Sharon Kinoshita (University of California, Santa Cruz)

"Avendo di servidori bisogno": *Decameron* 5.7 and the Medieval Mediterranean Slave Trade

Abstract: Celebrated (along with Dante and Petrarch) as one of the Three Crowns (Tre Corone) of Italian literature, Giovanni Boccaccio is typically associated with the city of Florence. Yet he spent an impressionable youth in Naples, capital of the Regno (the Angevin kingdom of southern Italy), and up to 20 of the 100 novelle in his Decameron are set in the Mediterranean, with its politics and commerce as an indispensable backdrop. Drawing on recent work by scholars of the Mediterranean, this essay rereads Decameron 5.7 in that historical context—on the one hand, examining the ambiguities of the slave trade that brings its protagonist, Teodoro, from the Anatolian coast to Sicily and, on the other, the way modern editions and translations gesture toward the fractious politics of the medieval Mediterranean in ways seldom taken up in literary analyses.

In 2009 I observed that literary scholars lagged behind historians in exploring the potential of the then-emerging field of Mediterranean Studies. Now, over ten years later, more literary research is being conducted under the rubric "Mediterranean"—particularly in the areas of modern, postcolonial, and Francophone studies;[1] overall, however, the discrepancy still remains. In this essay, I examine the interface between medieval Mediterranean *literature* and medieval Mediterranean *history*, taking as my case study Novella 7 from Day 5 of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (c. 1350–1370). Told on the day devoted to "the stories of lovers who, after terrible accidents or misfortunes, finally found happiness" (384), tale 5.7 features a slave captured in a pirate raid on the Anatolian coast and sold in Trapani, Sicily, where he becomes the lover of his master's daughter. Reading this tale through recent studies in eastern Mediterranean commerce, slavery, and crusades, I argue for the central importance of history to the field of Mediterranean literature and for the ways in which literary texts do more than "illustrate" or "reflect"

1 See, for example, Tamalet Talbayev (2017), Elhariry and Tamalet Talbayev (2018) and Esposito (2014).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110775136-011

historical events or phenomena, using Wayne Rebhorn's 2013 annotated English translation as my example.[2]

Set "during the time when good King William ruled Sicily," novella 5.7 begins when Messer Amerigo Abate, a noble from Trapani in northwestern Sicily, finding himself "in need of servants" [avendo di servidori bisogno] (437/660.4), buys a number of children captured by Genoese pirates in raids on the Armenian coast. While most were obviously peasants,

> there was one among them whose noble and better appearance seemed to reflect some other origin, and he was called Teodoro. Although he was treated as a servant [a guisa di servo trattato fosse], he was nevertheless raised in the house together with Messer Amerigo's sons, and as he grew up, Teodoro…became so well mannered and likable and he pleased Messer Amerigo to such an extent that Amerigo made him a free man [franco]. Believing him to be a Turk [credendo que turchio fosse], Amerigo had him baptized, giving him the name of Pietro, and he entrusted him with all his important affairs, placing the greatest of faith in him. (412/660.5)

Before long, Pietro and Messer Amerigo's daughter Violante fall in love and she eventually becomes pregnant. When they are discovered, the outraged father appeals to Messer Currado, the king's military governor, who sentences Pietro to death. As Pietro is being led to the gallows, however, he is recognized by Fineo, an Armenian nobleman on his way to Rome to negotiate with the Pope "on important matters concerning a crusade [un passagio] they were supposed to undertake" (416/666.32). Seeing Pietro's strawberry birthmark, the nobleman, Fineo, recalls his son, "kidnapped by pirates from the seashore of Laiazzo some fifteen years earlier and [never] heard of since" (442). On a hunch, Fineo calls out his son's name and addresses "Pietro" in Armenian, prompting a moving reunion between father and son. In a sudden reversal of fortune, in keeping with the theme of the *Decameron*'s fifth day, Pietro is pardoned and his marriage to Violante arranged. A few days later,

> Fineo embarked on a galley with his son, the lady, and his little grandson, and took them with him to Laiazzo, where the two lovers remained in peace and tranquillity for as long as they lived. (419)

A rescrambled Hellenistic romance in miniature, tale 5.7 has it all: piracy, slavery, conversion, illicit sex, near tragedy, and a just-in-the-nick-of-time recognition scene that leads to a happily-ever-after ending. Even the most conventional of plots, however, signifies differently in different historical circumstances, and here—as else-

2 English translations, occasionally modified, are taken from Wayne Rebhorn. Italian originals are from Vittore Branca's two-volume edition; references give page number with section number.

where in the *Decameron*—Boccaccio tantalizes us with the specificity of the names, places, and circumstances: Trapani and the Anatolian coast, linked by Genoese shipping and slave trading; or negotiations for a new crusade conducted by the papacy and the kingdom of Armenia. Literary critics, on the other hand, as a cursory glance at the existing secondary scholarship shows, have been most interested in questions like classical sources and themes, and the social and the family matters elicited by the love between Teodoro and Violante.

The tale's more explicitly Mediterranean elements, in contrast, are consigned literally to the margins: the footnote, the gloss, the annotation—the interface, that is, between primary source and secondary reading. As an example, let's look at two endnotes to the Rebhorn translation. The first, noting that "There is no specific source for this story," identifies some of novella 5.7's proper names:

> It takes place during the reign of William II, the Norman King of Sicily (b. 1155, ruled 1166–89). The Abate (Abbate) family, to which Amerigo supposedly belongs, were *capitani*, that is, leaders of the local militia, in Trapani under the Normans and, after them, under the Aragonese. There is no Amerigo among its members, although there is an Arrigo who was a privy counsellor to King Frederick II in the next century. (900n.1)

The second focuses on the land of Teodoro's birth:

> The Armenia in question here is what historians refer to as **Lesser Armenia**, which was founded in the twelfth century by Armenians fleeing from their homeland in what is now the northeastern part of Turkey (as well as in areas to the east) and settling in **Cilicia**, which lies on the Mediterranean in the southeastern part of Turkey just north of present-day Syria and Lebanon. The Armenians had actually been Christians since the fourth century and Lesser Armenia, being the easternmost Christian country on the Mediterranean in the later Middle Ages, was an important way station for Italian merchants trading with the East as well as a staging ground for various Crusades. **The Crusade that is mentioned** later in the story i**s presumably the Third, which was launched in 1189**, although Boccaccio also refers there to the 'King' of Armenia, which is anachronistic, since Lesser Armenia only became a kingdom in 1199.[3] Note that t**he kidnapped boy's name…is Greek** and means 'God's gift.' (Rebhorn 900–01n.2, emphases added)

Drawn closely from Vittore Branca's magisterial 1992 Italian edition, these notes clearly situate us in the medieval Mediterranean. The first one takes us from the one explicit historical marker contained in the text—the reign of William II (d. 1189)—to Emperor Frederick II (d. 1250), the Stupor Mundi who dominated Mediterranean politics in the first half of the thirteenth century, through the Sicilian

3 Not uncommonly, Boccaccio is slightly inaccurate in his history: is this inadvertent or intentional?

Vespers (1282), the revolt that overthrew the French king Charles of Anjou and ultimately installed Peter III of Aragon as king of Sicily, triggering what David Abulafia has called a "Two Hundred Years' War" dominating, with intermissions, "the western, central and even at times eastern Mediterranean" (1997, xvi) in the centuries to come. Together, these two notes conclusively establish the "Mediterraneanness" of *Decameron* 5.7. Yet, I suggest, they leave us with a tale that, to borrow a phrase from Horden and Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2000)—the work that helped launch the present post-Braudelian revival of Mediterranean Studies—remains set *in* the Mediterranean without yet being made part of it (2). If in 2009 Teodolinda Barolini could rouse students of Dante to the "massive work of social and historical contextualization [that] lies before us" (53), then the annotations provided by Rebhorn and other editors and translators, I submit, provide a kind of *effet de réel* of that kind of engagement. By appearing to saturate the historical as an explanatory field, such notes gesture toward an exploration of these tales' Mediterranean imaginary while simultaneously foreclosing it.[4]

Boccaccio in the Mediterranean

Though closely associated with Florence, Giovanni Boccaccio was a thoroughly Mediterranean figure. He spent his youth, as is well known, in Naples, capital of the Angevin kingdom (Regno) of southern Italy, where his father worked for one of the great Florentine banking companies (likely the Bardi). He returned to Florence only reluctantly in 1340–1341, having exhausted all attempts to secure a position that would have allowed him to remain in this "cultural crossroads" (Lee 742) of the Mediterranean.[5] Florence, of course, figures at the center of the *Decameron*, from the Prologue's vivid account of the horrors of the Black Death in that city to the ten young people (seven women and three men) of the *brigata* who begin and end their flight from Florence and eventual return at the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella. And though, as we might expect, many of the *Decameron*'s 100 *novelle* are set in that city (especially those told on Days 6, 8, 9), up to 18 or 20 of the tales are set in places across the Mediterranean and feature what I have elsewhere identified as typically Mediterranean themes.[6]

4 A major exception is Morosini (2020).

5 For Boccaccio's biography, see Wallace (1991, 4–12). On Naples as a literary and cultural center, see Lee (2016).

6 For an overview, see Kinoshita (2021, 154–157). For Mediterranean thematics in other *Decameron* tales, see Kinoshita and Jacobs (2007) and Kinoshita (2011, 44–49).

What happens if we embed novella 5.7 in the medieval Mediterranean? Set in the time of "good King William" of Sicily (d. 1189), it puts us nominally in the late twelfth century—over a century and a half before the composition of the *Decameron.* Geographically, the tale ranges across the eastern half of the Mediterranean, beginning, as it does, when Messer Amerigo Abate, "in need of servants" (avendo di servidori bisogno) (437/660.4) buys a number of children captured by Genoese pirates in raids on the Armenian coast.[7] We will return to the chronological gap between the time in which the tale is set and the time when it was composed in due course. In Boccaccio's day, the lands Rebhorn describes as "an important way station for Italian merchants trading with the East [and] staging ground for various Crusades" (900n.2) was in fact:

> [a] world of dizzying physical mobility—crisscrossed by overlapping networks of nomads and seminomads, raiders, volunteers on their way to join military adventures, slaves of various backgrounds, wandering dervishes, monks and churchmen trying to keep in touch with their flock, displaced peasants and townspeople seeking refuge, disquieted souls seeking cure and consolation at sacred sites, Muslim schoolmen seeking patronage, and the inevitable risk-driven merchants of late medieval Eurasia.[8] (Kafadar 1995, 61)

Teeming with Borgesian excess, this passage lifts the curtain on a riotous collection of characters that fall between the cracks of conventional histories told from the perspective of empires and nations. Constitutively on the move, they formed the perfect backdrop for the slave trade to flourish, for Genoese raiders to pluck Teodoro and other boys from the Armenian coast.[9]

Let's return to tale 5.7, which begins, as we remember, when Messer Amerigo Abate finds himself "in need of servants," so that

> when some galleys arrived from the eastern Mediterranean [di Levante] belonging to Genoese pirates [*corsari*] who had captured a great many children while scouring the coast of [*corseggiando*] Armenia, he purchased a few of them, thinking they were Turks. (437/660.4)

---

7 Compare *Decameron* 4.4, in which King William's (fictional) grandson Gerbino falls in love, sight unseen, with the daughter of the king of Tunis—an affair that ends tragically, in keeping with the theme of the Fourth Day, of "those whose love came to an unhappy end" (300).

8 This is Ottomanist Cemal Kafadar's description of late thirteenth- through early fourteenth-century Anatolia. For a review of six book-length studies that illustrate the complexity of this region, see Kinoshita (2011, 369–385).

9 The Cilician coast had been a hotspot for such raids for millennia; cf. Pompey the Great's expedition to clear the Mediterranean of pirates in 67 BCE (Backman 2014, 170–171). In *Decameron* 5.6, a nobleman's daughter, Restituta, is abducted from the shores of the island of Ischia by a band of Sicilian youth and given as a gift to King Frederick [III?] of Sicily.

As in other Mediterranean locales featuring rugged coastlines and fragmented hinterlands, topography simultaneously connects spaces—so that merchants or their alter egos, pirates, can move between them regularly or even routinely—and separates them into discrete cultural spheres, so that individuals are easily removed from the social institutions and family structures that secure their identity.

In the fourteenth century, no one would have been surprised at the prospect of Genoese adventurers abducting captives to be sold as slaves. To the modern ear, translating "*corsari*" into English as "pirates" rather than the cognate "corsairs" might seem a mere choice of register, preferring a plain word to a more poetic or somewhat archaizing alternative. A crucial distinction, however, separates pirates and corsairs: the former, the maritime counterpart of brigands, act in their own interest, whereas the latter act under the authority of a state or other political entity. Boccaccio's "corsari genovesi," then, are not simply pirates who happen to be Genoese; rather, they are raiders operating legally under the auspices of the republic of Genoa.[10]

In the medieval and early modern Mediterranean, piracy or corsairing and the slave trade were "intimately linked" (Backman 2014, 175) in ways that both exploited and reinforced hostility between Christendom and the Islamic world. Christians and Muslims alike were forbidden from enslaving their coreligionists. Thus whether on land or at sea, their raids—officially, at least— targeted the perpetrators' religious "others." Many of these encounters took place in the Aegean theatre, "an amazingly complex contested region" in which the erosion of Byzantine power had resulted in a power vacuum in which

> Greek states, French principalities, Turkish emirates, Venetians and Genoese colonies, the Hospitalers on Rhodes, Catalan adventurers, Serbian and Bulgarian kingdoms, and others established mixed relationships and fought among themselves to control [its] shores. (Epstein 2006, 110)

This unruly patchwork of states and political actors, combined with the fragmented geography of myriad islands and rugged coastlines, made for an ideal environment for piracy and corsairing to flourish. In the decades just preceding the *Decameron*, Turks from the coastal beyliks of pre-Ottoman Anatolia had begun raiding the Aegean islands, taking captives "who were usually Orthodox Greeks" (Carr 2015, 58). Outrage at this Turkish traffic in Christian slaves became central

10 The narrator, Lauretta, does not pause to condemn them here, though in *Decameron* 2.4, the crews of "two large Genoese merchant ships" are described as "greedy and rapacious by nature" (100).

to papal and crusade discourse, as in Clement VI's proclamation of the Crusade of Smyrna in 1343:

> For some time past [the Turks] have mobilised the strength of their nation and used a great number of armed vessels to invade by the sea the Christian territories in the region of Romania, and other neighbouring places in the hands of the faithful. Raging atrociously against the Christians and their lands and islands, they have taken to roaming the seas, as they are doing at present, despoiling and depopulating the settlements and islands of the Christians of those parts, setting them ablaze, and what is worse, seizing the Christians themselves as booty and subjecting them to horrible and perpetual slavery, selling them like animals and forcing them to deny the Catholic faith. (Carr 2015, 57–58, citing *Documents on the Later Crusades*, 78–80, doc. 22)

In such a context, reciprocal raids on the part of Christians, in the absence of explicit treaty agreements, could assume implicit justification as a maritime extension of holy war. It is not surprising to find in *Decameron* 2.4, when the failed merchant Landolfo Rufolo "bought a small, fast pirate ship [un legnetto sottile da corseggiare]" to recoup his business losses, he "dedicated himself to making other people's property his own, and especially that belonging to the Turks" (99/168.9).

Scratching the surface of the picture presented in Clement's fiery proclamation, however, suppresses some inconvenient truths concerning the slave trade. Nearly three decades earlier, in his Crusade treatise the *Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expugnandi* (c. 1314–1318), the Dominican William of Adam had fulminated against "the Catalan, Pisan, Venetian, and other maritime merchants, and above all the Genoese": not only did they do business with "the Saracens of Egypt" in violation of papal sanctions but in fact collaborated with the Mamluks (r. 1260–1517) in the slave trade:

> For they traverse the seas and travel through provinces, and from diverse parts of the world they buy boys and girls, that is, Greeks, Bulgars, Ruthenians, Alans, and Hungarians from lesser Hungary, **who all rejoice in the Christian name**, or Tartars, Cumans, and many other pagans whom their impious parents have offered for sale, as is the custom of these pagans, or who have been defeated or subjugated by the Tartars, Turks, or other impious foes.(William of Adam 2012, 27, 29, emphasis added)

In the official discourse emanating from the papal curia, corsairing and slaving neatly hewed to the division between Christians and Muslims. Equally inflammatory but uncompromisingly pragmatic, William's diatribe, meant to goad the papa-

cy of his day into taking action against the Latin mercantile powers, "above all the Genoese," is under no such illusions.[11]

As William of Adam makes clear, eastern Orthodox subjects often made opportune targets for Latin merchants, pirates, and mercenaries.[12] To his list of Greeks, Bulgars, Ruthenians, Alans, and Hungarians, "who all rejoice in the Christian name," *Decameron* 5.7 adds Armenians from the kingdom of Cilicia (southeast of the Aegean, where the Anatolian peninsula meets the Levantine coast). From a distance of seven centuries, it is easy for us to assume that Latin Christians from western Europe had only the haziest idea of distinctions among all manner of ethnicities—Eastern Christians like Greeks and Armenians, "pagans," even Latin Christians like the Hungarians.[13] But beneath the reductionism of taking the high Middle Ages as an age of Crusades in which "Christianity" and "Islam" were arrayed in permanent opposition, we see the messy Realpolitik in which eastern Christian slaves plucked from the shores of the eastern Mediterranean were sold to Latin Christians not only by Turks (Carr 2015, 57) but by western "maritime merchants" like the Catalans, Pisans, Venetians, and Genoese.[14]

This, then, is the immediate context of *Decameron* 5.7.[15] Let's revisit the opening scene.

> [I]n need of servants…when some galleys arrived from the eastern Mediterranean belonging to Genoese corsairs who had captured a great many children while scouring the coast of Armenia, [Messer Amerigo] purchased a few of them, **thinking they were Turks**" (437, emphasis added).

"[C]redendogli turchi" (660.4)—it's a detail easy to read through at first: *of course*, if the Genoese are seizing captives from the coast of Armenia and if the noble Messer Amerigo is buying them halfway across the sea, *of course* they must be

11 William's treatise comes on the heels of "troubled times" (1305–1310) in the eastern Mediterranean: in retaliation for the assassination of their captain, Roger de Flor, the Grand Catalan Company captured and sold many Orthodox Christians—Greeks, Armenians, and Bulgarians—alongside Turks, to "merchants specializing in this trade" (Marcos Hierro 2017, 329).

12 Citing the enslavement of Orthodox Greeks as a *casus belli* had to overcome Latin Christendom's entrenched hostility toward the Byzantine empire. Cf. Carr (2015, 58) on Petrarch.

13 On the Hungarians as Latin Christians, see Catlos (2014, 230–241).

14 On the link between piracy and slavery in the early modern period, with the emergence of new political actors and the realignment of control of the seas after the battle of Lepanto, see (for the western Mediterranean) Hershenzon (2018) and (for the eastern Mediterranean) White (2018).

15 *Decameron* 5.7 is explicitly mentioned by historians Carr (2015, 58n.106) and Barker (2019, 163). Curiously, Steven Epstein, in his book *Speaking of Slavery*, says Boccaccio had little to say on the topic: "Having lived for a while in Naples, he put a few slave women in a story [*Decameron* 8.10] set in Palermo" (2001, 43).

Turks. Thus when Teodoro shows such unusual promise that Messer Amerigo manumits him, it seems logical, "thinking he was a Turk" (credendo che turchio fosse) (437/660.5), to have him baptized before entrusting him with his affairs.[16] The words "Muslim" and "Christian," we should note, never appear in the text; rather, Messer Amerigo's world is divided between Turks, presumed to be of a different faith, while Christianity is implicitly signaled in the word "battezzare" (660.5). But as we have seen, the astonishing diversity of historical actors traipsing across the medieval Mediterranean stage makes a mockery of such ideologically comforting, but ultimately reductive, binarisms.

The dénouement of *Decameron* 5.7 hinges on the revelation of Teodoro's identity as the son of an Armenian nobleman. Clues to his origin are there from the start of the tale, when we are told that the Genoese galleys "di Levante"[17] (660.4) have been "corseggiando l'Erminia" (660.4)—a detail made legible by Rebhorn's endnote on the short-lived coastal kingdom of Cilicia while at the same time explaining that Armenians had been Christian since the fourth century. As an Armenian, Teodoro should have been exempt both from seizure by the Genoese and from sale in the slave market of Trapani. What happened?

As William of Adam's denunciation makes clear, the Genoese (along with other Latin mercantile nations) did not hesitate to traffic in Christian slaves. Such violations of official injunctions surrounding commerce in what historian Hannah Barker calls "that most precious merchandise" were facilitated amidst the fragmentation of the eastern Mediterranean. In this environment of "so many ethnicities in such a small place" (Epstein 2001, 110), criss-crossed by "slaves of various backgrounds" (Kafadar 1995, 61), Armenians frequently blurred conventional categories of classification. In the *Chanson de Roland* (c. 1100), the Old French epic that most clearly articulates a vision of holy war between Christians and Muslims, Armenians figure right next to the "Moors" (l. 3227) in the army of the "Saracen" emir of Babylon (Cairo).[18] On the Muslim side, Mamluk *shurūt* manuals—collections of model contracts akin to Italian notarial formularies— classified Armenians as "Turks," a category of enslavable lighter-skinned northerners of various languages and religions (including Mongols, Kipchak, Circassians, Tatars, Georgians, and

16 The text does not specify how old he is when he first arrives in Trapani. Historically speaking, the median age for slaves sold in Genoa and Venice was between 15 and 20, but the youngest recorded sales were for children of four and five (Barker 2019, 68, 107). Since Fineo, at the end of the tale, recognizes in "Pietro" the son who had been snatched from the shores of Laiazzo fifteen years earlier, we can assume Teodoro to have been close to this minimum age.

17 Rebhorn renders "Levante" as "eastern Mediterranean" while the Mark Musa/Peter Bondanella and G.H. McWilliam translations both opt for "Levant."

18 See Kinoshita (2006, 29).

Greeks) as opposed to "Sūdān," the collective designation for darker-skinned southerners (Barker 2019, 49, 113). At the same time, Mamluk slave-buying guides dividing enslavable peoples into Arabs, ᶜAjam, and Sūdān listed Armenians as ᶜAjam, alongside non-Arab or non-Arabophone Muslims like the Persians, Turks, and Berbers. Even amidst the "riotous instability" of the late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century eastern Mediterranean, the Armenians are notable shape-shifters easily "othered" to fit others' convenience.[19]

As noted above, readers both medieval and modern (the latter assisted by editorial annotations) are alerted from the outset to Teodoro's Armenian connections. What of Messer Amerigo Abate? In the opening section, we are told, first, that he purchases the lot of boys "*credendogli* turchi" (660.4), and then that he arranges for Teodoro's baptism "*credendo* che turchio fosse" (660.5). What are we to make of this? If taken at face value, it exonerates him from knowingly violating official injunctions against trafficking in Christian slaves. However, the repetition is just unsubtle enough to capture our attention; emphasizing Messer Amerigo's belief rather than, say, any Genoese attempt to deceive him, it invites us to ask: Is he an innocent naïf, acting in good faith? Is he a credulous dupe who should have known better? Or is he a complicit buyer, willing to turn a blind eye to this unsavory but common side of the Mediterranean slave trade? Is Boccaccio, through his narrator Lauretta, pointing the finger at Messer Abate?

Even in a group of boys who were genuinely Turkish, Teodoro should have stood out for his recognizably Christian name (Greek for "gift of God")—especially in Sicily, with its long history of engagement with Greek and Byzantine culture.[20] Then again, in Italy, masters commonly renamed their slaves ("Giorgio" being popular for men), even when their old names were already Christian—as in the case of Abkhaz and Russian "Marias" who were renamed Barbara and Marta, respectively (Barker 2019, 43).[21] New names commonly entailed baptism, but this could

19 On the complexities of Armenian identity and cultural affiliations from the Middle Ages forward, see the essays collected in *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and Words in Motion*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Michael Pifer 2018.

20 Due to its period under Muslim rule, western Sicily (where Trapani is located) retained less Byzantine influence than the eastern part of the island. Although Boccaccio would not necessarily have first-hand knowledge of Sicily, images of Saint Theodore are found in the mosaic program of Cefalù cathedral and the *muqarnas* (Arabic-style ceiling vaulting) of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, two major Norman monuments from the twelfth century.

21 What's in a name? As for the tale's female protagonists, Rebhorn (following Branca) notes that Violante was the name of Boccaccio's daughter, who died in 1355, as well as the daughter of the count of Antwerp in tale 2.8 (901n.3). McWilliam adds that the name was "[n]ot exactly commonplace" (835n.5); in fact, the name, a variant of Yolanda (deriving from an early twelfth-century countess of Hainault) was a common one in descendants of the royal house of Aragon, including

include the "theologically unsound" practice of rebaptizing non-Latin Christians (Barker 2019, 43–44) like Teodoro, whom Messer Amerigo has "baptized and renamed Pietro" (437–438).[22]

Decameron 5.7, then, illuminates the complexity of identity in the medieval Mediterranean, placing Teodoro-Pietro at the nexus of religion, ethnicity, social status, and family. His nobility, drawing from "nature," is evident from the start —seeming "better bred [gentilesco] and of better appearance [di migliore aspetto] than the rest" (437, modified/660.4)—even though Messer Amerigo believes him to be a Turk. Yet even when manumitted and baptized Latin Christian, he is still a servant; his religious assimilation means nothing without the social and familial rank that only Fineo can provide. In the premodern Mediterranean, when important people (as Teodoro is later revealed to be) were taken captive, they could reasonably expect to be ransomed. The plot of 5.7 thus occupies the gap between Teodoro's capture and the novella's culminating recognition scene, in which "Pietro" is literally hailed in his native language and by his original name.

The tale's happy ending, in dramatic fashion, depends on the death sentence Messer Amerigo has imposed on the servant who has impregnated his daughter. On his way to the gallows, Pietro is "stripped naked from the waist up" (441), exposing to public gaze "a large red spot" [una gran macchia di vermiglio] on his chest, "not painted on the skin, but imprinted there by Nature, just like the ones that the women here call 'roses'" (442/666.34).[23] The procession passes an inn housing three Armenian ambassadors who had stopped in Trapani "for a few days' rest and relaxation" on their way to Rome for an audience with the Pope. Catching sight of Pietro's distinctive birthmark, one of dignitaries, as we have seen, is reminded of his long-lost son, "kidnapped by pirates from the seashore of Laiazzo some fifteen years earlier and [never] heard of since" (442). Calling out "O Teodoro!" he asks in Armenian, "Where do you come from? Whose son are you?" (442). Hailed by name in his native language, the erstwhile Pietro responds, "I'm from Armenia, the son of someone named Fineo, and I was brought here as a little boy by I don't know what people" (442).[24]

---

the first wife of Robert I of Naples and, in Boccaccio's day, the daughter of a count of Montferrat who was countess of Savoy by marriage.

22 In the early fifteenth century, this became—or was seen as—enough of a problem that Pope Martin V threatened those who baptized Greek slaves with excommunication (Barker 2019, 44).

23 A similar mark is thematized in the early thirteenth-century French romance the *Romance of the Rose or of Guillaume de Dole*, in which a deceiver's second-hand knowledge of a distinctive rose-shaped birthmark on the heroine's thigh risks compromising her reputation.

24 "Io fui d'Erminia, figliuolo d'uno che ebbe nome Fineo, qua piccol fanciul trasportato da non so che gente" (667.39, my translation).

Instantly, Pietro—free and Christian, but condemned to death for his affair with his master's daughter—is transformed into the son of "an elderly gentleman of great authority" (441), belonging to a people that renders his baptism at the hands of Messer Amerigo moot. At the beginning of the tale, his lack of voice was naturalized as the result of his lowly status, the language barrier, and his extreme youth. This scene reveals not just Teodoro's identity but the fact that throughout his time in Trapani, he has retained both his knowledge of Armenian and memory of his origins, both ethnic and familial.[25]

Fineo's memory of the son kidnapped "from the seashore of Laiazzo" some fifteen years before lends further specificity to the primal scene of Teodoro's abduction by pirates "scouring the coast of Armenia" (437).[26] Here Rebhorn intervenes with another endnote: "Laiazzo (Ayas), a port city in Lesser Armenia, was an important center of trade between East and West in the second half of the thirteenth century" (Rebhorn 901n.6),[27] especially in the wake of the Mamluk conquest of Acre in 1291.[28] It was also a transshipment point for the traffic in slaves from the Black Sea destined for the markets of Mamluk Alexandria—often brokered (as William of Adam tells us) by the Genoese and other Latin Christians.[29] By Boccaccio's day, however, no one would have taken Laiazzo as a place to live "in peace and quiet" (444) as Teodoro and Violante do in the tale's happy ending: the port

25 Compare Alatiel, daughter of the sultan of Babylon, in *Decameron* 2.7: shipwrecked on Christian shores in the western Mediterranean and unable to speak the language of her rescuers, she conceals her identity—revealing it only when fortune lands her back in the eastern Mediterranean, among people, including Christians, with whom she can communicate. See Kinoshita and Jacobs (2007).

26 Or "corseggiando l'Erminia" (660.4) in the original. The closeness between corsairing and coastal sailing appears in tale 5.2, where Martuccio Gomito from the island of Lipari takes to the seas to acquire enough wealth to aspire to marry his well-born lover: "*corseggiando* cominciò a *costeggiare* la Barberia" (610.6, emphasis added), rendered less economically in English as "he proceeded to become a pirate and sailed up and down the Barbary coast" (403)

27 Branca's edition adds a quotation from the Italian translation of Marco Polo's *Description of the World* (666n.5).

28 Acre, the last crusader outpost on the mainland, had been a major commercial entrepôt for goods from the Middle East and Asia. Laiazzo (along with Famagusta, on the island kingdom Cyprus) replaced it as the site where Venetians, Genoese, and other Latin Christians met merchants from Syria, Egypt, and—increasingly—Ilkhanid Persia (Ashtor 55–56). Venice and Genoa clashed over control of the city in 1293 (Barker 2019, 130).

29 In 1288, the Armenian king Leo II (r. 1269–1289) granted the Genoese freedom from tolls on the export of slaves and animals, while prohibiting the sale of Christian slaves to Muslim buyers (Cluse 2017, 459–460). Only three years earlier, however, he had signed a treaty with the Mamluks agreeing not to inhibit the flow of trade, including "all nationalities of slaves and all nationalities of slave-girls of their various kinds" (Barker 2019, 163).

had been captured by the Mamluks in 1337, and the loss of that commercial outpost, together with further papal restrictions on trade with Ilkhanate Persia, contributed to the spike in crusade fervor among the maritime republics, leading to the formation of a Naval League against Smyrna (seized from the Genoese in 1332 by the Turkish beylik of Aydin).[30] By the time Boccaccio composed the *Decameron* (c. 1350–1370), the spectacle of a diplomatic embassy from Cilician Laiazzo to Rome (which had lost its role as seat of the papacy to Avignon in 1309) would have served as a provocational reminder of Latin Christian, and specifically Italian, losses.

"[A]vendo di servidori bisogno": Traduttore, traditore

This phrase, which I quoted at the beginning of this essay, is the starting point of Teodoro's adventure: it is "avendo di servidori bisogno" (66.4) that Messer Amerigo buys a lot of "fanciulli" from the Genoese. English versions tell us that he was "in need of servants" (437),[31] yet the narrative context— Messer Amerigo purchases Teodoro, frees him, then oversees his re-baptism as "Pietro"— leaves no doubt that we are dealing with an everyday case of medieval Mediterranean slavery. Now, the terminology of slavery is slippery, and varies over time and place. In Italy, the Latin term "servus" retained its ancient meaning of "slave" into the thirteenth century, when elsewhere it was coming to mean "serf." In the course of the fourteenth century, archival evidence tells us, it was supplanted by the Latin *sclavus* (and dialectal forms of *schiavo*), which came into common use throughout the Italian peninsula."[32] The modern English "servant" downplays this history of slavery, but perhaps so too does Boccaccio's choice of "servidori," adopting a somewhat archaizing form over the vocabulary of slavery in current use in Italy in the second half of the fourteenth century.

30 Carr (2015, 26, 49, 127). The League lasted from 1343–1352; it captured Smyrna in 1344, but the subsequent defense of the city was hampered by the Black Death and, especially, infighting among the Venetians (who sought a truce with the Turks), the Genoese, and the Hospitallers (Carr 2015, 75–78).

31 This is Rebhorn, but "servant" also appears in the translations by McWilliam (412 in the Penguin edition) and Musa and Bondanella (412 in the Signet Classics edition).

32 In Italy, "servus" retained its ancient meaning of "slave" into the thirteenth century even as elsewhere it began to be used for "serf" (Epstein 2001, 18–19). In Sicily, some records refer to "*laboratories*" rather than "*servi*" (Backman 1995, 253).

But Pietro and his captive peers are not the only "servants" with important roles in *Decameron* 5.7. Just before Pietro's scheduled execution, Messer Amerigo sends "one of his servants…who was more inclined to do evil than good" (441)[33] to force Violante, who has just given birth to an illegitimate son, to choose between a dagger and poisoned wine to kill herself, and then to "smash [the newborn's] head against a wall, and throw it away to be eaten by the dogs" (441). In English, then, both "Pietro," who had distinguished himself by his better and noble-like appearance, and this underling, charged with forcing a suicide and committing infanticide, are indiscriminately called "servants." In Boccaccio's Italian, this unnamed would-be assassin is, rather, "un suo famigliare" (665.29)—which might more accurately be rendered by the English cognate "familiar," in the sense of a household servant or agent.[34] In the very next scene, Pietro is led to the gallows by "a troop of soldiers" (441)[35] driving him along with a whip; but the Italian calls them "famigliari" (665.32) as well, thus conflating the subordinates charged with carrying out the death sentences of Violante and "Pietro" (privately and publicly, respectively) while distinguishing them from Teodoro. Traduttore, traditore.

This status is central to Fineo's appeal to the king's military governor, Messer Currado: "Sir,…the person you've condemned to death *as a slave* [come servo] *is a free man*, my son, and he's ready to marry the girl he is said to have robbed of her virginity."[36] If the label "servidori" for the lot of boys purchased by Messer Amerigo soft-pedals the reality of the Mediterranean slave trade, Fineo is under no such illusion: in his eyes, his son was abducted and sold as a slave, and his manumission and conversion have not altered the powerlessness of that status.

33 Again, echoed in both McWilliam (415) and Musa and Bondanella (416).

34 On the other hand, in the *Catholicon*, the dictionary compiled by the Genoese Dominican Pietro Balbi in 1286, *famulus* is a slave member of the family. Such dictionaries drew definitions of slavery from ancient Roman laws and practices (Epstein 2001, 20).

35 McWilliam, "a troop of soldiers" (416), Musa and Bondanella, "some soldiers" (416).

36 Rebhorn's translation, "the person you've condemned to death *as a slave* is actually my son, *a free man*" (442, emphases added), emphasizes Teodoro's lineage, obscuring the direct contrast between slavery and freedom in Boccaccio's original: "Messere, colui il quale voi mandate a morir *come servo è libero uomo* e mio figliuolo, e è presto di torre per moglie colei la qual si dice che della sua virginità ha privata" (667.42, emphasis added). The name Currado (a Sicilian-inflected pronunciation of Corrado, Conrad) would have come to Sicily with the Hohenstaufen, just after the reign of King William II.

In lieu of a conclusion

If many *Decameron* tales play on the mutability of identities, few do so as dramatically than those set in the Mediterranean: failed merchants turn pirate, like Landolfo Rufolo of Ravello in novella 2.4; spurned wives cross-dress and become market inspectors for the sultan of Egypt, as in the adventures of Madonna Zinevra of Genoa in novella 2.9; Saladin poses as a Cypriot merchant for some undercover reconnaissance in northern Italy in the lead-up to the Third Crusade in novella 10.9.[37] This is no accident: "indelibly fragmented into its ports, islands, coasts, and their attendant interiors…divided into a set of city-linking itineraries, routes for the transmission of ideas, goods, and military forces, [and]… marked by…complex, overlapping, ethnolinguistic, commercial, and cultural identities" (Brummett 10), Mediterranean topography is ready-made to uproot people from their homes and drop them into places where the social and cultural networks that define them are broken. *Decameron* 5.7 functions as a laboratory to assay the variations and variables from the resulting complex, overlapping, or disjunctive identities. As I hope to have shown, recent work by medieval historians is indispensable in illuminating the ways in which the *Decameron* and other literary texts are not simply set *in* the Mediterranean but are quintessentially *of* it while the narrative turns in a text like novella 5.7 caution us against the perils of taking categories of religion, ethnicity, or race as stable categories of medieval identity.[38]

References

Abulafia, David. "The Reputation of a Norman King in Angevin Naples." *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979): 135–147.

Abulafia, David. *The Western Mediterranean Kingdoms, 1200–1500: The Struggle for Dominion.* London: Longman, 1997.

Amitai, Reuven and Christoph Cluse. "Introduction." *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500 C.E.).* Eds. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse. Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. 11–27.

Babayan, Kathryn and Michael Pifer, eds. *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and Words in Motion.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Backman, Clifford R. "Piracy." *A Companion to Mediterranean History.* Eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. 170–183.

Backman, Clifford R. *The Decline and Fall of Medieval Sicily: Politics, Religion, and Economy in the Reign of Frederick III, 1296-1337.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

37 On tale 10.9, see Kinoshita (2011).

38 I thank Hannah Newburn for her research assistance.

Barker, Hannah. *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

Barolini, Teodolinda. "Only Historicize." *Dante Studies* 127 (2009): 37–54.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella. New York: Signet Classics, 1982.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*, 2 vols. Ed. Vittore Branca. Turin: Einaudi, 1992.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*. Trans. G. H. McWilliam. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron.* Trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

Brummett, Palmira. "Visions of the Mediterranean: A Classification." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.1 (2007): 9–55.

Carr, Mike. *Merchant Crusaders in the Aegean, 1291–1352.* Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015.

Catlos, Brian A. *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, c. 1050–1614.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Cluse, Christoph. "The Role of the Slave Trade in the *De recuperanda* Treatises around 1300." *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500 C.E.).* Eds. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse. Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. 437–469.

Elhariry, Yasser, and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, eds. *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Epstein, Steven A. *Speaking of Slavery: Color, Ethnicity, and Human Bondage in Italy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Epstein, Steven A. *Purity Lost: Transgressing Boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1000–1400.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Esposito, Claudia. *The Narrative Mediterranean: Beyond France and the Maghreb*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014.

Hershenzon, Daniel. *The Captive Sea : Slavery, Communication, and Commerce in Early Modern Spain and the Mediterranean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Holmes, Olivia, and Dana E. Stewart, eds. *Reconsidering Boccaccio: Medieval Contexts and Global Intertexts.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018.

Horden, Peregrine, and Nicholas Purcell. *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Kafadar, Cemal. *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Kinoshita, Sharon. *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Kinoshita, Sharon. "Medieval Mediterranean Literature." *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 600–608.

Kinoshita, Sharon. "'Noi siamo mercatanti cipriani': How To Do Things in the Medieval Mediterranean." *The Age of Philippe de Mézières: Fourteenth-Century Piety and Politics between France, Venice, and Cyprus.* Eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kiril Petkov. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 41–60.

Kinoshita, Sharon."Mediterranean Literature." *A Companion to Mediterranean History.* Eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. 314–329.

Kinoshita, Sharon. "Negotiating the Corrupting Sea: Literature in and of the Medieval Mediterranean." *Can We Talk Mediterranean? Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Studies.* Eds. Brian A. Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 33–48.

Kinoshita, Sharon. "Travelers: Texts and Contexts." *A Cultural History of the Sea.* Ed. Margaret Cohen, vol. II: *The Medieval Age.* Ed. Elizabeth Lambourn. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. 139–158.

Kinoshita, Sharon, and Jason Jacobs. "Ports of Call: Boccaccio's Alatiel in the Medieval Mediterranean." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.1 (2007): 163–195.

Kirkham, Victoria, Michael Sherberg, and Janet Levarie Smarr, eds. *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013.

Lee, Charmaine. "Naples." *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418.* Ed. David Wallace. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 732–747.

Marcos Hierro, Ernest. "The Catalan Company and the Slave Trade." *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500 C.E.).* Eds. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. 321–352.

Morosini, Roberta. *Il mare salato: Il Mediterraneo di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio.* Rome: Viella, 2020.

Talbayev, Edwige Tamalet. *The Transcontinental Maghreb : Francophone Literature Across the Mediterranean*. First edition. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

Wallace, David. *Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron. Landmarks of World Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

White, Joshua M. *Piracy and Law in the Ottoman Mediterranean*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2017.

William of Adam. *How to Defeat the Saracens: Guillelmus Ade, Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expungandi.* Eds. and trans. Giles Constable et al. Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012.