frere? si je n’étois pas dans le ciel pour mes vertus, j’aurois du moins échapé à l’enfer; loin de mon frere aîné, je sommeillerois en paix auprès de mon frere cadet; cela eût été aussi-bien pour moi que pour lui. Comment le Seigneur se débarrasse-t-il des reproches de celui-ci?...Comment? en lui disant, j’ai prolongé ta vie, afin que tu puisses mériter la souveraine félicité comme ton frere aîné, et c’étoit une grande grace que je te faisois...Si c’étoit une si grande grace, répondra le troisième; que ne me la faisiez-vous aussi?...Il faut convenir que voilà trois freres bien incommodes pour un optimiste philosophe ou Dieu. Son maître poussé à bout lui dit, allez, vous êtes possédé du diable.
Appendix B

Diderot’s Latin Translation of Golestân or The Rose Garden (1258) thought to be for Sophie Volland

« Quadam nocte propterit temporis memoriam revocavi; Vitoeque male transacte dispensium cum indignatione devoravi, Saxumque habitaculo cordis lacrymarum adamante perforavi, Hosque versus conditio meoe convenientes effudi. Quovis momento unus vitoe abit spiritus, Illud dam inspicio, non multum restitit. O te cajus jam quinquaginta sunt elapsi somno etiamnum gravem! Utinam istos quinque supremos vitoe dies probe intelligens! Pudor illi qui abit, opusque non perfect. Discusius tympanum percuserunt, sarcinam non composit, Suavis summus in discessu aurora, Retinet peditem ex itinere. Quicumque venit novam fabricam struxit; Abit ille; fabricamque alteri construxit; Alter illa similia buic vanitatis molimina agitavit; Illam vero fabricam ad finem perduxit nemo. Sodalem instabilem, amicum ne adscisse. Amicitia indignus est fallacissimus hic mundus. Cum bonis malisque pariter sit moriendum, Beatus ille qui bonitatis palmam reportavit. Viaticum vitoe in sepulcrum tuum proemit; Mortuo enim te, nemo feret, tute ipse proemit. Vita ut nix est, solque augusti. Pauxillum reliquit, tibi tamen domino etiamnum sacordia & inertia blanditur! Heus tu qui manu vacua forum adiisli? Metuo ut plenum referas strophiolum. Quicumque segetem suam comederit, dum adhuc in herbâ est, Messis tempore, spicilegio contentus esse cogitur. Consilium Saadi, attentis animi auribus percipe. Vita ita se habet: tu te virum proesta, & vade ».
Notes


2. See “Femmes,” or the four-part entry on women.

3. There is a surprising paucity of scholarship examining Diderot’s entry “Sarrasins.” Little of the scholarship on Diderot examines “Sarrasins ou Arabes, philosophie des” directly. Jacques Proust touches on Diderot’s mindset while writing “Sarrasins ou Arabes” in “Diderot savait-il aussi le persan » (1958) and “l’Encyclopédie dans la pensée et dans la vie de Diderot” (1963); Rebecca Joubin shows how Islam and Mohammed served to further Enlightenment agendas in, “Islam and Arabs through the Eyes of the Encyclopédie: The “Other” as a Case of French Cultural Self-Criticism” (2000); finally, Madeline Dobie highlights Diderot’s shifting depictions of the Orient throughout his career in “Going Global: Diderot, 1770-1784” (2009). That is the extent of scholarly attention devoted to “Sarrasins,” based on my searches. I would like to acknowledge Lindy Scripps-Hoekstra, Modern Languages Library Liaison at Grand Valley State University, for her valuable bibliographic assistance.

4. Prominent examples cited by Tolan include: *Contra sectam mahumeticam*, by the Dominican theologian Riccoldo da Montecroce in the thirteenth century, published in France in 1509; *Debate between the Christian and the Saracen*, by the Burgundian Jean Germain (d. 1460); *Against the Qur’an*, by the Carthusian Denys Ryckel, 1533; *Life of Muhammad, Prince of the Saracens and the Whole Doctrine. Known as the Law of the Ishmaelites and the Qur’an*, by Theodor Buchmann under the pseudonym “Bibliander,” 1543-1550, which reprinted the twelfth-century Latin translation of the Qur’an by Robert of Ketton; *Instructions in the Christian Faith against the Impostures of the Muhammadan Qur’an of the Great Sultan of Turkey*, by Celestine father Pierre Crespet, 1589 (Tolan 149-150).

5. “The same aversion and the same prejudices (against Islam) predominated in Christian minds during the [eighteenth century] as well. Theologians themselves were not generally better informed, or more nuanced in their criticisms, or more sophisticated in their arguments than their medieval predecessors. In fact, they did not refrain from printing old polemical treatises” (Tolan 164, emphasis added).

6. Interactions between Muslims and European Christians date back to the first expansion of Islam, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. The European anti-Islam discourse emerged immediately thereafter. According to Tolan, the earliest known invective against Muslims appeared in 640 from Maximus the Confessor, a Byzantine theologian. Maximus fulminated in a letter, “What could be more direr than the present evils now encompassing the civilized world? To see a barbarous nation of the desert overrunning another land as if it were their own, to see our civilization laid waste by wild and untamed beasts who have merely the shape of human form” (Tolan 43).

7. Over a century later, circa 778, French emperor Charlemagne clashed with Saracen invaders in the attempt to defend massive territorial gains made by Saracen armies north of the Iberian Peninsula and southern France. Rallying the second call to Crusade circa 1115, troubadours sung of Charlemagne’s heroic legacy in *La Chanson de Roland* (the first literary work written in French). In *Roland*, Saracens are portrayed interchangeably as polytheists, idolaters and pagans, in utter ignorance of Islam’s indisputable monotheism (Tolan 136). Saracen invaders were written as not only pagans, but as satanically inspired sub-humans. This theme emerged as the “popular” image of Saracens, preserved through melodies of talented troubadours.
8. Christian apologists also frequently compared Mohammed invidiously to Jesus, according to Tolan. In his *Opus Majus* (ca. 1267), Roger Bacon depicted the former as sexually deviant, politically ambitious and thirsty for power. (Bacon was influenced by Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, ca. 1109). Plucking obscure Qur’anic verses to illustrate his points, Bacon noted with dismay the success of the heresiarch Muhammed and his “feigned” prophecy. Producing false miracles “by fraud and deception” Muhammed led a “most vile” life as an adulterer who took every beautiful woman away from her men and raped her (Tolan 226). Ultimately, Muhammed’s life and prophecy contorted into a caricature, albeit a complex and detailed one, as Christian apologists attempted to recount every known detail of his life, filling in gaps with Biblical clues and seventh-century Saracen folklore (Tolan 137).

9. Christian polemicists’ favorite “proof” of Muhammed’s heresy was sex: Mohammad’s wives, Muslim polygamy, and the celestial houris promised to the faithful. In a chapter on natural marriage, Ramon Martí, a Dominican missionary, averred that “Saracens’ marriage law permitting polygamy is not a law of rational and honest humans, but rather of pimps and whores” (Tolan 240).

10. This view pervades the marginal notes of *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, the first translated Qur’an in Latin, by mathematics scholar Robert of Ketton (ca. 1142). Ketton saturated the margins with his own personal touch, most notably calling Islam a “death-dealing religion,” “absurd lies,” “extremely stupid” and the ultimate enemy of Christianity (Lyons 84). *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*, though a botched translation, provided scholars with fodder with which to refute Islam for centuries.


12. See Appendix A to view Diderot’s uncensored original text, The ARTFL Project of the University of Chicago.

13. For more on Diderot’s style see Andrew H. Clark’s *Diderot’s Part* (2008) and Walter E. Rex’s *Diderot’s counterpoints. The dynamics of contrariety in his major works* (2002).

14. According to Lyons, Diderot uses medieval sources out of their original context in “Sarrasins.”

15. Tolan reasons the Muslim world functions as the point of comparison is due to the historical circumstance of Europe and the Islamic world’s having a long mutual, multifaceted past dating back to the Crusades (261-262).

16. See Appendix B: Diderot’s Latin Translation of *Golestân or The Rose Garden* (1258).

17. Abu Aamir Muhammad bin Abdullah ibn Abi Aamir ruled the Muslim Iberian territory (Spain) circa 938-1002).

18. See Jaucourt’s article “Mahométisme” in the *Encyclopédie*.

19. To learn more about Medieval Christian apologists comparing Muhammed’s violent behavior to Jesus’s nonviolent practices in order to delegitimize any divine inspiration, See Tolan on *True Religion* by Theodore Abû Qurrah circa 750-825 (59).

20. Diderot could have also been concerned of Islam’s close resemblance to Christianilty in comparison to Buddhism or Hinduism.

21. “On peut regarder Mahomet comme le plus grand ennemi que la raison humaine ait eu.”

23. Rebecca Joubin argues the Oriental narrative is remains medieval until the Enlightenment. She claims there is slight improvement during the Enlightenment—not because the Oriental lens was lifted, but simply because it was necessary for the Orient to be competent if it would serve as a suitable surrogate population to criticize (198).

24. My statement reflects a report of increased hate crimes against persons appearing Arab, Muslim and recent gains made by nationalist political parties in German, Hungarian and Polish elections.
Works Cited


