

## Implied Acceptance: The Religious Other in the *Decameron*

By Timothy R. Jordan

### **Abstract**

While much of medieval literature takes negative views of Jews and Muslims, the *Decameron* presents a more complex view. Through the use of *paraleipsis* in the *Decameron's* frame and characterization within the tales, Boccaccio gives a more humanistic view of the religious Other than do other places in medieval literature. The result is an implied worth in the Other's secular virtue, individuality, and personal association.

### **Keywords**

Boccaccio, Christians, *Decameron*, Jews, Muslims, Other, Stereotypes



Though following the medieval Christian practice of condemning Jews and Muslims in his scholarly works such as *De Casibus* and *Esposizioni*, in the *Decameron* Giovanni Boccaccio displays a remarkably high degree of religious tolerance compared to other popular works of the day.<sup>1</sup> For example, while *The Song of Roland's* poet revels in the deaths of Saracens (cf. “Clean through [Roland] thrusts [Adelroth], forth from the saddle wrenching,/ And flings him dead a lance-length from his destrier;/ Into two pieces he has broken his neckbone”<sup>2</sup>) Boccaccio features the famed Saracen king Saladin in two tales, describing him as of “worth [. . .] so great that it raised him from humble beginnings to the sultanate of Egypt” and as “an outstandingly able ruler.”<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio similarly presents his

---

<sup>1</sup> Smarr, “Other Races” 127-28. In the same article, Smarr notes that in the European medieval mind, little distinction is made between Jews and Muslims as non-Christians (113-14).

<sup>2</sup> *Song* 93.1203-5.

<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio 42, 765.

Jewish characters Abraham and Melchizedek as, respectively, “Being a very perceptive person”<sup>4</sup> and “indeed a wise man.”<sup>5</sup>

Janet Levarie Smarr offers one explanation for this tolerance by asserting that Boccaccio belongs to part of a larger medieval view that sees Christians and Muslims as sharing the same cultural values of justice, piety, charity, and personal valor with “only the difference of religion, or ‘law’ as it was often called, divid[ing] them.”<sup>6</sup> Since medieval anti-Semitism was based upon the view that Jews were rejected by God as long as they adhered to their traditional beliefs,<sup>7</sup> it is reasonable to assume a similar attitude toward Jews as toward the Muslims. For the purposes of my present discussion, I will refer to the shared cultural values between Christians, Muslims, and Jews as “secular,” while using the phrase “religious Other” to refer to the medieval Christian perception of Muslims and Jews as faultily adhering to a different belief system.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes in medieval literature the act of praising virtue in the religious Other is featured as “a means explicitly to shame the rulers and clergy of the west.”<sup>9</sup> In the *Decameron*, however, the worth of Boccaccio’s non-Christians frequently matches or exceeds that of his Christian characters, even when anticlericalism is not a major component in the tale. This worth becomes particularly evident when the reader compares the stated theme of the tale, given by the particular tale’s Florentine narrator, with the characterization of the tale’s personae, a comparison which forms an implied commentary. Since R. Hastings has argued that the *Decameron* has a moral, though unstated, purpose that follows

---

<sup>4</sup> Boccaccio 39.

<sup>5</sup> Boccaccio 43. This respectful attitude surpasses even the social diversity of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, which relates in “The Prioress’s Tale” that the Jews of a certain city are “Sustened by a lord of that contree/ For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,/ Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye” (490-92). *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., notes that “Jewish colonies were protected for the taxes they provided and for money lending, usure [usury], forbidden in canon law, but essential to business” (914).

<sup>6</sup> Smarr, “Other Races” 131-32.

<sup>7</sup> Chazan 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of the Other, of course, comes from a greater tradition of philosophical, cultural, and literary study. The term can be used to define anyone who is in some way different from the dominant individuals in a culture and discriminated against for these differences. See Childers and Hentzi, 216-17 for additional discussion and specific primary texts.

<sup>9</sup> Smarr, “Other Races” 130.

the Italian humanist teaching principle of “stimulat[ing] objective inquiry.”<sup>10</sup> In light of this, this technique of making an implied commentary on a stated theme is an attempt by Boccaccio to encourage readers to explore the greater implications of his tales.<sup>11</sup> In Tales 1.2, 1.3, and 10.9, the effect of this implied commentary is to advocate seeing the secular virtue, individuality, and worth of the religious Other. Boccaccio accomplishes this advocacy through characterization, paraleipsistic statements, and the incorporation of a frame-within-a-frame.<sup>12</sup>

### *Stated Themes and Implied Commentary*

The frame narrative of the *Decameron* allows Boccaccio to direct the reader’s attention toward a main idea for each tale that is explicitly introduced by the Florentine narrator. For instance, in Tale 1.2, Neifile prefaces her story by saying:

Panfilo has shown us in his tale that God’s loving-kindness is unaffected by our errors, when they proceed from some cause which it is impossible for us to detect; and I in mine propose to demonstrate to you how this same loving-kindness, by patiently enduring the shortcomings of those who in word and deed ought to be its living witness and yet behave in a precisely contrary fashion, gives us the proof of its unerring rightness; my purpose being that of strengthening our conviction in what we believe.<sup>13</sup>

By giving this introduction, Neifile explicitly connects a major idea from her story to the one that precedes it, unifying all of the stories told on each of the *Decameron* days under one theme.<sup>14</sup> Such adherence to a theme gives the *Decameron* what Bonnie D. Irwin has described as a ‘tight’ versus a ‘loose’ frame: “The tighter the

---

<sup>10</sup> Hastings 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> This technique also fits very nicely alongside Boccaccio’s stated themes of moderation and storytelling that he lays out in the *Decameron’s* Prologue.

<sup>12</sup> While Smarr has discussed the medieval Other in many of the *Decameron* tales, I single out Tales 1.2, 1.3, and 10.9 as three in which religious belief and not just foreignness plays a significant role.

<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio 37.

<sup>14</sup> Though Pampinea, the queen of Day 1 gives no explicit theme, translator G. H. McWilliams notes at the end of Day 1: “Even the stories already told, those of the first day, have certain unifying elements. All depend for their effect on a display of eloquence or quick-wittedness on the part of the main character. All involve the reversal of the outcome that characters (and readers) have been led to anticipate” (810).

frame, the more control it exerts over the content of the interpolated tales tending to make the collection more unified. Conversely, a looser frame will contain more variety.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the unity of the overall collection is the directed meaning that the explicitly stated theme of a tight frame imposes on the tale. Outside the context of the frame, this explicitly stated theme is only one of several possible messages that might be extrapolated from the telling of the tale. As Irwin elsewhere notes, “Frame tales also provide great occasion for irony. The multiple layers of narrators and audiences filter the stories through several different perspectives before they reach the reader.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Florentine narrator for each tale leads the reader to one important idea at the outset of the story. However, Boccaccio adds slight twists to his stories, setting the reader up to consider not just the explicitly stated themes given by his Florentines but also a non-stated commentary. In the case of Tale 1.2, for example, the character of Abraham is depicted in very positive terms. This positiveness, as I will argue momentarily, is so great that he becomes the most admirable character in the story even before his conversion to Christianity. Such quality of character cuts against Jewish stereotypes and is not integral to the theme that Neifile states for her tale. Thus, Boccaccio implies a commentary on the worth of the religious Other.

### *Tale 1.2: Abraham’s Virtue*

Tale 1.2 is the story of how Jehannot de Chevigny attempts to convert his friend, Abraham the Jew, to Christianity. Abraham resists Jehannot’s proselytizing, saying that he will convert only once he has seen the Christian clergy in Rome. Counter to Jehannot’s expectations, though, it is the very corruption of the clergy that convinces Abraham to convert, for while at Rome he sees the clergy engaged in sodomy, prostitution, gluttony, drunkenness, slavery, and simony. Abraham sees the Church’s continued existence as proof of God’s

---

<sup>15</sup> Irwin, “What’s in a Frame?” 31.

<sup>16</sup> Irwin, “Narrative in the *Decameron*” 25.

mercy for tolerating such despicable behavior and this mercy drives him to convert. While God's mercy becomes Neifile's stated theme, Boccaccio, ironically, depicts the Jewish characters, and Abraham especially, as more virtuous than not just the Roman clergy but also Jehannot the Christian. Thus, Boccaccio implicitly grants a greater deal of personal worth in Abraham than the other characters in the tale.

The Roman clergy fit stereotypical depictions. Consistent with other medieval anticlerical portraits, Boccaccio renders them guilty of lustfulness, sodomy, gluttony, and simony.<sup>17</sup> Particularly telling is Boccaccio's comparison of them to "a pack of animals" and his assertion that they would willingly "buy and sell human, that is to say, Christian blood."<sup>18</sup> In subtle contrast to this inhuman depiction of the Roman clergy is the tale's preceding depiction of Abraham's Jewish friends who "warmly welcomed" him upon his arrival,<sup>19</sup> a depiction that runs counter to stereotypical expectations. Consequently, even at the most general levels Boccaccio portrays the greater personal worth of the religious Other.

The more specific portraits of Jehannot and Abraham similarly depict these lines of division. While Boccaccio calls Jehannot "extremely honest and upright," an improvement over the Roman clergy, he implies that his theology is less than perfect, calling Jehannot an "ignoramus" as he attempts to convert Abraham.<sup>20</sup> Also notable of Jehannot is that upon learning of Abraham's intent to go to Rome, "he was thrown into a fit of gloom,"<sup>21</sup> a less than faithful response in his hopes to see his friend converted. Even more significant is that rather than falling back on his Christian faith that God will intercede, as the stated theme suggests, Jehannot tries to use deception to prevent Abraham's pilgrimage, saying: "Come now, my friend, why should you want to put yourself to the endless trouble and expense involved in going all the way from here to Rome?"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Boccaccio 40.

<sup>18</sup> Boccaccio 40.

<sup>19</sup> Boccaccio 39.

<sup>20</sup> Boccaccio 38.

<sup>21</sup> Boccaccio 39.

<sup>22</sup> Boccaccio 39.

Abraham, then, becomes the pinnacle of virtue. Similar to Jehannot, Boccaccio calls him “extremely upright and honest.”<sup>23</sup> However, whereas Jehannot is an “ignoramus,” Abraham is “very learned in Jewish doctrine” and by the end of the tale has “quickly mastered” Christian teachings.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Abraham possesses the trust and integrity that Jehannot lacks. Stavros Deligiorgis points out that as a Jew, Abraham “belongs to a faith that is dominated by the concept of a just God.”<sup>25</sup> This being the case, Abraham’s willingness to make a pilgrimage all the way to Rome displays a greater faith in a Divine will than Jehannot has. Similarly, Abraham shows integrity by following through with his promise to convert. Further accenting Abraham’s virtue are Boccaccio’s references to him as “the Jew.”<sup>26</sup> Such identification recalls Abraham’s religious Otherness, constantly throwing it into contrast with his virtuous behavior so as to emphasize both. Finally, while Smarr has noted that Abraham’s baptized name of “John” is simply a different version of Jehannot’s name, suggesting a merging of the characters into one,<sup>27</sup> Abraham’s greater virtue makes him all Jehannot should be, even though Jehannot is the born-and-raised Christian.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Boccaccio’s implied commentary says that while Abraham’s faith might be deficient, his personal worth is greater than that of the Christian characters in the tale.

### *Tale 1.3: Melchizedek’s Individuality*

Tale 1.3, another story featuring a Jewish character, gives an account of Melchizedek matching wits with Saladin, a Saracen who attempts to obtain money from Melchizedek through guile. The tale is Filomena’s exemplum for how “prudence extricates the wise from dreadful perils and guides them firmly to safety.”<sup>29</sup> Central to this story is the tale-within-a-tale of the three rings, which

---

<sup>23</sup> Boccaccio 38.

<sup>24</sup> Boccaccio 38, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Deligiorgis 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Passim*.

<sup>27</sup> Smarr, “Other Races” 115.

<sup>28</sup> In Smarr’s “Other Races,” the similarity in these names is perhaps even easier to see since she gives Jehannot’s name as “Giannotto” and Abraham’s Christian name as “Giovanni” (115).

<sup>29</sup> Boccaccio 42.

allows Melchizedek to sidestep Saladin's trap. In this story, a man must continue his family's tradition of selecting an heir by passing a ring along to the son who will succeed him as the head of the family. However, since the man does not want to pick between his three sons, he has two more rings made, both indistinguishable from the first to all but him, and gives one to each of his sons. While such storytelling on Melchizedek's part is an example of the prudence Filomena wants to illustrate, Boccaccio also uses Tale 1.3 to imply the folly of assuming that Melchizedek will adhere to the Jewish stereotype, even though he (Boccaccio) has just had Filomena say, "So clearly may we perceive that folly leads men from contentment to misery, that we shall not even bother for the present to consider the matter further."<sup>30</sup> This raising of an issue only to dismiss it is an example of what I will refer to as a *paraleipsistic* statement throughout the rest of this paper. While a *paraleipsistic* statement misdirects the reader, nonetheless it brings an issue (folly, in this case) to mind for the "stimulation of objective inquiry" that Hastings discusses, as previously mentioned.<sup>31</sup> In addition to a *paraleipsistic* statement, Boccaccio once again forms his implied commentary in this tale through characterization as well as through the frame-within-a-frame structure utilized in the telling of the tale of the three rings.

In giving her analysis of this tale, Smarr provides the following estimate of its two main characters:

Saladin and Melchisedech are two of a kind, not in justice and reliability but in avarice and shrewdness. Their fast friendship, across religious lines, results from their recognition of this similarity; there is no suggestion of a change of faith but rather a shared complicity in the refusal to acknowledge Christianity's truth.<sup>32</sup>

Although such an understanding is consistent with the medieval view of the religious Other,<sup>33</sup> I find that these characterizations veer too sharply away from the

---

<sup>30</sup> Boccaccio 42.

<sup>31</sup> Hastings 32.

<sup>32</sup> Smarr, "Non-Christian People" 35.

<sup>33</sup> Again, cf. Chaucer's depiction of the Jews in "The Prioress's Tale" for an example (see note 5).

tone that Boccaccio establishes toward non-Christians in the person of Abraham. Indeed, Filomena's opening description of Saladin flies in the face of his depiction as avaricious, crediting him with "extraordinary acts of munificence."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Saladin's actions throughout the tale, while not perfect, embody a concern with balanced justification. Though his intended trickery is not admirable, Saladin's decision not to use violence is. Additionally, while it is not clear why "the Sultan was not prepared to take [Melchisedek's money] away from him by force,"<sup>35</sup> the courage he displays in finally admitting he needs Melchisedek's help in the end is equally admirable. Saladin's greatest fault proves to be his assumption that Melchisedek will follow the greedy Jew stereotype.

Melchisedek's character, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. Like Abraham in Tale 1.2, Boccaccio also identifies him as "the Jew,"<sup>36</sup> which calls attention to his role as a religious Other. However, in Melchisedek's case the stereotype seems more consistently invoked, for while positively depicted as wise, he is immediately and negatively labeled as a "miserly fellow."<sup>37</sup> It is this stereotype that prompts Saladin to take the course of action he does. Contrary to expectations, though, at the end of the tale "Melchizedek *gladly* provided the Sultan with the money he required."<sup>38</sup> This contradiction alone might suggest a misjudging of Melchisedek, but more importantly, it might suggest a change of heart in Saladin, for it is only after being outmaneuvered that Saladin decides to "see if the Jew would come to his assistance."<sup>39</sup> The implication is that Saladin committed an act of folly in his earlier assumption that Melchizedek would act according to his negative label instead of as an individual. If this is the case, the tale affirms Melchizedek's worth as an individual, despite his status as a religious Other, and suggests that it is folly to rely on religious stereotypes.

---

<sup>34</sup> Boccaccio 42.

<sup>35</sup> Boccaccio 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Boccaccio 42.

<sup>38</sup> Boccaccio 44, emphasis mine.

<sup>39</sup> Boccaccio 44.

Further complications about the religious Other come through Melchizedek's actual telling of the tale of the three rings. In telling this tale, Melchizedek's manner contains Christ-like undertones that affirm his worth by making such an association. Saladin's attempt to verbally trap Melchizedek with his question "which of the three laws, whether the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian, [do] you deem to be truly authentic"<sup>40</sup> is similar to questions such as, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"<sup>41</sup> that the Pharisees ask of Jesus. Like Jesus, Melchizedek's use of an exemplum allows him to redirect the question into an answer that leaves his listeners, both Saladin in the tale and the readers of the *Decameron*, reconsidering the meaning of their stated assumptions. Melchizedek answers: "But as with the rings, the question as to which [religion] is right remains in abeyance."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Jesus says: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."<sup>43</sup>

While such a positive reading of Melchizedek and the tale of the three rings is plausible, Smarr points out some important considerations for interpreting this tale:

[T]he father who had the two copies made of the ring [. . .] "could hardly tell which was the real one" [. . .]; his sons [. . .] "could not recognize the true one" [. . .]. Thus the three religions are not in fact indistinguishable. Filomena might expect her totally Christian audience to enjoy a sense of superiority in being able to recognize that their own faith is the true one. She might expect them to find amusing the mutual assurances of the two infidels that no one can know the real truth.<sup>44</sup>

Even when the reader adopts a less cynical view of the Saladin and Melchizedek characters than Smarr does, as I have argued, such an understanding of the tale of the three rings might still be implied. After all, the virtue of Abraham's conversion

---

<sup>40</sup> Boccaccio 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 22:17b.

<sup>42</sup> Boccaccio 44.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 22:21b.

<sup>44</sup> Smarr, "Non-Christian People" 36.

to Christianity in Tale 1.2 is never in question even if the virtue of the Christians in the tale is. However, as Irwin has pointed out, the layers of the frame narrative add irony to the tales of the *Decameron*. Since the dialogue between Saladin and Melchizedek forms a frame-within-a-frame, it is not easy to tell whether or not Melchizedek's view equals Filomena's or if Filomena's equals Boccaccio's. Moreover, given Boccaccio's sustained implied commentary on the folly of making assumptions about the religious Other, it is difficult to say where Boccaccio's own stance lies. Leaving the reader pondering such question is ultimately appropriate for Tale 1.3.

### *Tale 10.9: Secular Association with Saladin*

Like Tale 1.3, Tale 10.9 features Saladin as one of its main characters. In this story, Saladin takes two advisors and goes on a tour of Europe shortly before Western Christendom launches a Crusade. While there, they are generously housed by Torello of Stra, a Christian from Lombardy. When Torello is later captured during the Crusade, Saladin, upon recognizing him, is able to return the gesture and has him sent home by magic when they learn that Torello's wife is about to remarry.

As in Tale 1.3, Boccaccio uses a paralepsistic statement to bring a major idea to mind before redirecting his reader to his Florentine's stated theme. Specifically, Panfilo, the narrator, acknowledges that the preceding tale-teller is right to complain "of the scant regard in which friendship is held by the people of today."<sup>45</sup> He then says he does not want to preach but instead will talk about "being courteous to people, in the hope that sooner or later our actions will bring their reward."<sup>46</sup> In this way, Boccaccio implies that the religious Other is not only worthy of respect but also of personal association.

Though Tale 10.9 contains no actual debate over the veracity of one religion over another, religious oppositions are at its core. The Crusades form the backdrop

---

<sup>45</sup> Boccaccio 765.

<sup>46</sup> Boccaccio 765.

for the story with an impending Crusade providing the impetus for Saladin and his counselors to make their journey to Europe in order to scout out the Christian preparations. It is the launch of this impending Crusade that then leads to Torello's capture, placing him in Saladin's keeping so that the Sultan can repay his hospitality. Further adding to the religious tension is Saladin's identification of Torello as "the Christian" prior to recognizing his former host.<sup>47</sup> Such identification is especially notable because it mirrors Boccaccio's earlier uses of "the Jew" for Abraham and Melchizedek.<sup>48</sup> This places the shoe on the other foot for Boccaccio's Christian audience, who is now thrust into the position of the Other with Torello. This ironically forces them to also identify with Saladin, who is also the Other to them. Thus, Boccaccio blurs the lines that his audience would normally draw in forming their personal associations.

As a consequence of the religious tension that undergirds the tale, there is a heavy emphasis on disguise and secrecy. Saladin and his counselors carefully dress and identify themselves as merchants while exploring Christian lands. At no point in the first half of the story do they reveal their identities; even when Torello says "you cannot persuade me to believe that you are merchants," Saladin's veiled response is "We may yet have the chance, sir, of showing you some of our merchandise, and then you shall be persuaded well enough."<sup>49</sup> With all these veiled words and identities, it comes as no surprise that the two men do not immediately recognize each other, allowing Boccaccio to tacitly comment on the guardedness with which people conduct themselves toward the Other in general. Torello seems to have an equal fondness for secrets, though in contrast these take the form of surprises as he hosts Saladin and his companions first at his country estate and then his home in Pavia. Deligiorgis characterizes such behavior as "dumb enthusiasm, or blind love, that we find behind all 'improperly motivated' greatness."<sup>50</sup> This "dumb enthusiasm" represents a manner of conduct that breaks down the barriers

---

<sup>47</sup> *Passim*.

<sup>48</sup> *Passim*.

<sup>49</sup> Boccaccio 771.

<sup>50</sup> Deligiorgis 224.

between Others, as seen upon Saladin's departure as he "resolve[s] [. . .] to return the hospitality of Messer Torello in full."<sup>51</sup>

Aside from these important motivations for their secrecy, Saladin and Torello have much in common. Boccaccio respectively describes them as "of a very astute disposition" and "no less wise than [. . .] eloquent."<sup>52</sup> Additionally, each character holds the other in high regard: Saladin sees Torello as a "most agreeable, civilized, and affable gentleman" and in the same passage Torello sees the travelers as "gentlemen of quality, much more distinguished than he had previously thought."<sup>53</sup> Consequently, issues of religious belief seem to fall aside in favor of the secular attributes Saladin shares with Torello. With these commonalities established, Boccaccio proceeds to merge Saladin and Torello, showing their relationship goes beyond that of hosts repaying generosity to friends who recognize their secular selves in the Other.

One of the first gestures Torello makes toward Saladin that pushes their relationship from that of hosts to friends is to introduce his family. This scene occurs in Pavia, where he has arranged for the gentlemen of the city to greet his guests, and it marks a very significant shift to Torello's private life from his public life: "[A]ll the gentlemen of Pavia went home to take their siesta, leaving [Torello] alone with his three visitors. And so none of his treasures should remain hidden from their eyes, he escorted them into another room and sent for his excellent lady [. . .] flanked by her two small children."<sup>54</sup> Further deepening the personal qualities of this scene, Torello displays his trust for his visitors by leaving. Through Torello's physical absence, Boccaccio continues to merge him with Saladin in the manner that Torello's wife, Adalieta, interacts with him. Boccaccio characterizes Adalieta as "a lady of great intelligence and exceptional spirit" who

---

<sup>51</sup> Boccaccio 771.

<sup>52</sup> Boccaccio 766-67.

<sup>53</sup> Boccaccio 767. While these descriptions already make Saladin and Torello very comparable, Smarr importantly notes that the generosity of the legendary Saladin led medieval Christians to exoticize him, depicting him as having a Christian grandmother and a deathbed conversion ("Other Races" 133-35).

<sup>54</sup> Boccaccio 769.

speaks with “much eloquence,”<sup>55</sup> making her comparable to Torello in character and by extension to Saladin. As a result, she displays a wifely concern toward Saladin when she gives him a gift of two robes, saying: “Take these robes: they are like the ones in which I have arrayed my husband.”<sup>56</sup> Adalieta’s actual gifts are not as important as the fact that the robes are like the ones she dresses her husband in, a gesture that brings Torello’s and Saladin’s identities together.

The robes themselves also become a symbol for the personal association of Torello and Saladin. The immediate result of the gift is that Saladin puts on the robes before embarking on a tour of Pavia, becoming Western in appearance. Saladin then takes the robes with him when he returns home, setting up the long-term consequence of the gift. The robes gain further significance as clues that begin to reveal Torello’s identity to Saladin after Torello has been captured. Torello says: “[T]hese two resemble certain robes which I myself once wore.”<sup>57</sup> Not only do the robes signify the two protagonists’ identities but the actual exchange of ownership further links the characters. Therefore, it is only fitting that a similar exchange of clothing from Saladin to Torello happens before Torello returns to Pavia, giving him an Eastern appearance. As Torello prepares to leave, Saladin clothes him “in a robe of the kind that Saracens wear [. . .] whilst around his head he caused one of his longest turbans to be wound.”<sup>58</sup>

Dressed as a Saracen, Torello also plays the part, becoming the Other in secular appearance that Saladin represents. He then goes to the second wedding of Adalieta, who thinks that he is dead. True to his character, he then surprises her in the way he chooses to reveal his identity. Torello instructs the young man who is serving him:

Tell the bride, with my compliments, that in my country, whenever a stranger such as myself attends a bridal feast such as hers, it is custom for her to send him the cup from which she is drinking, filled with

---

<sup>55</sup> Boccaccio 767-70.

<sup>56</sup> Boccaccio 770.

<sup>57</sup> Boccaccio 774.

<sup>58</sup> Boccaccio 778.

wine, to signify her pleasure at his coming. When the stranger has consumed his fill, he replaces the lid of the wine-cup, and the bride drinks up the remainder.<sup>59</sup>

Adalieta complies with Torello's request and he slips a ring that she gave to him into the cup. Upon seeing the ring, Adalieta recognizes Torello, throwing herself around his neck. Since Adalieta and Torello are similarly characterized, this gesture symbolically reads as the acceptance of the secular Other as containing parts of the Self, surpassing the theme of reciprocated courtesy that Panfilo states in the tale's introduction. Notably, the placement of this tale as the penultimate tale mirrors the placement of Tale 1.2, where the pagan becomes a Christian who surpasses all others in virtue. Here, the Christian of surpassing virtue 'becomes' a pagan and is accepted.

Boccaccio, however, leaves one final conundrum for the reader. Before Torello is magically transported from the East, Saladin asks him to return so that "I shall be able to repair the omissions which your haste to depart imposes upon me."<sup>60</sup> However, at the tale's conclusion Torello sends to Saladin "more than a single messenger" to tell of "his felicitous return to Pavia, declaring himself to be his friend and servant."<sup>61</sup> Such a statement clinches the importance of friendship as the tale's 'non'-theme, but ignores Saladin's request. While several interpretations might explain this unfulfilled promise, the one I find easiest to believe, given Boccaccio's scholarly writings and his historical position between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, is that Saladin, as a non-Christian, cannot live up to Torello's generosity.

### *Conclusion*

While it is difficult to read the *Decameron* as being truly universalistic in perspective, Boccaccio's implied commentary on his narrators' stated themes

---

<sup>59</sup> Boccaccio 781.

<sup>60</sup> Boccaccio 778.

<sup>61</sup> Boccaccio 783.

shows an openness toward the religious Other in Tales 1.2, 1.3, and 10.9. Through characterization, paraleipsistic statements of theme, and a frame-within-a-frame structure, Boccaccio suggests that the Other has worth in secular virtue, individuality, and personal associations. These themes prove truly universal, easily bridging Boccaccio's 14<sup>th</sup> century frame narrative to the 21<sup>st</sup> century readers of today. Like Boccaccio's characters, people of today's world encounter others of different belief systems more and more frequently. Since these religious beliefs are at times very pronounced, reminders of how to relate to and value one another are not only important but necessary.



### **Works Cited**

- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Trans. G. H. McWilliam. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Penguin, 1995.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 23-328.
- Chazan, Robert. *Jewish Suffering: The Interplay of Medieval Christian and Jewish Perspectives*. Ed. Richard Newhauser. Lectures on Medieval Judaism at Trinity University: Occasional Papers 2. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998.
- Childers, Joseph and Gary Hentzi, eds. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.
- Deligiorgis, Stavros. *Narrative Intellection in the Decameron*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1975.
- Hastings, R. "To Teach or Not to Teach: The Moral Dimension of the *Decameron* Reconsidered." *Italian Studies* 44 (1989): 19-40.
- Irwin, Bonnie D. "Narrative in the *Decameron* and the *Thousand and One Nights*." *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's Decameron*. Approaches to Teaching World Literature. New York, NY: MLA, 2000. 21-30.
- . "What's in a Frame? The Medieval Textualization of Traditional Storytelling." *Oral Tradition* 10.1 (1995): 27-53.
- The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Smarr, Janet Levarie. "Non-Christian People and Spaces in the *Decameron*." *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's Decameron*. Approaches to Teaching World Literature. New York, NY: MLA, 2000. 31-38.
- . "Other Races and Other Places in the *Decameron*." *Studi sul Boccaccio* 27 (1999): 113-36.
- The Song of Roland*. Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers. New York: Penguin, 1961.