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## Moors and Christians in the Sicilian figurative and performance tradition

Gabriella D'Agostino

«For 2500 years the focus of all the major epic poems of our tradition, such as the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, as well as the *Chanson de Roland*, *Orlando Furioso* and *Jerusalem Delivered* has definitely been the East-West conflict». So says a short note by Giovanni Mariotti in the Italian newspaper «Corriere della Sera», on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1998 (p. 27).

Over the years, this partly historically motivated contrast has taken on a gnoseological significance. It has become a regulatory apparatus of the world, loaded with legendary contents and open to ambiguous symbolism, whose fullest expression is to be found in myths. On the one hand, the *ex oriente lux*, namely the East, as a source of light: a historical interpretation based on myth at the dawn of Christianity, stretching all the way to the pan-Indo-European momenta in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; on the other, the West as a sinister dimension of the unknown belonging to the ancient Underworld. This dimension was one which heroes would have to fathom while retracing their steps to their own world as winners of the pagan chaos and observers of the Christian order, in keeping with the crusaders' ideals.

Broadly speaking, the Moor-Christian opposition is to be seen as an ambiguous bipartite distinction which permeates so many aspects of the European culture. In Sicily, it is the content substance of popular theatrical performances known as “opera dei pupi” (puppet theatre). In the Sicilian dialect, a term which covers the semantic field of “mori” or “mauri” (Moors) is *saracinu* (Saracen) or *turcu* (Turk/Turkish). In the Sicilian-Italian dictionary *Nuovo Dizionario siciliano-italiano* by Antonino Traina (1868), the entry for *moru* literally states: «A black man from Ethiopia: *moor*». There is no entry for *saracinu* (Saracen), and the one for *turcu* reads: «Inhabitant of Turkey: *Turk*. Belonging to the Mohammedan sect: *Turkish*. An un-baptised person. And *fig.*: heinous, sacrilegious. Black: *moor*». Some additional common sayings are also provided by the author: «*Cosi turchi* [Turkish things (*lit.*)], strange, unbelievable things»; «*Cu' pigghia un turcu è so'* [if you catch a Turk he will be your property (*lit.*)]»; «*Sintirisi pigghiatu di li turchi* [to be caught by the Turks (*lit.*)], to be amazed, to be at a loss»; «*Essiri comu lu turcu a la predica* [to be like a Turk at a sermon (*lit.*)], not to listen, not to understand». The Sicilian-Italian dictionary by Vincenzo Mortillaro (1876) also has a concise entry

for *turcu* which briefly reads: «Belonging to the Mohammedan sect. *Fig.* heinous, inhuman. In a derogatory sense the term refers to a person whose dark hue and curly hair are reminiscent of the Moors’».

What we know from dictionaries in the transition from the level of denotation to that of connotation clearly shows which directions research on the relationship between Moors and Christians in Sicily should follow. Primarily, this centuries-long relationship affecting many Mediterranean countries was developed out of the expressive conventions mentioned above, and recognisably marked by corsair raids, which were labelled as brigand activities despite being legally separated. An upsurge of piracy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was noticeably caused by the rising power of Turkey, and pirates would continue to pose a threat until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, operating from North Africa<sup>1</sup>. Expressions and sayings, along with other accounts can all be associated with more general dualities in which the ambiguous relationship between the West and the “other” is examined against a backdrop of polar opposites: civilised vs savage; good vs evil; culture vs nature. According to dictionaries, in Sicily’s cultural traditions the rite of baptism marks a significant moment of transition from *turcu* or *armalu* (animal) to *cristianu* (Christian, that stands for human being) and finally recognises any individual as part of a socially structured community (D’Onofrio 1997: 27).

In Sicily, the memory of pirate raids is equally substantiated through numerous ex-voto paintings in churches and shrines given by mariners in thanksgiving for being saved from pirate attacks. In the Agrigento area, an example of this is a set of wooden votive panel paintings preserved in the cathedral of San Gerlando, or formerly belonging to the Church of Sant’Agostino in Sciacca (see photos in D’Agostino 1991: 36-39, 284-289). Conventionally, most illustrations depict one or more “infidel” sailing vessel/s showing the red crescent moon symbol on a white background, as they assault the Christian ships parading their white flags with a red cross. Sometimes the composition is deliberately off-balance and based on a clear disproportion of the pirate ship compared to the small Christian boat. Other times the pirates are portrayed wearing turbans and carrying scimitars. The Trapani mariners were the most common victims, as proved by the multiple ex-votos preserved in the shrine of Our Lady of the Annunciation in Trapani. Following oral traditions, this Madonna, known as the Madonna of Trapani, is entrusted with a pivotal role in the protection against all the dangers connected with the “Turkish” incursions<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Apart from Braudel 1976, I am referring to: Tenenti 1960; Bono 1993; as for Sicily: Trasselli 1952; Adragna 1980; Bonomo 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The legend of the simulacrum (which recalls the common narrative scheme of other founding legends) has it that the Madonna of Trapani performed two miraculous intercessions to save the city from the “infidels”. Giuseppe Pitrè reports: «Here a Turkish incursion has been threatening the city, all the people are in great consternation. What are their chances of escaping from this other than keeping the venerated images on the walls? Mary repulses the assault and the city is safe. The shuddering Turk – continues Pitrè – is hatching deceit: he offers a large candle as a sign of simulated faith (*cu firi fintizza*), which the people light up before the Madonna; but the candle is filled with dust and balls that will make

The victory of Christianity over the “infidels” is also celebrated with the staging of armed conflicts in some traditional festivals. These performances can be bracketed with the theatrical genre of pantomimic dance dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which became known as *moresca* in Europe. In Scicli (Ragusa, south-east Sicily), the feast in honour of Our Lady of the Militia falls on the last Sunday of May<sup>3</sup> and recalls the clash between the Christians led by Roger the Great Count and Saracens, headed by Belcane, which occurred in 1091. The legend tells how one night, in March, the inhabitants of Scicli were suddenly awoken by the announcement of a Saracen landing on the nearby shores of Donnalucata. Soldiers gathered round in tight groups and rushed to the shore to discover that a multitude of hostile galeases and Saracens had already come ashore. The story, as told by Pitrè (1900: 332 et seq.), focuses on the disproportionate forces drawing attention to the need for an extra-human intervention in order for the clash to be resolved in favour of the Christians. In other words, the narrative promptly brings to light how the defence of Christendom can only be achieved through a miracle<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, men prostrate themselves with their faces on the ground and offer prayers to the Virgin who suddenly appears on a white cloud in the sky. She emerges on a white horse with a drawn sword as a guide for the Normans who have miraculously come to the infidel assault with Count Roger.

The battle is short and bloody – continues Pitrè –. The Saracens, overwhelmed by the unexpected multiplication of soldiers, are thrown into confusion. They break rank and finally retreat. They run towards the sea, die, drown, leaving the field free. Here, the Virgin’s banner still reads: *Ecce ad sum, civitas mea dilecta, protegam te dextera mea* (Pitrè 1900: 334).

In memory of the prodigious victory, Roger restored an “ancient temple” and consecrated it to the Virgin; in this place, the extraordinary event is loudly commemorated every year in Scicli with the staging of a performance.

In addition, Pitrè provides a description of this festive event following the 19<sup>th</sup> century custom, when this celebration used to take place on the Saturday preceding the Holy Week. The staging was put on just outside the town at the Oliveto

it explode while burning, thus blowing up the church. Mary puts out the flame and the candle opens by itself. The balls fall down and, in memory of the miracle, they are placed at the main entrance» (Pitrè 1900: 465-466). A popular song dedicated to the Madonna of Trapani about the aforementioned legends also evokes her miraculous intercessions to release Sicilians who had been captured and enslaved, and convert their masters to Christianity (Pitrè 1870-1871: II, n. 945, 242 ff.).

<sup>3</sup> About this and the other festivals presented in this essay, my objective is to highlight some specific traits consistent with the general topic, so their ethnography is not the matter of my contribution. All the festivals took place regularly until 2019 and they have been suspended during the Pandemic, except for the religious celebrations in the churches and a few small events which were broadcast in streaming and social media specifically devoted to the festivals.

<sup>4</sup> The motif of extra human intervention in the battle between Moors and Christians occurs in the tales of the Spanish *Reconquista*, represented as «a “crusade” conducted in the name of “true faith” and with the help of Christian saints» (Albert-Llorca 1998: 334).

plain. As for the characters, locals were seemingly set to portray the Christians, while actors from the neighbouring towns were cast in the roles of Muslims. Leaving aside plausibility, the contrast between good and evil as identity vs otherness is explained in relational terms depending on whose viewpoint is being presented. On a large scale, this polarity has an impact within the ideological confrontation between Christians and infidels, in which the former stands for Christendom as a whole against Islam; on a smaller scale, it bears on the staging and the *mise-en-scène*. So, fiction is obtained by inside/outside, in/out, Scicli/surrounding villages dichotomies, thus breaking down what is judged as being uniform on a different level.

Christians are guided by Roger, and the Saracens by Belcane, known as the “Turkish King”. At the beginning of the play, a messenger from Roger would pay a visit to the Muslim to ask him why he had landed in Sicily, urging him to leave. The Muslim would answer that Sicily belonged to him and the Normans had an obligation to pay him tribute. At this time, Roger and Belcane would come close moving away from their troops to get into a heated argument resulting in a declaration of war. By the time they had returned to their armies, the battle had already begun. The following description is by a folklorist at the end of the last century:

Saracen attacks are all about being quick enough at loading and unloading, but Christians always coordinate their actions: at the beginning, nobody will change their position; then, the mutual assaults begin proving to be a major hurdle to the Christians who find themselves in unfavourable positions and numerically unbalanced; so it is not uncommon for some of them to be surrounded by five or six enemies wildly firing at them. [...] Finally, when Saracens are mingled with Christians in a way that the latter are not able to evade the enemies to restore their groups, or when they are running out of ammunition, the Virgin comes to their aid (Morana 1880: 277).

Interestingly, the action was conceived in a way that the viewer could understand that, even in their attacks, the infidels were following a “different” code, as further evidence of their “otherness”. And if the latter always put their *esprit de corps* first, the former would even manifest their wickedness in their individual attacks. By the intercession of the Virgin, the infidels would eventually take a beating and run away «screaming hysterically, hurling terrible insults». At last, angels would descend on the field suspended from wooden beams bowing down three times before the Madonna. With reference to this scene, the description mentioned above also reports that angels used to be portrayed by three children, then replaced by three wooden figures, while three real children standing on a small altar dressed as angels started to sing chants in honour of the saviour Virgin.

Nowadays, the performance takes place on a large stage in the town’s main square. The setting shows a huge towered castle, namely Roger’s abode, next to some small commoners’ houses. Actors now perform in Italian, while in the past all the acting was in Sicilian. On the space in front of the castle rumours about a Saracen landing are spread by some fishermen and the lookout on duty. A hermit

claims to have had a vision in which the infidels had landed and abducted a girl. A messenger turns up confirming the incident and, from the top of the castle, the guards announce that the troops are marching on towards Scicli from the shores of Donnalucata. In fact, a vessel appears from the main streets, full of dark-skinned Saracens with thick sideburns, wearing turban-shaped hats, harem trousers, as well as carrying shields and scimitars. The ship stops at the bottom of the castle and some soldiers get off mocking the guards and the Norman. They demand tribute and return the abducted girl in exchange, as a demonstration of Belcane's noble spirit<sup>5</sup>. A dispute arises between the leaders of the two rival forces. Belcane stakes his claim on the island in a defiant, insolent attitude, and Roger majestically denies all rights. At some point, men from the two opposed formations make an advance that will end up instigating a fierce battle. When the "Turks" seem to be getting the better of the Christians, the Virgin appears announced by the sounds of a band. She is almost entirely wreathed in the smoke from the bursting firecrackers as she approaches on a horse with a drawn sword (it is a large statue portraying the Virgin on a white reared-up horse on the verge of treading upon two frightened Moors lying at the bottom with beseeching eyes). The enemy is therefore made to run off and an angel sings a hymn of thanksgiving<sup>6</sup>.

A sword dance, called *Tataratà*, is coreographed in Casteltermini (Agrigento) on the fourth Sunday of May during the Festa della Santa Croce (Feast of the Holy Cross). An even number of dancers varying from twelve to twenty, wearing "Moorish" costumes, white trousers, long shirts, head garlands and wrappings create a series of combat scenes performed in pairs to a ritualistic beat of drum. The dancers exchange sword strokes holding their weapon with both hands and hop around rhythmically, dodging each other in concentric circles. According to Paolo Toschi (1973: 575-576), this dance, performed as *moresca* – a genre which the academic, like others, considers as a historical reconstruction of archaic armed dances connected with fertility rites – is not merely perceived as a battle dramatisation, rather it is an example of peaceful cohabitation between Moors and Christians in the Norman age. Furthermore, the swords look like an evolution of the pestle, *spatula*, used for grinding the flax seeds cultivated in this area. Only the *spatulatura* (beaters), arranged in a corporation, were eligible to perform the dance in the past, since it was thought to simulate the beating of seeds (Bonanzinga 1992: 61). If on the one hand the undistinguished clothing does not make a contrast between two different "ethnic" groups, on the other, according to current popular interpretation, the dance stands for the triumph of the Christian faith over Islam, a tribute of the "infidels" to the Holy Cross (cp. Bonanzinga 1996: 21, cd).

The liberation from the Saracens is also hinted at with the *Campaniata di*

<sup>5</sup> The ostentatious display of the Moorish leader is also a recurring theme in Spanish *morescas* (cp. Albert-Llorca 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The celebration ends with a procession of the simulacrum which parades through the streets of the town and a large fireworks display. During the festival, local confectioneries bake a turban-shaped cream puff pastry filled with ricotta, called "testa di turcu" which translates to Turk's head.

*Sant'Agata* or *Catabbu*, announcing the novena prayer to Saint Agatha in Monforte San Giorgio (Messina) from 15<sup>th</sup> January to 7<sup>th</sup> February. Here, the opposition is retained through the sound of the bells as a «resonant symbol of Christianity» contrasting the drum, that is the «emblem» of Islam. The bell ringer sitting on a beam plays the bells by pulling the ropes connected to a clapper.

The camel walk calling up Roger's camel-riding, along with the arrival of the troops, the battle and the final thanksgiving *tarantella* are rendered realistically through timbres, rhythmic modules and dynamic alterations. The bell tower is the place where rhythms and timbres intertwine to reshape (the mythical) history through (ritual) sounds (Bonanzinga 1992: 99-100).

Some references to the relationship between Moors and Christians can also be found during the Festival of Our Lady of the Assumption in Messina on 15<sup>th</sup> August, when the *vara*, a large votive pyramid-shaped wagon representing the moment of assumption, is carried in procession. A couple of days before the procession two gigantic figures and a huge stuffed camel are paraded through the streets. These two figures must be analysed in detail for the purpose of the subject being presented. The Giant and the Giantess, locally known as *Lu Gilanti* and *A Gilantissa* are two huge wooden and paper mache equestrian statues portraying two warriors. The Giant resembles a black-bearded Moorish man wearing earrings, a laurel wreath on his head and armour over a white long-shirt. He holds a shield in his left hand and a cudgel in the other. The Giantess is a «big, moon-face benevolent woman» wearing a leafy flower crown on her hair tied back with a coloured ribbon. She wears a dress with an embroidered bodice and carries a bunch of flowers and a spear. The two characters are believed to have a strong connection with the founding legend of the city to such an extent that local scholars and historians have identified them variably as Mata and Grifone, Cam and Rea, Saturn and Cybele, Zancle and Rea<sup>7</sup>. The gigantic Moorish Grifone is traditionally said to have come to the Island from Africa to conquer the city, but instead fell in love with Mata, a young girl from Camaro, a small village on the Peloritanean Mountains. The «cruel anthropophagous» was finally «tamed» by love and the two of them got married and founded the city of Messina.

According to Curt Sachs (1966: 142), not only are weapon dances a choreographic stylisation of combat, but they are also the result of two combined forces generating an increased growth: a negative defence force and a positive phallic force. In this direction, Bonanzinga suggested putting a different interpretation on Mata and Grifone's tradition, as a

reversal of the moresca motif [...]. Rather than the «contrast», here it is the «nuptials»

<sup>7</sup> For various interpretations see: Pitrè 1900: 150; La Corte Cailler 1926; see Pitrè M. (1899: 533-554), and (1900: 65-99) for descriptions of the festival by Italian and foreign travellers, starting from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

which reveal the archaic substratum that in the *moresche* found its historical reconfiguration: dramatic expressions of fertility propitiatory performances, with both erotic and competitive connotations (Bonanzinga 1999: 89).

Beyond historical reconfigurations, the conflict is still perceived in some of the key features of the festival. All celebrations in honour of Our Lady of Assumption were resumed in 1926. We learn from Gaetano La Corte Cailler, who conducted his research on this special occasion, that at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a huge fifty-five-metre oval-shaped basin on Saint John plain – where Villa Mazzini covers much of the area today – was generally used to hand wash silk. The clergy used to finance the construction of a big vessel, called *la Galera*, in this basin, to celebrate the festival. Statues of soldiers in Moorish-style clothes were placed on the vessel as a memorial to some military undertakings against the Saracens (La Corte Cailler 1926 in Todesco, Molonia 1991: 115). Instead, the camel parading with the Giants in the days preceding 15<sup>th</sup> August is a reminder of the oppressors/oppressed opposition in ideological (other than physical) terms. A dromedary skin covering is modelled around a light wooden framework which provides the structure for the camel. The whole structure is animated by two men hidden inside who drive the camel around the city and who also had the job of collecting food donations in the past.

According to a certain tradition, the Camel evokes the animal on which Roger the Norman made his grand entrance to Messina after Christianity had finally been restored; as reported by historian Bonfiglio in *Messina città nobilissima* (1606), the animal was a symbol of Count Roger's victory. After routing the Moors, he triumphantly entered Messina revelling with his soldiers along with camels laden with remains.

However, La Corte Cailler believes that

the information provided by others is more reliable and holds true for the camel<sup>8</sup>, whose origins reportedly trace back to the times «when the Saracen domination oppressed our ancient people and the oppressors were tax collectors on camelback. This is what our local custom takes inspiration from if we think about the leaders of the fake animal. In fact, they tend to mimic the Saracens wearing similarly styled clothes while performing their traditional dances. They would take possession of what had been denied – almost alluding to the Saracens' greed – among the townsfolk cheering and shouting in excitement» (La Corte Cailler 1926 in Todesco, Molonia 1991: 133).

Essentially, the implication behind the camel imagery should take us back to the tax-collection mechanism during the Arab rule of Sicily. Pitrè recalls a popular Messinese saying: “*fari u Camiddhu*” (to do the camel), to refer to indiscriminate misappropriation of goods and objects.

<sup>8</sup> The author takes this quote from D. Ventimiglia's work, *Le feste secolari di Nostra Donna della Lettera in Messina*, Messina 1843.

A privileged observatory to zoom in on the ideology to an understanding of the relationship between Moors and Christians is the *opera dei pupi*, the traditional puppet theatre in southern Italy, whose repertoire comes straight from epic and chivalric literature, and especially from the Carolingian cycle. Initially, it was intended for a learned audience until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it became a popular form of entertainment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The best-known examples of chivalric literature in Sicily include Giusto Lodico's *Storia dei Paladini di Francia* from 1858, those of Pietro Manzanares from 1886, and those of Giuseppe Leggio from 1895<sup>9</sup>.

The Christian/Moor opposition in the knightly epic tale equals the good/evil duality, additionally referred to as truth/falsehood, loyalty/betrayal, piety/cruelty, beauty/ugliness. Moreover, traditions may sometimes allow the enemy to get involved in the positive connotation of the first word, whereas in popular literature actions are judged according to the characters who perform them. In other words, morality coincides with Christians, therefore similar actions will go through a separate evaluation process whether they come from Christians or Saracens (cp. Pasqualino 1977: 108-131).

From the perspective of subjects, figurative style, as well as the *mise-en-scène* codes and the typological and mechanical features of the puppet theatre, one can distinguish three main traditions: the "Palermitan" tradition pertaining to western Sicily, the "Catanese" tradition concerning the eastern part of the island, and the "Neapolitan" tradition, identifying Campania, Apulia and Calabria. Generally, with the help of his family, the *oprante* – namely the theatre owner who operated puppets – would organise the repertoire presenting a year-round cycle of performances that were acted out on a daily basis. They played only for working class people, whereas middle-class people would cause surprise among the public and attract many critical comments. According to the so-called *civil* people, puppetry is definitely a plebeian spectacle (Pitrè 1887-1888: I, 124).

Antonino Buttitta states that puppet theatre may be defined as one where a target audience has been deliberately identified, but also one where audiences have definitely created their own theatre<sup>10</sup>. Basically, it was a closed group sharing their own universe of values and a personal representation of life and the world that were paradigmatically confirmed in the puppet ideology. Performances would provide some behaviour patterns in which characters were indeed human types, seen as paradigms of human and social relationships used for categorising people in real life. As Pasqualino noted:

<sup>9</sup> G. Lodico, *Storia dei Paladini di Francia cominciando da Milone conte di Anglante fino alla morte di Rinaldo*, Palermo, G.B. Gaudio, 1858-1860, 4 vols.; P. Manzanares, *Storia dei Paladini di Francia da Pipino re alla battaglia di Roncisvalle facendo seguito la morte di Carlo Magno*, Palermo, Pedone Lauriel, 1886-1887, 2 vols.; G. Leggio, *Storia dei Paladini di Francia cominciando dal re Pipino alla morte di Rinaldo lavoro di Giuseppe Lodico con l'aggiunta di altri famosi autori*, Palermo, G. Leggio, 1895-96.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to the social and historical reasons for these transformations, and more generally, to the whole subject, cf. Buttitta 1977; Pasqualino 1977 and 1992.

An infamous traitor that one must not trust is called a Gano di Maganza. Someone rich and mean who is naturally misled by villains is a Charlemagne. A man who is powerful, loyal, faithful, serious, but not so shrewd, with little or no luck with women is called a Roland, whilst on the other hand, a rebel, strong, playful and astute man, who is also very flirtatious and ready to handle any situation is nicknamed Renaud. Lastly, Astolfo is a popular nickname for a generous and cheerful braggart (Pasqualino 1977: 40).

The subject matter of puppet theatre is as an essential component to modelise the real world, in which Roland and Renaud are regarded as two of the most prominent figures who split the public into groups of supporters and opposers.

This separation – as suggested by Buttitta – clearly reflects two distinctive, opposed visions of the world: one, revealed by Renaud, in which the power of traditional authority serves as a symbol of injustice and disorder; the other, modelled by Roland, which identifies power structures as a defining element to balance the social universe. Of these two different ideologies the *opra* world would offer mythical representations, where myth appears to be the answer to the expressed needs (Buttitta 1977: 13).

For the subject at hand, unlike the Palermitan tradition, puppetry in Catania is enriched with cycles of plays such as *Erminio della stella d'oro*, *Uzeta il Catanese*, *Guido di Santa Croce*, *Farismane e Siface*<sup>11</sup>. This different repertoire leads to some further considerations. The Catanese plays depict two different types of Moorish characters. Two examples of the first type are Rodomonte and Diamante from Spain, from the *Storia dei paladini di Francia* and *Erminio della stella d'oro* cycles. Ariosto's character Rodomonte (cantos XIV-XVIII) is also featured in a new first-time episode: after entering Paris, he kills anyone standing in his way until an angel from God appears to him in the guise of Renaud<sup>12</sup> and manages to halt his advance. Diamante appears in the adventures of Tigreleone, son of Erminio in *Erminio della stella d'oro*. On Tigreleone's tenth birthday, other than the major Christian representatives, Diamante – the powerful Moorish king of Spain – is also invited to hold a big celebration in his honour. On this occasion, Diamante falls in love with Sciura, King Leone's beautiful daughter and niece of the King of France. When the

<sup>11</sup> Despite being inspired by epic-chivalric literature, these cycles introduce previously unknown stories and episodes, through more vivid and fully-themed imagery. Complete bibliographical references used include: Salvatore Patané: *Erminio delle Stella d'oro e Gemma della Fiamma. Guerre ed avventure mediovali* (sic), Palermo, G. Leggio Editore, 1896; Giuseppe Malfa, *Uzeta il Catanese e Magilola di Catane ovvero Ferrandino Sant'Aquila*, Palermo, G. Leggio Editore, n.d. (early 20cen.); *Guido di Santa Croce* was written by Costantino Catanzaro and published in Palermo as a four-volume work by publisher G. Leggio: *Guido di Santa Croce e le reali avventure di Leondoro e Fiammetta con i sorprendenti fatti del Principe Fulminato* (1904); *Storia di Guido di Santa Croce con i parti di Trovato e Spagnoletto*, (n. d. but: 1904-1905); *Valentino e Germina sèguito al Guido di Santa Croce* (1905); *Orientale delle Stelle ovvero i quattro Cavalieri della Morte, sèguito al Guido di Santa Croce e Valentino e Germina* (1906). For a detailed literary account including the Catanese puppet theatre cp. Alessandro Napoli's documented work (Napoli 2002).

<sup>12</sup> According to the Catanese tradition, Renaud is actually the only knight feared by Diamante.

girl rejects his love, he attacks Lione's city in revenge, and after killing her father before her eyes, he abducts her and takes her to Madrid, where she is held captive. She is then brutally tortured until she is offered to drink from a cup made from the skull of the French king's son, namely her cousin. Meanwhile, all Christian princes allied against the Moor have besieged Madrid, though Diamante manages to kill the most valiant knights. But Tigreleone comes to turn the tide of the battle<sup>13</sup> and saves Sciura in extremis as she is about to be beheaded. Puppeteers from Catania called the torture scene *the martyrdom of Sciura*<sup>14</sup> and used to stage it realistically to the extent that the audience was not spared seeing blood or smoke rising from the hot iron (cp. Napoli 2002).

So, Rodomonte and Diamante are both very negative characters and they are portrayed as having very dark complexions, negroid traits, long sideburns, gnashing teeth and wearing an earring. Furthermore, Rodomonte's scale armour highlights the feeling of *otherness* in comparison to the opposing warrior who wears metal armour in any case. Diamante from Spain looks very much like Rodomonte, but in addition, he wears a turban, armour and harem trousers. Equally, other characters depict the Moorish paradigm as a negative symbol of evil, such as Ulieno of Sarza (Rodomonte's father), Polos (a Saracen killed by Uzeta the Catanese), Scerinoff king of Algeria (from the *Erminio della stella d'oro* cycle, killed by Luigi Sofia under the walls of Taormina).

The fact that the skin colour is not a hallmark of negativity per se – despite still recalling otherness – is borne out by an additional group of characters who, although depicted as Moors, allow other opposing pairs to come into play. This group of Moorish characters is the second type in the Catanese tradition, who are regarded as sorts of embodiments of the myth of the noble savage. Two examples of this type are Ideo Selvaggio and Lupo, who live wandering in the woods until a king (respectively Soranzo of Russia in the *Erminio* cycle and Arcibaldo of Tartary, from the *Uzeta* cycle) finds them and puts them at his disposal. They act like real Saracen heroes of extraordinary strength, brave warriors against Christian heroes and they have earned respect and admiration from the audience. They always have the most valorous death in a battle, but their noble spirit as leading figures of an uncorrupted nature is the key for redemption. As a matter of fact, they are baptised at the point of death and cleansed from the sin of fighting amongst the “infidels”.

Noble privateers Bacail and Perì, two characters from the *Guido di Santa Croce* cycle, are black Christians as well. In one episode of the cycle, set in Tunis, «foul and ugly argalif» Semar attempts to dishonour his servant Irma and orders his slave Bacail to take the girl to the garden. Bacail falls in love with Irma, though, who reciprocates his feelings and they manage to escape together. But they are both captured, and Irma takes her own life so as not to betray her loved one. The slave

<sup>13</sup> The incident occurs shortly after the birthday party and Tigreleone is in fact a child wearing a child armour, as reported by puppeteers.

<sup>14</sup> Based on the “martyrdom” of Saint Agatha, the patron saint of Catania.

is imprisoned but manages to kill his prison warden, and after putting the man's clothes on, he manages to break out. He avenges Irma's death by killing Semar and eventually leaves Tunis. He succeeds in becoming the leader of a pirate band and one night Irma appears in a dream, exhorting him to become a Christian, saying that he will turn into a «champion of the Cross, helper and defender of baptised heroes» (Napoli, 2002). Perì follows in his wake. He is a slave to Roger V of Spain and saves his sovereign from two giants by strangling them. He is found again, old and ill and committed to honouring Guy from Santa Croce during a battle under the walls of Vienna in the *Valentino e Germina* story. He is fatally injured, but Saint Guy appears to welcome him into Heaven. Another «good black Christian» is Ali, a character from *Farismane e Siface* who has a combination of Bacail's and Perì's traits. As a leader of a pirate band, he is arrested by King Celidio II of Caesarea, experiences conversion to the "real faith" and is appointed Captain General of his army by the king. He is to be the defender of all the heroes whom he comes across in the whole play (cp. Napoli 2002).

Posters (*cartelli*) also had references to the repertoire from the puppet theatre<sup>15</sup>. The *oprante* used to have them painted by a qualified painter and they displayed them outside the theatre so that goers could be informed about the scheduled episodes performed at night. In line with the two Sicilian theatrical traditions, advertising boards had two distinct styles too. In Palermo, they were all painted with temperas on canvas and divided into eight frames (sometimes ten or twelve), each portraying a different episode of the cycle<sup>16</sup>. Instead, the Catanese posters were painted on brown paper and focused on one single episode from the cycle<sup>17</sup>. Hence, theatres in Catania had a much larger number of *cartelli* at hand (cp. Vibaek 1985: 229-248; D'Agostino 1996: 66-76). To this end, the posters mainly set out to tell complex episodes through narrative segments, while painting was based on a particular expressive code and specific grammar and syntax. The painter had to be able to give a perfect visual rendition of the event he wanted to represent using just a few simple brush strokes. In general, compared to the elements drawn from the Palermitan model to identify Saracens and Christians, in Catania different types of facial hair styles are also noticeable (in accordance with the local puppets). In fact, while puppets in Palermo have their moustache painted with downward pointing ends (*calati*), the ones in the Catanese theatres retain a more traditional shape. However, paintings showing Moors on the *cartelli* are primarily based on their clothing style. Saracens wear harem trousers underneath their armour and turbans or round helmets bearing crescent moon signs on top, and

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Giuseppe Aiello from what was formerly the Department for Cultural Heritage at the University of Palermo, with whom I have discussed these subjects many times – who passed away prematurely. I hereby wish to mention that I hold him in my greatest esteem and affection. I also had privileged conversations with *opra* expert and researcher Alessandro Napoli, a cousin of the Napoli brothers, the illustrious family of *pupari* from Catania, with whom he shares a great passion for puppetry.

<sup>16</sup> Average sizes range from 1.30mt to 1.70mt in width and 2mt or so in height.

<sup>17</sup> Here average sizes range from 1.80mt to 2mt in width and 1.40mt to 1.50mt in height.

sometimes they are armed with scimitars. Upper-class warriors and nobles from the sultan's retinue are recognised by the same signs as those on the puppets' shields. The skin colour is an additional common distinctive trait. In Palermo, the puppets portraying Saracen rank-and-file soldiers are black-skinned individuals, as are the ordinary soldiers identified as Turkish mercenaries (even though, historically they were enlisted from the Ethiopian and Nubian areas). On the other hand, light-skinned individuals make up most of the higher-ranked warriors with the notable exception of King Salatiello. Remarkably, on a late 19<sup>th</sup> century *cartello* titled *Rizzieri all'assedio di Roma* (at Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino, Palermo), the scenes from a battle under castle walls show Turks with negroid physical traits, wearing lobe earrings and armed with scimitars. They are Saracen mercenaries and, as supporters of the enemies of the Church, they are considered to be twofold enemies. Therefore, when compared with Christians, traits are supposed to be clearly distinguishable, whereby a Saracen soldier in the regular army is usually portrayed as having lighter skin than Turks, but a little darker than Christians.

Due to its close connection with narration and staging, *cartelli* painting offers an extensive figurative repertoire in which all Saracen, Turkish, gigantic or savage opponents are armed within appropriate objects not conforming to regular military equipment, such as a toothed sword, a stick, or a cudgel<sup>18</sup>. However, there seem to be some exceptions to this: Dudone della Mazza, son of Uggeri the Danish ("mazza" may be translated as "club" or "cudgel"), Viviano del Bastone (meaning "the stick") and Charles Martel (intended as "hammer"), namely all characters with positive connotations in the *opra* ideology. Actually, the spurious implication of their equipment is cancelled and made into a personal attribute and name, as a distinctive feature of their identity<sup>19</sup>.

The puppet theatre has also inspired cart paintwork. While the constituent and stylistic solutions of *cartelli* art are strictly related to stage works and puppets, the tradition of cart painting is more independent when compared with both storytelling and its staging. For this reason, it was not unusual to hear puppeteers blame cart painters for not knowing the repertoire of the chivalric epic poems. As for cart painting, it was introduced around the end of 1820s, and up until 1850s the figurative repertoire mainly included pictures of saints and fruit and flower baskets. Between the 1860s and the 1870s, this popular form of art developed its own defined language in which chivalry-themed subject matters were a prime focus (cp. Buttitta 1961: 185-200)<sup>20</sup>. The cart, covered in painted scenes progressively turned

<sup>18</sup> Notably, Grifone, the Moorish giant from the festival of Our Lady of the Assumption in Messina carries the same kind of "weapon".

<sup>19</sup> About nicknames in cultural traditions and the process out of which peculiarity is supposedly secured to «perpetual immobility» by «identifying the main [...] individual trait», cp. Cirese 1976: 21 ff.

<sup>20</sup> The reasons for the progressive growth of cart painting, which prompted many qualified painters to set up their studios in several areas, are related to the implementation of a road network for wheeled cargo transport systems in order to surpass marine transport and mule trips. Other reasons also include

into the distinctive pattern of a social class aiming to stand out as an elite group in the peasant community.<sup>21</sup> In other words, it went from serving as a means of transport to being a status symbol-embodied proof of privilege.

Each side of the cart is divided into two panels (*scacchi*), on which the artist would paint events hugely inspired by the carvings coming with the works of the above mentioned chivalric literature in Sicily.<sup>22</sup> Not only would the painter keep to those illustrations, he would also put multiple events together. Some of the paintings were also drawn from other iconographical sources and sketched on a sheet of paper as draft models (*vilina*) to be used during the creation process. From that moment on, the *vilina* became part of the workshop's iconographical archive as a transmissible practical guide (see D'Agostino 1991: 365-388 and *passim*).

Looking at the events painted on the sides of the cart, Moors and Christians are more recognisable by their clothes and emblems, rather than their complexion. This choice has been clarified by the last cart painters still in business who give technical explanations of it. Black is generally not found on palettes. Instead, it is used for drawing outlines and writing captions with relevant information: the name of the craft workshop, the titles of the episodes, along with the name of the people who have worked on the cart, such as the carver and the painter. Painters agree that any other use of black would cause a "hole-effect" (*pirtusu*), meaning it would make the illustration flat with no clear outlines. Actually, they even avoided painting black horses (and still do), including Renaud's horse, which was reportedly black but appeared to have a bay coat on the painted scenes.

In the illustrations, however, Christians and Saracens are easily distinguishable; a Saracen is arguably a *function* of a hero's endeavour, and this hero is always a Christian. Symbolic and ornamental scenes are primarily focused on actions with epic and mythical connotations. It must be noted that the figurative repertoire of cart painting has followed a number of different trends and styles which reflect the painter's and client's personal tastes. Their active role in choosing the subjects, along with their pursued goal of a commissioned painting for *their own* cart as a status symbol have influenced the repertoire, and artists have gone through a process of revision in compliance with tradition. The dissemination of popular and press publications (historical novels, *Storia d'Italia*, published by Nerbini, in Florence, periodicals such as «La Domenica del Corriere» and others) has had an effect on this. Progressively, it has introduced some new themes other than chivalry, or even replaced the repertoire.<sup>23</sup> In addition to that, as a means of *transport*, a cart was certainly not immune to signs of wear, so the surviving specimens in private and public collections mainly date from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite bearing

a boosted economy deriving from the Bourbon reformist policy, which allowed the birth and recovery of several handicraft activities (cp. Buttitta 1979: 11-37).

<sup>21</sup> As carters and cart-makers cp. Guggino 1978.

<sup>22</sup> See note 8.

<sup>23</sup> For a social-historical reconstruction of the repertoire cp. Buttitta 1961: 151-200 and Buttitta 1985: 251-270.

testament to the evolution of themes, they are not broadly representative samples of chivalry-themed paintings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cp. D'Agostino 1991: *passim*). Some scenes are inspired by the opera repertoire, or draw from Roman and Italian history, especially in popular illustrated publications dating back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years, cart painting has moved back to puppetry and towards popular culture, bringing knightly legends back to the fore once again. The few workshops that are still crafting carts, or have started working again, choose to depict the most memorable episodes. In doing so, they only sketch in the broad outlines for the reconstruction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century chivalric repertoire based on elderly people's memories.

Finally, to come back to theatre, there is a strict rule that Moors are to be placed on the left hand side of the stage, and Christians on the right (according to the puppeteer's point of view). The *pupari* think this position is related to a conventional procedure and assume it as a "natural" fact. Not fully aware of the ideological meaning hidden in such convention, they continue to propose the opposition between East and West, as another way to perpetuate the opposition between right and left, good and evil<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> See Hertz 1909.

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