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The Uncanonical Dante: The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. It is a difficult question to determine how far they were conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted in their minds between their own creeds and that of the people. Dante at least appears to wish to mark the full extent of it by placing Rhiphaeus, whom Virgil calls *justissimus unus*, in Paradise, and observing a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments.

—Percy Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*

The case of Dante provides an excellent opportunity to open up the question of the Western canon. In one sense, Dante is the perfect example of a canonical author. His name is one of the few certain to appear on anybody's short list of the truly central authors in the Western literary tradition. But in another sense Dante can be regarded as uncanonical. In his own day he was widely suspected of being heretical in his religious views,¹ and a careful reading of his works does indeed raise serious doubts about his being the pillar of orthodoxy he is often taken to be today.² Out of this interplay between the canonical and the noncanonical Dante, I hope to show that the issue of the Western canon is more complicated than either its defenders or its attackers generally present it.

In discussing the issue of the canon, it is important to sort out at the **[End Page 138]** beginning what we do and do not mean by the term. A canonical work may merely be a work that has been accepted into the literary canon, one that has become a touchstone in the reading and

teaching of literature. But the term *canonical* can suggest something else, that the work is orthodox and somehow represents a central authoritative position in Western culture. The word *canonical* is so loaded with religious connotations that it is difficult to separate the relatively neutral first meaning of the term from the loaded second meaning. Dante is a case in point. When people refer to him as a canonical author, they usually do not simply mean that he is widely read and taught. Most discussions of Dante today treat him as representing an authoritative cultural moment in the Western tradition, as the supreme embodiment of the medieval mind. Viewed that way, Dante becomes an emblem of everything contemporary critics of the Western canon bitterly hate and reject. The reason they feel that they must attack authors like Dante and displace them from the center of literary study is that these authors have come to stand for orthodoxy and thus seem to enforce the hegemony of Western culture.

Critics who wish to champion various forms of non-Western culture have a particular axe to grind with canonical authors like Dante. The contemporary debate over the Western canon seems to be premised on a sharp opposition between Western and non-Western cultures, as if they were complete and irreconcilable antitheses, and even wholly unrelated. One of the principal charges against the Western canon is that it is Eurocentric, that it remains confined within a narrow orbit of European ideas and beliefs, thus excluding all other views of the world. A corollary of the idea of Eurocentrism is the concept of Orientalism, developed by Edward Said.³ Said argues that throughout its history, the Occident has defined itself in opposition to the Orient, basing its elevated self-image on a debased vision of the cultural Other. In Said's argument, the Occident views itself as rational as opposed to an irrational Orient, as emotionally disciplined in contrast to an emotionally uncontrolled Orient, and as masculine over against a feminine Orient.

In medieval Europe the Orient was chiefly represented by the Muslim world, and one does not have to look far in medieval literature to find the kinds of orientalist stereotypes about which Said writes. The French

Song of Roland contains excellent examples, but even the *Divine Comedy* seems to...



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