Sicilian Puppet Theater: Alterity or Diversity?

By Jo Ann Cavallo

Abstract: From the perspective of alterity, the predominant figure of the Other in Sicilian puppet theater is undoubtedly the Saracen (Muslim). As antagonists, Saracens have been associated with different historical aggressors, from North Africans to Ottoman Turks to the House of Bourbon ruling Sicily in the 19th century. However, depictions of Saracens across the source texts, time periods, and puppet theater companies are exceptionally multifaceted. Many non-Christian protagonists were beloved by the traditional opera dei pupi public. A chivalrous Mongol khan, for instance, was affectionately depicted with the characteristic mustache of Vittorio Emanuele II, “il re galantuomo” (the honest gentleman king). And some puppeteers reversed the angle and fostered identification with the Saracen underdogs in the face of oppression coming from elsewhere.

At the same time, the “Paladins of France” cycle, with its more than 300 nightly episodes, is replete with stories that eschew an opposition between an “us” and a “them” and instead underscore our common humanity across borders of all kinds. Camaraderie, friendship, and even romance can readily emerge between individuals from the most disparate corners of the globe—from China to Africa and from Syria to the islands above the Russian landmass—in extended narratives that encourage and promote understanding and peace. In recent decades, moreover, some Sicilian puppeteers have staged plays that thoughtfully challenge collective confrontations and question conventional societal attitudes.

With such boundless material in both traditional and contemporary Sicilian puppet theater, scholars may shine the spotlight on features that either emphasize alterity or embrace diversity. The plays themselves sometimes stage a shift from one perspective to the other, as when an unknown foreign Other becomes a friend, benefactor, or lover. My essay focuses on a selection of examples under the guise of alterity before moving to three principal storylines that celebrate diversity through heterogamous marriages.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, Italian epic literature, European poetry—Renaissance
When I started thinking about the thematic keyword for the symposium that led to this collection, “alterity,” I found myself contrasting it with another term that has been on everyone’s mind of late, “diversity.” “Alterity,” for me at least, conjures up images of difference, division, exclusion, and potential hostility toward whatever is “alter,” Other, on the outside of one’s self or community. “Diversity,” on the other hand, embraces multiplicity and promotes inclusion, evoking the image of a kaleidoscope rather than a binary opposition. How do we situate Sicilian puppet theater in relation to these two concepts? The truth is that one can find an abundance of examples of both alterity and diversity along with episodes that lead the spectator from one perspective to the next. This paper explores some ways in which alterity and diversity play out in the main repertory of Sicilian puppet theater, the Paladins of France cycle, with particular attention to its historical context and literary sources.

Medieval Origins: Agolante’s Invasion of Southern Italy

If we focus on hostilities involving a foreign Other, we can locate a prominent thread in the multi-generational invasions of southern Europe by North African kings and their allies (generally referred to as Saracens). In an extended sequence, the emperor of Africa, named Agolante of Biserta (i.e., Bizerte, in northeast Tunisia), attacks the Italian peninsula by invading Calabria (see Figure 1). This popular puppet theater narrative has its historical origins in the repeated Arab–Muslim incursions into the Apulia and Calabria regions of southern Italy during the over two

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1 I’m referring to diversity as “the inclusion of individuals representing more than one national origin, color, religion, socioeconomic stratum, sexual orientation, etc.” (dictionary.com). As Siân Gibby and Anthony J. Tamburri (2021), co-editors of the recent volume Diversity in Italian Studies, have put it, “diversity entails the recognition and appreciation of difference and its values” (i).

2 The Paladins of France cycle is based on Giusto Lodico’s Storia dei paladini di Francia (History of the Paladins of France), a prose rewriting of Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato, Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, and other medieval and Renaissance chivalric poems. Originally published between 1858 and 1860 and comprising almost 3,000 pages, the work quickly became the authoritative source of Sicilian puppet theater. Since the 1950s, puppeteers no longer stage the entire cycle consisting of well over 300 plays; rather, they have refashioned memorable episodes into self-contained plays with varying degrees of artistic license. My essay focuses on episodes that were popular in the tradition and are still performed today.

3 Following the chivalric tradition, I employ the term Saracen when referring to literary or dramatic characters rather than historical Muslims. As John V. Tolan (2002) notes, the words “Islam” and “Muslim” were virtually unknown in western European languages prior to the sixteenth century (xv). For the record, traditional opera dei pupi spectators, who knew the stories as well as the puppeteers, would have recognized additional types of conflict, including rivalries between knights and rebellions against unjust rulers. For this latter politically charged theme in Sicilian puppet theater, see Cavallo (2017 and 2020), “The Ideological Battle of Roncevaux” and “Malaguerra.” For Sicilian puppet theater in general, see Pasqualino (1977); for the Catanese tradition, see Napoli (2002). For book-length studies in English, see McCormick (2010) and Croce (2014).
centuries of North African occupation of Sicily from the 9th until the late-11th century. The events were first fictionalized in the anonymous 12th-century Old French epic *Aspremont*, believed to have been written in Sicily.

4 The invasion of Sicily by the Emirate of Ifriqiya—roughly, today’s western Libya, Tunisia, and eastern Algeria—began in 827 and control of the island was completed in 902; the Italo-Norman rulers of southern Italy, with the support of the papacy, ended Muslim control in 1091 after a thirty-year struggle. The Benedictine monk Goffredo Malaterra recounts that Roger I was able to initiate the reconquest of Sicily because he was invited by an exiled Muslim emir against his compatriots. See Metcalfe (2009) for a recent history of the Arab–Muslim presence in Sicily and southern Italy during this period based on numerous sources.

5 Luke Sunderland (2012) writes that the “*Aspremont*, widely diffused in Italy and extant in no fewer than four Anglo-Norman versions, was arguably composed in Sicily by a Norman writer” (228). In Andrea da Barberino’s Italian prose *L’Aspramonte*, Agolante refers to himself as “king of the two major parts of the world, that is, Asia and Africa, for the virtue of Mohammad who caused the winds of Africa to grow [so that our force] has reached the port of Messina, and we have placed all the forces of Apulia and Calabria under our dominion” (“re delle due parti maggiori del mondo, cioè Asia e Africa, per la virtù di Maometto che à fatto crescere e’ venti africani [per modo che la nostra forza] è giunta nel Farro di Messina, e tutte le forze di Puglia e di Calabria sottomettiamo alla nostra signoria” (*L’Aspramonte* 2.5.3–6, 50). All translations are mine except for quotes from Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* and Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*.
In one popular episode during the invasion of Calabria, Agolante’s son Almonte treacherously kills the Frankish paladin Milone (see Figure 2). As Almonte is subsequently about to overcome Charlemagne, he is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Milone’s young son Orlando (the hero immortalized in the *Chanson de Roland*). Although not protected by armor, the youth nonetheless succeeds in avenging his father and rescuing Charlemagne by killing Almonte.

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*The play goes by various names in the repertory of contemporary puppet theater companies: *Le prime imprese di Orlandino* (Teatroarte Cuticchio), *Orlandino* (Figli d’arte Cuticchio), *La morte di Almonte* (Antica Compagnia Opera dei Pupi Famiglia Puglisi), and *Orlando conquista le armi* (Compagnia Brigliadoro). The above plays can be found on the “Andrea da Barberino” webpage of eBOIARDO ([https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/authors/andrea-da-barberino](https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/authors/andrea-da-barberino)).
The grateful emperor immediately dubs Orlando a knight, thus marking his entrance into the world of chivalry.

Yet, amid the animosity between opposing forces, a love story arises that goes against the “us versus them” mentality. The North African Saracen princess warrior Galaciella, the daughter of Agolante and an Amazon queen, falls in love with the Calabrian Christian knight Ruggiero II because of his chivalric valor, and the young man reciprocates her love (see Figure 3).  

Sadly, their marriage leads to another (and less felicitous) bond across enemy lines: that between Ruggiero’s jealous brother Beltramo and Galaciella’s bellicose brother Almonte (who has not yet met his fate at the hands of Orlando). With Beltramo’s complicity, Almonte invades the city of Reggio Calabria and then kills the unarmed Ruggiero and his father.  

Despite these treacherous actions, the couple’s brief heterogamous marriage bears fruit: Galaciella will subsequently escape by boat and give birth

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7 This episode is not in the original Aspremont but rather in Italian rewritings, both Andrea da Barberino’s prose Aspremonte and an anonymous version in ottava rima verse.

8 Recent performances of the puppet play Ruggero di Risa by the Antica Compagnia Opera dei Pupi Famiglia Puglisi (Sortino) and the Compagnia Opera dei pupi siciliani Gaspare Canino (Alcamo) are also available on the “Andrea da Barberino” webpage referenced in footnote 6. For parallels between the historical Roger I and the character Ruggiero II in the literary sources (both L’Aspremonte and the Orlando Innamorato), see Cavallo (2013), The World beyond Europe, 95–100.
to twins on the shores of North Africa before expiring, suggesting that love not only defies alterity but also transcends death.\(^9\)

![Image](image.jpg)


Renaissance Developments: Agramante’s Invasion of France

The extensive central section of the Paladins of France cycle concerns the invasion of France on the part of Agolante’s grandson, Agramante of Biserta, with the help of allies not only from the African continent but also from Spain, Persia, the Mongol Empire, and southeast Asia.\(^10\) In

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\(^9\) To be more precise, this turn of events in the Storia dei paladini and Sicilian puppet theater follows Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato and Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso.

\(^10\) The vast international scope of these alliances may seem far-fetched, but sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Alex Metcalfe (2009) reports that the historical coalition that invaded Sicily in the early 9th century was comprised of the “Aghlabid Arab jund, the Saqaliba (slaves of central European/Balkan origin […]), as well as contingents of non-Arab Iftiqiyans, troops from sub-Saharan Africa, and an Andalusi force from Tortosa led by a Berber adventurer,” joined in 859 by “a party of Cretan Muslims” (12).
the end, however, Agramante will lose both the war and his own life in a battle of three against three on the island of Lampedusa. This decisive combat, in which Agramante is killed by none other than Orlando, is one of the most famous episodes in Sicilian puppet theater.

Agramante’s war is first recounted in the late 15th-century Italian romance epic *Orlando Innamorato* (*Orlando in Love*) by Matteo Maria Boiardo and is brought to a conclusion by Ludovico Ariosto in his early 16th-century continuation, *Orlando Furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*). Historically, the plot evokes the same North African aggression against southern Europe as the earlier narrative about Agolante. At the time when Boiardo was developing his storyline, however, the threat of occupation was coming not from North Africa but rather from the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Boiardo’s Agramante recalls Mehmed II, the ruler of the Turks between 1451 and 1481 who attempted the conquest of Italy while the poet was in the midst of composing his romance epic.

During the heyday of puppet theater, however, the foreign invader was the Bourbon monarchy, which ruled the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies between 1816 and 1860. The puppeteer

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11 Boiardo died in 1494, leaving his poem unfinished as Agramante and his allies were attacking Paris. Ironically, the final stanza evokes the devastation of Italy by Charles VIII’s French forces that same year: “I see all Italy on fire, / because these French—so valiant!— / come to lay waste who knows what land” (“Vedo la Italia tutta a fiama e a foco / Per questi Galli, che con gran valore / Vengon per disertar non scio che loco”; OI 3.9.26). Ariosto set out to complete the *Orlando Innamorato* around 1505 and published the third and final edition of the *Orlando Furioso* in 1532, a year before his own death. These two lengthy poems were woven into the extensive central section of Lodico’s *Storia dei paladini*.

12 Boiardo, in fact, imagines Agramante to be not only the grandson of the fictional Agolante but, more generally, a descendant of the historical North Africans who “conquered Spain with arrogance, / divided Italy, stormed France” (“preser Spagna con tanta aroganza, / Parte de Italia e tempestarno in França”; OI 2.1.13).

13 Reading Agramante’s war as an allusion to the Turkish campaigns, Michael Murrin points out that the height of the Ottoman threat to the Italian peninsula coincided with the period in which Boiardo was writing the *Innamorato* (70).

14 After the Ottoman Turks invaded the Italian city of Otranto in 1480, they used their foothold in the peninsula to raid nearby coastal towns and enslave the Italian inhabitants while preparing for a larger-scale military operation. Giovanni Ricci (2008) notes the shock of Christians forced into slavery by the Turks right on Italian soil (45). For more on Mehmed II, see Babinger (2004). For Agramante’s links to Mehmed II, see Cavallo (2013), *The World beyond Europe*, 92–94.

15 This struggle against a new foreign occupation does not mean that previous historical allusions were thereby completely erased. Pier Mattia Tommasino (2015) cites an example of how easily distinct moments of resistance to foreign invasion become connected, in this case the northern Italian city-states against the emperor Frederick Barbarossa in the 12th century, Otranto against the Ottomans in 1480, and Milan and Brescia against the Austrians in the mid-1800s (147). John M. Foley’s (1991) conception of immanent art may also be apropos here: “Traditional referentiality […] entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text. Each element in the phraseology or narrative thematics stands not simply for that singular instance but for the plurality and multiformity that are beyond the reach of textualization” (7).
Mimmo Cuticchio (2000) maintains that puppet plays during that period were intended not only to entertain spectators “but also to encourage them to rebel against the occupation, in that period, of the Bourbons. […] Rodomonte [i.e., the king of Algiers] who attacks Paris is also the foreigner who attacks Palermo.”

Resistance to the Bourbon occupation, according to Cuticchio, explains how the Orlando puppet came to wear a red, green, and white sash representing the colors of the new Italian flag. Although Bourbon domination ended over century and a half ago, in some companies Orlando still wears the tri-colored sash (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Orlando with Tri-Colored Sash (2018). From *Orlando contro Rinaldo per la bella Angelica*. Figli d’arte Cuticchio. University of Illinois-Urbana. Photo by Jo Ann Cavallo.](image)

16 He goes on to say: “The battle between Orlando, Rinaldo, and the other paladins against the foreigner who comes to occupy your land is also the wish to free oneself from a master who forces you to serve him.” Cuticchio’s original statement in Italian can be found at [https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/mimmo-cuticchio](https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/mimmo-cuticchio). Rodomonte’s attack on Paris stands out for the atrocities committed against defenseless civilians (*Orlando Furioso*, see especially 16.19–29, 85–89; 17.8–12).

17 From another perspective, however, many historians have argued that the so-called independence can more accurately be referred to as “the territorial expansion and transformation of the Kingdom of Piedmont into the Kingdom of Italy” (Fogu 2020, 15), resulting in such desperate living conditions that millions of Sicilians and southern Italians were subsequently forced to emigrate to other countries in order to survive. See Fogu for an in-depth analysis of these political events and the resulting diaspora.
In the fictional story of Agramante’s invasion, as in the earlier plot involving his grandfather Agolante, here, too, there are key moments that push against the binary opposition between an “us” and a “them.” The shift from alterity to diversity is signaled most prominently by the enamorment of the Christian Frankish knight Bradamante, sister of the famed paladin Rinaldo, and the Saracen North African knight Ruggiero, the son of Ruggiero II and Galaciella, who was born on the coast of Libya and raised in the Atlas Mountains (see Figure 5). The two are technically enemies when they meet, since Ruggiero is participating in Agramante’s invasion of France whereas Bradamante is one of Charlemagne’s preeminent warriors. Nonetheless, Ruggiero courteously offers to take Bradamante’s place against his fellow African Rodamonte who refuses to let her follow the Frankish army in retreat (Orlando Innamorato 3.5). Although Bradamante initially accepts the offer and departs, she soon thereafter returns because her own sense of honor is higher on her value scale than her duty to follow the emperor. They end up falling in love because both have placed a universal code of chivalry and individual integrity above the interests of their respective rulers as well as any religious, political, or ethnic distinctions.

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18 The play was recently performed under the direction of Giacomo Cuticchio with the title Primo amore di Ruggiero e Bradamante (Palermo, April 21 and 22, 2018), but it is not currently available online.

19 She reasons thus: “I’m bound to my high emperor, / but to myself and honor more” (“Sono obligata alo alto imperatore, / Ma più sono a me stessa e al more onore”; OI 3.5.7)

20 Ruggiero will go on to convert to Christianity (according to the expectations of the genre) and the couple will marry in the final canto of the Orlando Furioso. Their love story is destined to have some happy years before Ruggiero is betrayed and killed by none other than Gano di Magonza (i.e., Ganelon, Charlemagne’s evil advisor infamous for his betrayal of the rearguard in the Battle of Roncevaux).
Through the Centuries to Today: The Vicissitudes of Angelica of Cathay

My remaining examples of alterity and diversity feature one of the most memorable characters in the Paladins of France cycle: the princess Angelica of Cathay, whose story begins in Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* and is brought to a conclusion in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso.*

In a scene popular in the Palermo tradition, Angelica is rescued by Orlando from a giant who intends to gain substantial money from the sale of her person. Nino Cuticchio’s giant tells Angelica that he has kidnapped her because “you will earn me a lot of money” ("mi farai guadagnare..."

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21 Mimmo Cuticchio (2000) states: “The Arrival of Angelica is one of the traditional public’s most loved episodes because the most beautiful stories, interlaced with love, duels, and enchantments, begin from this point” (50). Scenes from several puppet plays featuring Angelica derived from both Boiardo and Ariosto can be found at [https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo](https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo).
molto danaro”) and specifies that he plans to sell her at the slave market (“mercato degli schiavi”).

Enzo Mancuso’s giant evokes the procedure of buying and selling captives specifically through an auction when he tells Angelica that he will bring her to the market (“mercato”) and sell her to the highest bidder (“ti venderò al miglior offerente”). And while all the giants wear head garb suggesting a foreign and essentially Arab origin, Mimmo Cuticchio’s giant also has markedly non-European facial features that further denote his ethnic Otherness.

The chivalric source texts include similar episodes in which women and even children are abducted in order to be sold into slavery. Angelica, however, is never destined for a slave market in either poem. Why, then, does this scene appear in Sicilian puppet theater? It is commonly noted that Sicily was vulnerable to invasion by foreign armies throughout its history. It is also worth remembering, however, that the island was also prey to smaller-scale aggression: Beginning in the medieval period, but especially between the mid-16th and late-19th centuries, the coastline was devastated by attacks from corsairs and pirates based in North Africa who made a business of abducting inhabitants, sometimes transporting them as far as Ottoman Turkey. In Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800, Robert C. Davis (2003) recounts how “piracy and slaving became the policy instruments of state for both

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25 The Orlando Furioso’s warrior queen Marfisa, for example, was captured by Arabs and sold to the Sultan of Persia at the age of seven (OF 38.14–15), and the princess Isabella was seized by corsairs along the western coast of France and destined for the same fate (OF 13.29–31). Both stories are told in the words of the female characters themselves rather than the third-person narrator. Marfisa says “Some Arabs stole me from a sorcerer / In Persia then they sold me as a slave” (“gli Arabi poi rubata m’hanno / E mi vendero in Persia per ischiava”; OF 38.14–15). Isabella explains to her rescuer Orlando that “to a merchant I shall soon be sold, / Then to a Sultan in exchange for gold” (“m’h an promessa e venduta a un mercadante, / che portare al soldan mi de’ in Levante”; OF 13.31). For Lodico’s further elaboration of Marfisa’s story, see Cavallo (2021), “Boiardo’s Eastern Protagonists,” 157–62.

26 Karla Mallette (2005) sums it up thus: “Indeed, between antiquity and the Middle Ages, the island invited conquest from every shore of the Mediterranean. The ancient Greeks, the Romans, and the Byzantine Greeks took turns ruling it before the arrival of the Arabs. Following the period of Norman and Swabian rule, it would be governed by Angevin and Aragonese sovereigns” (4).
sides” (140). At the same time, he notes that “especially in areas close to some of the main corsair bases (western Sicily is just 200 kilometers from Tunis) slave taking rapidly burgeoned into a full-scale industry, with a disastrous impact that was apparent at the time and for centuries to come” (140). Could its impact have extended into Sicilian puppet theater? After all, noting that “abductions, captivity and ransoming were a matter of course rather than the exception in the Mediterranean in the early modern period,” Erith Jaffe-Berg (2015) points out that “the often-outrageous plots of the scenarios of commedia dell’arte were based more in truth than fiction” (12).

In the scene in question, we might examine not only the features of the giant but also the painted backdrop of the scene (see Figures 6–8). In two of the three cases, the sea in the background indicates that the attempted abduction is taking place along a coast. In the Orlando Innamorato, however, Angelica travels from distant Cathay to France and back without the mention of any body of water. Like the hundreds of “torri saracene” or “Saracen towers” that were constructed in Sicily and southern Italy to defend the coastlines, the backdrop of the sea suggests that this scene may indeed be a vestige of centuries of historical trauma.

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27 As Edmund Burke III notes, “Such raiding was indeed ubiquitous, forming part of a complex system of economic and political warfare whose history goes back at least to the beginnings of Ottoman intervention in the western Mediterranean in 1517” (135). See also Hershenzon’s (2018) The Captive Sea for both Christian and Muslim slavery in the early modern Mediterranean.

28 Alessandro Triulzi (1971) notes that by the early 19th-century the “long-standing practice of slave-raiding along the Mediterranean coasts had brought to Tunis vast numbers of slaves, most of whom came from the Italian islands and mainland” (155).

29 The fact that the scene is situated within the context of the Innamorato is made clear subsequently when Angelica asks Orlando for help against the Tartar khan Agricane (discussed in the following paragraph).

30 A linguistic rather than architectural vestige of this long-standing historical trauma can be found in the centuries-old expressions such as “Mother, the Turks!” or “What, did the Turks get you?” that are still used in Sicily to signal alarm (see La Grutta).
Figure 6. A Giant Attempts to Abduct Angelica (2002). From *Orlando contro Rinaldo per la bella Angelica*. Nino Cuticchio. Teatro Ippogrifo, Palermo. Photo by Jo Ann Cavallo.

Figure 7. A Giant Attempts to Abduct Angelica (2002). From *Orlando contro Rinaldo per la bella Angelica*. Compagnia Carlo Magno di Enzo Mancuso. Palermo. Photo by Jo Ann Cavallo.
Angelica Besieged by Agricane: Medieval Mongol Khans and a Modern Italian King

A more developed episode dramatizing threats to Angelica’s autonomy is the extended siege of her fortress in Albraca by King Agricane of Tartaria after the princess refuses to marry him. In this story, from Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato*, the Mongol emperor is not only supremely fierce, but he also abides by an international code of chivalry that places honor above victory.¹¹

I have argued elsewhere that Boiardo fashioned Agricane after the Mongol rulers described by Marco Polo and medieval missionaries.¹² Late 19th-century Catanese puppeteers, however, had another association in mind that was closer to their own reality. Alessandro Napoli, a member of his family’s puppet theater company in Catania and a scholar in his own right, has pointed out that a perceived affinity of character between Agricane and Vittorio Emanuele II, the king of Italy from 1861 to 1878, led Catanese puppeteers to construct Agricane puppets with a large wavy mustache and beard deliberately meant to recall those features of “the honest gentleman king” (“il re

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¹¹ For example, he dismounts from his horse in order to fight without any advantage, and later he refuses to achieve victory through treachery when offered the chance, threatening to kill the unethical schemer instead (Or 1.11.22–23; 1.14.55). Noting that Agricane is generally considered a positive figure in Sicilian puppet theater, Fiorenzo Napoli of the Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli (Catania) recalls that since childhood he was enamored of this character for his depth, strength, pride, and integrity (private correspondence with the author, April 19, 2020).

galantuomo” (see Figure 9). Thus, similar character traits, in this case uprightness and valor on the battlefield, trump geographical distance and ethnic difference.


Angelica and Medoro: Embracing Multiculturalism Today

My final example of Angelica’s interaction with Others, this time under the sign of diversity, originates in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso. After the damsel’s many escapes from would-be rapists and thwarted suitors, she finally encounters the man of her dreams and chooses him as her partner. The lucky fellow, named Medoro, is a low-ranking foot soldier participating in Agramante’s invasion of France.

Ariosto introduces Medoro as a Moor from Tolomitta (the Libyan coastal city of Ptolemais), but at the same time specifically describes him as fair-skinned and blond. What is a puppeteer who needs to present the character’s physical features to do? Traditional Sicilian puppet
theater followed centuries of Italian and European art that depicted both the Chinese princess and her North African beloved with fair skin and blond hair—although they often adopted darker shades of hair more common in Sicily. Recently, however, some puppeteers have decided to break from tradition. The puppeteer Alfredo Mauceri (of Siracusa) chose to render more visible Angelica’s Eastern origin by constructing an Indian Angelica—complete with a bindi, nose earring, and henna tattoo. He imagined Medoro as a darker-toned puppet with a white robe and turban evoking his Arab-Berber origin (see Figure 10). In the play staging their first encounter, Angelica tends to Medoro’s wounds and the latter expresses the first stirrings of an emotion that will lead to their marriage. They almost kiss before exiting arm in arm.

Figure 10. The encounter of Angelica and Medoro (2002). From Angelica, la Fuga. Compagnia dei Pupari Vaccaro-Mauceri, Siracusa. Photo by Jo Ann Cavallo.

There were some exceptions, however. Enzo Mancuso has in his workshop an Angelica puppet envisioned by his uncle as Indian (see the ninth clip at https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/interviews/ninoand-eno-mancuso/).

For this scene within the play Angelica, la fuga, see “Angelica encounters the wounded footsoldier Medoro” (in particular 1:46–5:26): https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/angelica-la-fuga/. Currently, Mauceri clothes Angelica in a dress meant to be evocative of traditional Middle Eastern garb, explaining that it “is certainly not an outfit typical of Cathay, but it allows us to distinguish her from the European clothes worn by the other female characters.” His more extensive comments, from a March 3, 2011, email message to the author, can be found in Cavallo, “Encountering Saracens,” 170–72.
The most iconoclastic representation I’ve encountered of Angelica and Medoro, however, is that of the late Onofrio Sanicola (of Marineo). As Orlando sleeps in the foreground, a topless Angelica and Medoro meet up just behind him, carve their names on trees (see Figure 11), and then engage in lovemaking, suggestively rendered through Medoro’s slow, stylized, dance-like motions. And onstage sex between puppets is not the only surprise in this scene. Adhering to Ariosto’s identification of Medoro as a Moorish foot soldier, Sanicola represents him as black and small of stature. Whatever one’s reaction to the scene, it is apparent that this break with convention reflects an awareness of (and invites discussion about) contemporary culture and pressing social issues from a global rather than more limited local perspective.

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17 This generic puppet is commonly referred to in Sicilian as a *suddateddu d’incolpo* (“small soldier who dies at the first hit”).

18 Nor are Mauceri and Sanicola alone in rethinking notions of alterity in contemporary Sicilian puppet theater. To cite just one more example, in an original play staged by the Marionettistica dei Fratelli Napoli titled *L’Oro dei Napoli*, first performed in 2002, the attempts by King Agramante of Biserta to prevent the destruction of his North African kingdom (from the final cantos of the *Orlando Furioso*) parallel the efforts of the Catane puppeteer Natale Napoli and his family to forestall the demise of traditional puppet theater in eastern Sicily. In this light, Agramante’s lowly messenger in the initial scene becomes the Napoli family’s spokesperson throughout the rest of the play. For scenes from the play, see https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/sicilian-puppet-theater/puppet-plays/oro-deinapoli/. For a review of the play, see Cavallo (2003), “L’Oro dei Napoli.”
Sicilian puppet theater—like the world at large—is always going to be more complex than it seems at any moment of one’s research or experience. A reminder of this is the presence of the tradition in North Africa. Not only did Sicilian immigrants bring their form of puppet theater to Tunisia during the diaspora that followed Italian unification (see footnote 17), but Sicilian puppeteers often leased their marionettes to Tunisian puppeteers who staged performances during Ramadan.\(^{19}\) Thus the same physical puppets (and ones resembling them constructed by Tunisians) were used to act out a host of different stories to a North African Muslim audience. In one popular Tunisian play, the Ottoman prince Ismaël Pacha kills both an Italian and an English general who

\(^{19}\) The entry on Tunisia in the *Encyclopédie mondiale des Arts de la Marionnette* notes that Sicilian *opera dei pupi* “connut un succès croissante auprès des Français et des Arabes” (“Tunisie” 2009, 720). Amine and Carlson (2012) note that there were at least three Sicilian puppet theaters in the city of Tunis in the nineteenth century (62). Aziza (1975) opens his chapter “Le théâtre de marionettes” by stating: “Venue probablement de Sicilie, la technique des montreurs de marionettes s’est très bien acclimatée en Tunisie” (66). My thanks to Greg Pellone, graduate of the University of Connecticut’s Puppets Arts Program, for the above references. For more on Sicilian and southern Italian communities in Tunisia, see Triulzi (1971) and Clancy-Smith (2011). For a thoughtful collection of essays exploring “how Arabs and non-Arabs view each other” (the volume’s subtitle), see Labib (2008).
have come to ransom the Italian princess he abducted and holds captive—and his Sicilian servant (or prisoner of war) N’Coula brazenly takes the credit (see Figure 12). 40


In conclusion, the Paladins of France cycle offered traditional spectators the occasion to imaginatively relive their ancestral stories and contemporary experiences—sometimes, as in the episodes examined in this chapter, moving from alterity to diversity, and from conflict to communion. Therefore, any attempt to understand Sicilian puppet theater in context must take into account the changing geopolitical landscape as well as the interplay between historical realities, literary epic sources, and staged performances.

40 Aziza (1975) provides the transcription of dialogues in colloquial Tunisian with a French translation (66–76). The other characters are a black slave (“esclave noir”) named Messaoud who serves as guard, a local Tunisian officer (“officier”) named Abderrazak who wants to marry the captive princess Nina, and a group of children (“Les enfants”) who prevent Abderrazak from killing N’Coula.
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