

# Polyphonic Voices of the Mediterranean in Boccaccio's Sicilian Novellas

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**Riassunto:** Molte novelle del Decameron sono ambientate in Sicilia ed è proprio attraverso di esse che viene veicolata la bellezza dell'isola, la sua cultura multiethnica, i sapori del cibo, ma anche la violenza e la criminalità, elementi che conferiscono una immagine suggestiva della Sicilia e degli abitanti di quest'isola posta al crocevia del Mediterraneo. Il presente contributo si propone di far emergere gli aspetti suddetti attraverso l'analisi di alcune novelle di Boccaccio; in modo particolare verranno prese in esame la seconda novella della quinta giornata, la decima novella della ottava giornata, la settima novella della decima giornata, la sesta novella della quinta giornata, nelle quali la storia, la letteratura e l'archeologia sono voci polifoniche che si intrecciano ed animano il continuum narrativo.

**Parole chiave:** Decameron, Sicilia, storia, letteratura, archeologia

**M**any of the *Decameron* novellas are set in Sicily and they convey the beauty of the island, its multi-ethnic culture, the flavours of the food, but also the violence and crime, elements that give a suggestive image of Sicily and the inhabitants of this island located on the Mediterranean crossroads. There is a total of about seven novellas if, according to the analysis done by Cesare Segre, you don't count the second novella of the fifth day that is set in Lipari, which Boccaccio already considered an independent island.

Particular consideration will be given to the second novella of the fifth day, the tenth novella of the eighth day, the seventh novella of the tenth day, and the sixth novella of the fifth day, in which history,

literature, and archaeology are polyphonic voices that intertwine and enliven the narrative continuum.

In the ‘fifth day: under the rule of Fiammetta, the discussion concerns the adventures of lovers whose cruel misfortunes had a happy ending’.<sup>1</sup> The sixth novella of the fifth day narrates that Marin Bolgaro lived with his beautiful daughter Restituta on the island of Ischia. Gianni, who lived in Procida, went every day to Ischia, even swimming, just to see her. But, one day, she was kidnapped by a group of boys who took her to King Frederick of Aragon who locked her in the Arab Norman palace called the Cuba. On the trail of his beloved woman, Gianni went to Palermo and caught a glimpse of Restituta behind a palace window. During the night Frederick discovered the two lovers sleeping and ordered that they be tied and exposed naked in the public square, before being burned at the stake. Thanks to the testimony of Admiral Ruggeri di Lauria, the two young people were forgiven because they were identified as the nephew of Gian di Procida, an Aragon partisan and one of the leaders of the revolt of the Vespers in 1282, and as the daughter of the famous Marin Bolgaro. The love between Gianni and Restituta follows the rules of courtly tradition being satisfied at the sight of the beloved, and is immediately put at risk by Fortune’s intervention upsetting human plans: some Sicilian sailors happen to land on Ischia and kidnap Restituta, handing her over to King Frederick II. The sovereign’s power is significantly represented by two places: the Cuba palace in which Restituta is held captive and the Palermo square where the two lovers are exposed to the crowd, waiting to be burned at the stake. The Cuba, whose name derives from Qubbah meaning ‘dome’, is the last monument created by the Normans in Palermo, which was formerly the capital of the Kalbid emirate and the Norman kingdom, together with La Zisa, is the building most representative of Fatimid architecture in Sicily. In 1180 the building was commissioned by William II utilizing Arab architects. In the place where the Cuba stood, there was a big park called Genoardo, a word that derives from the Arab *giannatulard*, meaning ‘heaven on earth’ because it was rich with waters and magnificent gardens, the place where Frederick II ordered that Restituta ‘be put in very pretty villas in his garden’<sup>2</sup> called the Cuba.

1 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Vol. 1, edited by Vittore Branca (Milan, 2012), 419.

2 *Ibid.*, 467.

The building had only one storey, divided into three parts, but with no private apartments, unlike what Boccaccio sustained. It was surrounded by a large pavilion where, in the daytime the king, attending parties and ceremonies, rested and refreshed himself during the more sultry hours of the day. The exterior of the building is rectangular, 31.15 meters long and 16.80 wide. At the centre of each side four tower shapes protrude, the outer walls of which are adorned with ogival arches. In the lower part there are windows separated by brick pillars: the thickness of the walls and the small windows are more resistant to the heat of the sun. In addition, it is believed that the greater surface area of windows was on the north-east side, the better to accept the cool winds coming from the sea. The interior of the Cuba was divided into three settings aligned and communicating with each other. At the centre of the internal setting, an impluvium in the shape of an eight-pointed star was used as a basin to collect rainwater. Muqarnas (stalactite vaults, only one remaining today) embellished the central hall; there were four columns and the side rooms were used as service and bodyguard places. The splendour of the Cuba and its park were extinguished after Norman domination: the Angevins raged on the trees and vineyards that had been planted with such care and the Cuba fell into an oblivion from which only the admirable pen of Giovanni Boccaccio freed it. During the plague of 1575–76, the Cuba was transformed in a Lazzaretto; the Bourbon government later settled the cavalry there and in 1680 all the military area and the Cuba became the property of the Italian State. The Cuba was recently sold to the Sicilian region that has returned it to its former glory.

Palermo is the city in which the tenth novella of the eighth day is set, in the port area, and tells the story of a Sicilian beauty, Madame Jancofiore, who deceives a Florentine merchant in order to steal his earnings, but is then paid back in her own coin and relieved of an even larger sum. As in the previous novella, the Arab element is strongly inserted in the narrative fabric of the novella: the first tryst between Jancofiore and the merchant takes place in a public bath, very similar to a *hammam*, a place of incredible elegance. Salabaetto comes to Palermo from Florence to sell woollen cloth left over from the Salerno fair, and Palermo looks good for Salabaetto, almost like the city that reveals a luxury of oriental ancestry. In the public bath where Madonna Jancofiore

meets Salabaetto, she orders the preparation of ‘a pair of fine silk-lined sheets’,<sup>3</sup> ‘a very white Cyprian buckram blanket with two velously embroidered pillows’,<sup>4</sup> ‘silver phials, one full of rosewater, others of water of orange blossoms, and yet another of jasmine flowers water and one of perfumed water’.<sup>5</sup> This sumptuous bathroom, protagonist in the scene where the Tuscan merchant is seduced, was the most famous one in Palermo, called the ‘golden bathroom’ and was in Via Marmorea, today Corso Vittorio Emanuele.<sup>6</sup> Opened by a powerful Muslim eunuch from the court of William, it enjoyed all the technical refinements of the Muslim hygienic tradition.

From the influence of Arab art and folklore, in the fourth novella of the fourth day and the seventh of the fifth day, the multi-ethnic elements that give rise to a sort of polyphony are identified in the trade relations that exist with Tunis and the East. Underlying the events of the fourth novella of the fourth day that addresses the courtly theme of love for fame, during the reign of William II there are the relationships that Sicily entertains with Tunis, very topical events in Boccaccio’s day, in which trade between the Sicilian and Tunisian ports was flourishing in spite of piracy.<sup>7</sup> So the King of Tunis justifiably asks William II to guarantee that the ship on which his daughter is travelling, always referred to as ‘the daughter of the King of Tunis’<sup>8</sup> and not by her name as if she were an object of exchange, can freely cross the sea. Gerbino also makes known his love through a friend who shows her jewels such ‘as merchants do’.<sup>9</sup> The two protagonists reflect the principles of the courtly world: Gerbino, in addition to being handsome, is ‘famous in prowess and courtesy’;<sup>10</sup> the daughter of the King of Tunis, ‘one of the most beautiful creations that Nature ever formed, is the most debonair and with noble and great spirit’.<sup>11</sup> The woman, however, falls in love with Gerbino thanks to the power of his word, a power which reveals

3 Ibid., 726.

4 Ibid., 727.

5 Ibid., 726–7.

6 Leonardo Sciascia, ‘Per una storia di Palermo nel Duecento (e dei toscani in Sicilia): la famiglia di Ruggero Mastrangelo’, in *Come l’oro della fiaba* (Florence, 2010).

7 C. Trasselli, *Privilegi di Messina e Trapani* (Messina, 1992).

8 Boccaccio, 369.

9 Ibid., 369.

10 Ibid., 368.

11 Ibid., 369.

the man's bourgeois virtue, but the logic of alliances and power plays and the chivalric code are worth more than feelings and human beings. The father sends his daughter in marriage to the King of Granata, considering her a means for political and economic alliance; Saracen sailors, after declaring that they would not give 'any thing that was on the ship',<sup>12</sup> without considering that she is the daughter of the King, they kill her and cast her body into the sea, saying to Gerbino: 'Take her, we give her to you, such as we may.'<sup>13</sup> In the name of economic logic, the conclusion of the story finds justification: King William, to honour his agreement with the King of Tunis, who is grieved more for non-compliance with the pacts than for the death of his daughter, personally kills the nephew Gerbino. From the strictly economic and political point of view, three cities – Palermo, Messina, Trapani – occupy a prominent place in the novella. Palermo is the capital, Messina is the naval base of the kingdom, while Gerbino heads to Messina to arm two galleys, Trapani is the commercial port, the city extending more towards Tunis, almost constituting a bridge to it. This is why Gerbino has the beautiful daughter of the King of Tunis buried on the little island across from Trapani, which is not identifiable as Ustica as Boccaccio erroneously states on the basis of what is stated by the Arab Idrisi in his 'Book of Roger', but was most likely Favignana.

Shrouded in myth and history, the city of Trapani continues throughout the Middle Ages to be present in the most important historical moments: it was active in the expulsion of the Angevins during the Vespers. In fact it was the first city on the island to accept Peter of Aragon and in the waters of Trapani the Angevins were defeated in 1284. Subsequent attempts by the house of Anjou to seize the city failed miserably, both in 1314 when Robert of Anjou who besieged the city for more than a year by sea and by land, and in 1432, the year in which Louis of Anjou tried a new siege.

We return to the fifth day. In the seventh novella: 'Teodoro, being enamoured of Violante, daughter of Messer Amerigo, his lord, gets her with child and is sentenced to the gallows; but while he is being scourged thither, he is recognized by his father and, being set at large,

12 Ibid., 372.

13 Ibid., 372.

takes Violante to wife'.<sup>14</sup> The seventh novella of the fifth day and the sixth of the same day show the continuity between past and present, equality between nobles and bourgeoisie on the level of natural capabilities. Teodoro and Violante are condemned to death like Gianni di Procida and Restituta; recognition has a great importance in both the novellas that evoke two love stories of classical tradition. Teodoro and Violante's separation from the group because of a storm can recall Dido and Aeneas (*Aeneid*, IV, 165–9), while Gianni's swimming to see at least the walls of Restituta's house may be a reflection of Hero and Leander, as described by Ovid. Even in this novella, as in the seventh of the fifth day and in the fifth of the second day, the driving power is love, thanks to which Violante falls in love with Teodoro, a young man who performs the duties of a servant. Between the two, Violante shows keen intellect to the point of inventing a story to justify the birth of her son while Teodoro would like to escape for fear that the relationship could be discovered. The servant Teodoro proves even inferior to Giovanni di Procida who, instead, has a frigate armed and tackles dangers in order to find Restituta. The attitude of the nobles is then stigmatized: Amerigo, ready to have his daughter and Teodoro killed then consents to the marriage only when Teodoro's noble origins are revealed, appears more bound to social conventions than affections. The economic and political reality of great interest that the novella outlines the purchase by Amerigo of the servant Teodoro from Genoese corsairs, who with their galleys have kidnapped several children from Armenia, bears witness to the intense commercial traffic in the Mediterranean and involves Trapani, in perfect agreement with the Genoese, according to the political orientation inaugurated by King William II of Hauteville. Boccaccio, in particular, specifies that the corsairs go to the Adana area, a place where Teodoro and Violante move to, to demonstrate the link of Trapani with this city, 'an emporium at the crossroads of Syria and Egypt, of Persia and Armenia'.<sup>15</sup>

If the wealth of Trapani is not due only to trade but also to the land, as evidenced by Amerigo's properties, positive relationships with the East are further evidenced by the fact that three Armenian ambassadors who, to break up the length of the trip, stop in Trapani for a while

14 Ibid., 473.

15 V. Branca, *Boccaccio Medievale* (Florence, 1968), 148.

before resuming the journey to meet the Pope, also informed of the good hospitality that the city provided to foreigners. Trapani is also the scene of recognition and discovery: the three ambassadors arrived there by chance, and chance always plays an important role in human affairs, attracted by the shouts of the crowd following poor Teodoro baptized by Amerigo with the name of Peter, looked out and one of them, a man of great authority, noticed a large red birthmark on Peter's chest, like that of the child who had been kidnapped years earlier by the corsairs. He instinctively cried out Teodoro's name and spoke to him in Armenian; the young man's answer in the same language was confirmation that Peter was his son Teodoro.

The Sicilian novellas thus create a polyphony of voices since Boccaccio, in his open vision of what is real, never imposes a unique idea but admirably makes dialogue between the different ways of seeing the world according to the concept of polyphonic narrative introduced by the Russian scholar Michael Bakhtin (1895–1975) in an important book on Dostoevsky. The perspective pluralism that results corresponds to the multiplicity of that world of which the *Decameron* wants to be a holy eternal image.

In conclusion, in a well-known early essay of 1929, Auerbach considered that, in the Middle Ages, the short-story genre could not assert itself, if it is true that it takes inspiration from immanent reality that in the Middle Ages was not considered worthy of attention. Giovanni Boccaccio, from this point of view, is located outside the Middle Ages because he is able to look at reality; he can grasp randomness and contradictions, by shifting the randomness of events in an ideal company, where women are presented with a new image that is on par with that of man. In this way the author, with a framework of the hundred novellas of the *Decameron*, opposes the chaos and dissolution that resulted from the plague of 1348, with an ideal company, where courtesy and kindness prevail on violence and on brutality and where love, according to Italo Calvino, is considered a natural force that only if respected how it is, can be governed by reason and morality. Boccaccio, however, is beyond the Middle Ages even for these polyphonic openings of socio-political and folkloristic nature.