

# **The Good Woman: The Prostitute as Other in Two Eurasian Tales**

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Eleonora Buonocore and Mark Holum

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the concept of otherness through the examination of two stories of prostitutes playing tricks on their marks and then being tricked in return. The first comes from the classical Indian novel the *Daskumaracarita*, and concerns the greatest prostitute of them all, and the attempts to hoist her by her own petard. The second, which is likely on a similar source, comes from the famous medieval Italian collection of tales by Boccaccio, the *Decameron*, where we find a prostitute cheating a merchant and getting cheated in return due to her own greed. We examine how despite the vast gulf medieval India and medieval Italy, the figure of the prostitute still emerges as the other, both because of her gender and her chosen profession. We explore the connection between otherness and deceit, and show how these “others,” women of disrepute and their marks, enable a critique of the concept of virtue and skill. What does it mean to be a “good” prostitute, or an honorable woman? Can one be simultaneously virtuous and cunning? Can one be honorable and clever? Is there a difference between a virtuous woman and an honorable man?

## **Keywords**

Italy, India, Medieval Tales, Women, Otherness.



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The importance of the transmission of narratives across medieval Eurasia, from c. 500 – 1500, is both widely acknowledged and rarely examined, particularly by the literary critics of the various traditions. Moreover, most such work is interested in the genealogy of stories, in tracing how individual stories moved, and not in the close comparative analysis of medieval stories.<sup>1</sup> This is hardly surprising since few scholars are conversant in multiple traditions and the multiple languages of medieval storytelling. In this paper, an Italianist and an Indologist collaborated to examine an example of the same tale, or perhaps tale type, in two very different historical and geographical contexts. Instead of focusing on the origins or the specifics of the transmission of this story, we use the tale to investigate how the concept of otherness

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<sup>1</sup> There are number of examples of Indian stories whose travels across Eurasia can be traced in the literary evidence, most notably the life of the Buddha, which would become the western saints' life of *Joseph and Barlaam*, as well as the Jewish story *Mishle Sendabar*. cf. Arilson Silva Oliveira, "A literatura europeia entre a fábula religiosa indiana e um Buda defraudado" *Horizonte* 13, no. 37 (2010): 504-524 and Morris Epstein "'Mishle Sendabar': New Light on the Transmission of Folklore from East to West," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 27 (1958): 1-17.

plays out differently in the contexts of 7th century India and 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, and yet how this concept might be perceived as one because it comes out of the same plot. In particular, we examine two tales of prostitutes playing tricks on their marks and then being tricked in return. The first comes from the classical VII c. Indian novel the *Daśakumāracarita* by the South Indian poet Daṇḍin, and concerns the triumph and ultimate defeat of a courtesan at the hands of a disguised prince. The second comes from the 1350 Italian collection of tales by Giovanni Boccaccio, the *Decameron*, and tells of a prostitute deceiving a merchant and ending up getting cheated in return due to her greed. This article argues that, in both stories, the figure of the courtesan emerges as a conceptual other with respect to the social context in which she lives. Her deceitful nature is a force of destabilization which must be tamed, so that the “natural” order of society can be reestablished. Yet, the courtesan, particularly the great courtesan, is at the same time a figure of admiration. She is a master at her trade, in the same manner as her clients, and thus inherently belongs in that same elite or mercantile society that pushes her to the margin. This article thus asks how this dichotomy is possible. How can honor and deceit, adulation and condemnation, inclusion and exclusion coexist with regard to a single person in the same tale? There is no doubt that the story of the talented prostitute was popular in both Medieval India and Italy, but our aim is to tease apart the similarities and differences in how this story was presented in both of these cultures, and in so doing examine the continuities and fractures in how alterity was conceptualized in two different cultures of the Middle Ages.

Given that the same trope is present in both the *Daśakumāracarita* and in the *Decameron*, it is tempting to imagine a genealogical link between the two texts. It is not possible to trace the specific antecedents of the Boccaccio *novella* back to its Indian instantiation. On the other hand, it might be possible to find some common sources or some avenue of transmission. Certainly, there were medieval European authors who

were aware of story texts of Indian origin, transmitted through Middle Persian and Arabic translations. The Italian critic Vittore Branca already identified the 12<sup>th</sup> c. Iberian Arabized Jewish author Petrus Alfonsis and his *Disciplina Clericalis* as the most probable origin of the plot of Boccaccio's story. The *Disciplina Clericalis* was a compilation and a translation into Latin of Arabic courtly sources from Al-Andalus, and specifically the 15<sup>th</sup> story, the *Exemplum de decem cofris* (The Exemplary Tale of the Ten Chests.)<sup>2</sup> That story uses the motif of the trickster tricked to show how persons aspiring to holiness can overcome unjust commercial cheating using their own guile. In this story, the help comes to the holy person by means of a wise woman. It is unclear where Petrus Alfonsi found this original for this tale, although the sources for others of his stories can be identified in collections like *Kalila wa-Dimna*, ultimately a translation and adaptation of the Indian *Pancatantra*, *Barlaam and Josaphat*, a hagiographical account based on the life of the Buddha, and *Mishle Sendebār*.<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio takes only the most general plotlines, changes all the details and modifies the setting in order to fit his agenda, to create an ethic for a society of merchants, such as that of 14<sup>th</sup> c. Florence, and at the same time to challenge it by means of a metanarrative<sup>4</sup>. We argue that the point of contention in both stories across diverse

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<sup>2</sup> On Boccaccio's uses of Latin *florilegia* and collections of stories as sources for the *Decameron* see Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio medievale* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1975) and Douglas Radcliff-Umstead, "Boccaccio's Adaptation of Some Latin Sources for the Decameron," *Italica* 45, no. 2 (1968): 171-194. More recently, see Olivia Holmes, "Beyond Exemplarity: Women's Wives from the *Disciplina clericalis* to the *Decameron*," in *Boccaccio 1313-2013* (Ravenna: Longo, 2015), 213-223.

<sup>3</sup> For *Kalila wa-Dimna*, we refer to Thomas Ballantine Irving, *Kalilah and Dimnah: an English version of Bidpai's fables based upon ancient Arabic and Spanish manuscripts*, (Newark, Del: Lingua Text, 2015). For *Mishle Sendabar*, see the following edition: Morris Epstein, *Tales of Sendebār = Mishle Sendabar* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967). For *Barlaam and Josaphat*, see Guy De Cambrai, and Penny MacCracken, *Barlaam and Josaphat: a Christian tale of the Buddha*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> On how Boccaccio challenges narrative structures by means of metanarrative one can see Millicent Marcus, *An Allegory of Form: Literary Self-Consciousness in the Decameron* (Saratoga, Calif : Anma

social backgrounds and diverse historical periods becomes the universal human relationship between virtue and skill, and between art and moral character. We will investigate how in both stories prostitute is portrayed as skillful, so good at her own art to become arrogant, and therefore to be susceptible to being tricked in return. Her role at the margin of society, as the other, is crucial in this portrayal, as she can only be tricked because she does not belong to the same social circles of the people that she interacts with, yet she can only execute her function by being at the margin. The prostitute is quintessentially the other, as it will become evident in the story of Kāmamañjarī.

### **The Prostitute in a Medieval Indian Tale: Daṇḍin's Kāmamañjarī**

A crucial issue in medieval Indian culture was the conflict between what is called *dharma* and what is called *svadharma*. *Dharma* means virtue in this context, *sva* is the Sanskrit prefix meaning self, and thus *svadharma* means one's own *dharma*, the virtue that pertains particularly to oneself. India was a society divided into castes, genders, languages, and religious communities, all of whom were supposed to act in very specific ways. Thus the question naturally arose, is there a general system of virtue, or does every social group have an ethical system of its own that determines right and wrong for that group? What happens if those particular ethical systems come into conflict? And what happens if those particular moral systems are destructive of society as a whole?<sup>5</sup>

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Libri, 1979). In the chapter on the second day and the wheel of fortune she links prostitutes and tricks, specifically referring to the tale of Andreuccio da Perugia, *Decameron* II, 5. As we will see later, the tale of Andreuccio da Perugia and that of Salabaetto and Iancofiore in *Decameron* VIII, 10 are closely related.

<sup>5</sup> For a more extended discussion of these issues, and their history in India, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. *The Origins of Evil in Indian Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980)

These questions are fundamental to Indian culture, and they form the central paradox of the great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, in which the heroes' *svadharma*, their need to retake their kingdom, mandates the destruction of the world. While a discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, we argue that the *Daśakumāracarita* contains a story that provides an interesting perspective in these issues. In particular, this story focuses on a character whose *svadharma*, it will be argued, is precisely to destroy other people's virtue, the prostitute.

The *Daśakumāracarita*, the great 7<sup>th</sup> century novel by the Southern intellectual Daṇḍin, is a story of ten princes and their various journeys.<sup>6</sup> While the stories intersect to some extent, in general each prince's tale forms a separate narrative, in much the same manner as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This paper is concerned with the story of one of these princes, Upahāravarman, who in the course of the tale crosses paths with the greatest courtesan in the world, Kāmamañjarī. At the beginning of his section of the novel, Prince Upahāravarman is wandering in search of his father. He decides to visit an ascetic named Marīci, who has the capacity to see anything in the universe and thus might know his father's location, but when he arrives at the hermitage, the ascetic tells him that he cannot help him, for he has lost all his powers. He then tells the prince this story: A short while ago he was in his hermitage when he noticed an extraordinarily beautiful woman followed by a large crowd of followers. The woman begged him for asylum as the crowd arrived, led by her mother. The woman was apparently the courtesan Kāmamañjarī, and she had decided to cease her life as a courtesan and live

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and Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there is no standard edition of the *Daśakumāracarita*. All quotations are translated by the author from the 1931 Bombay edition, Dandin, *The Dasakumaracharita of Dandin*, ed. by Pandit Kṛṣṇa Shastri, (Bombay: Gangavishnu Shrikrśnadas Press, 1931). Citations are given by page number in this edition. The story of Upahāravarman is the second chapter of the second volume of the work.

as a virtuous ascetic, thus following the path of general virtue, but simultaneously utterly forsaking her *svadharma*. When her mother, who was also acting as her madam, complained that in doing so she was consigning her entire family to starvation, Marīci reassured the older woman that Kāmamañjarī should be allowed to try, since undoubtedly, she could not withstand the harsh rigors of the ascetic life.

The mother agrees and departs, followed by all her dependents. Kāmamañjarī, however, defying all odds, becomes the model ascetic, and Marīci, totally entranced by her beauty and her virtue, falls madly in love with her. One day, Kāmamañjarī gives a learned discourse on how utterly pointless pleasure is next to virtue. Marīci is so entranced that he grabs Kāmamañjarī and kisses her. He comes with her to the city and becomes a dandy, losing his ascetic powers, his *siddhis*, which are dependent on his maintaining celibacy. One day there is a festival and everyone gathers in the park in the city, and as Kāmamañjarī and Marīci enter, a woman cries, “I am defeated.” The king enquires about what has happened and learns that the woman and Kāmamañjarī had a bet on who was the greatest prostitute, which Kāmamañjarī won by seducing the sage. Everyone wishes Kāmamañjarī well on such a great feat, and Kāmamañjarī then abandons Marīci to his fate.

The prince on hearing this story continues on to the city, which, he discovers, is a hotbed of sin and corruption, the novel itself continues in a different direction, but as part of this story Kāmamañjarī, and her mother, get their comeuppance at the hand of the prince. They are told of a magic bag into which they can put all their money, which will then disappear but will be magically multiplied after a time. They steal this bag, and put in their money. They do not, however, realize that the prince is in fact a master thief. Every night, he goes into their house by stealth, and removes the money from the bag. The two women perceive this as the bag’s magic, and continue to put money inside, until in the end they are utterly destitute.

This is a story that involves two tricks and two tricksters, but it is primarily a story about virtue. Marīci is seduced, reduced from his august celibacy, because he is so entranced not by Kāmamañjarī's beauty, but by her ability to feign utter virtue, to perfectly model the *dharma* of an ascetic devotee of the god Śiva. Here is how the text describes Kāmamañjarī's life with the sage:

That woman took on a difficult form of devotion wearing white clothes and not cleaning her body too much, and she filled the troughs of young forest trees, and she worked hard in gathering the masses of flowers for worshipping the gods, she made offerings of many forms and she chanted, sung, danced, lit lamps, burned incense and gave garlands in the worship of Śiva, and she surreptitiously told herself stories of the three aims of life, and by all this in no time at all she caused that sage to fall in love. (Dandin, 90)

The description here is typical of female ascetics and is perhaps a reference to the other great examples of beautiful devotees of the god in the Sanskrit literature of Daṇḍin's time, Śakuntalā from Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā*, and Śvetarasa from Bāṇa's *Kādambarī*. Daṇḍin goes beyond these earlier depictions when he portrays the moment of Kāmamañjarī's seduction of the sage. Notably, she excites Marīci, in spirit and in body, through a logical argument in the style of Indian philosophical texts, most notably in the commentary tradition of the various *Dharmasūtras*.<sup>7</sup> The argument is as follows:

Certainly compared to *Dharma*, *Kāma* [pleasure] and *Artha* [wealth] are worth nothing at all. *Dharma* needs nothing else; its cause springs from the bliss of salvation and it is accomplished only through perfection of the self. It is not too concerned with external matters as wealth and love are. And growing from seeing things as they truly are, it is not blocked by *artha* and *kāma*... and even if it is disturbed it is easily regained. (Dandin, 91)

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<sup>7</sup> cf. *Gautama dharma sūtram = Gautama Dharma sutra, with Maskari bhashya* (Varanasi: Chowkamba Press, 1967).

She then lists a series of deities and heroes who had an illicit love affair but regained their virtue afterwards, for instance, Bhrahman with Tilottamā, Śiva with the wives of the sages, Viṣṇu with 60 thousand king's wives, and Prajāpatī with his own daughter! "So I don't think *artha* and *kāma* even touch a hundredth part of *dharma*," she concludes.

Cleverly, Kāmamañjarī subverts the style of Sanskrit theological texts, śāstra, to her own purpose. While she is using rather common examples in Sanskrit literature, she specifically chooses situations in which males improperly seduce women whom they should not sleep with. Implicitly, Marīci becomes more and more sexually excited as Kāmamañjarī gives her speech.

It is Kāmamañjarī's mastery over the techniques of dharma that gives her the ability to subvert dharma. This, subversion, however, is the very essence of Kāmamañjarī's *svadharmā*. The *svadharmā* of a prostitute is in fact related to Marīci by Kāmamañjarī's mother. She must know for instance the science of health, *Ayurveda*: "Beginning from her birth taking care of her body, and nurturing it with the right amount of food balancing the humors, the fires, and the bodily essences and inspiring the intellect, good color, strength and radiance." She must have "complete familiarity in rhetoric and writing as well as in the arts of perfume, gourmet, drawing, dancing, speaking, singing, and acting," which is the science called *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as well as "Knowledge, only in the practical applications, of grammar, logic, and allegory." A courtesan should "give herself only to those who are financially independent, or for great fame she should give herself to one who is not independent but who is very virtuous or extremely knowledgeable, or she should have an affair with a minor and get the money from his father." (*Dundin*, 88). Ultimately the prostitute uses the skills of the elite: science, logic, medicine, astrology, business science, in order to enthrall

and trap the elite that is defined by the mastery of those skills. Her *svadharma* is to subvert, and Kāmamañjarī is a master of subversion.

Kāmamañjarī, however, is in the end defeated, and she defeated through a trick. One wonders how such a master of subversion could be tricked so easily. To some extent, it is because of her greed, and Kāmamañjarī's is a part of her *svadharma*, and thus is inexorably linked to her character. However, there is another aspect of Kāmamañjarī's ultimate defeat, and that is that the prince himself proves to be an even greater master of deceit. To defeat Kāmamañjarī, and in general to restore virtue to a town whose lack of virtue is exemplified by the great prostitute, the prince of the story must become a thief. In other words, he must adopt onto himself the same sort of low social position that Kāmamañjarī occupies. He is remarkably successful in doing so. In fact, he will go on to play another trick on the lecherous king of the city, and in so doing steal his kingdom.

The skills of a thief are not so different from those of a king. He must be skilled at words, powerful in martial arts, and clever in dangerous situations, properties that the prince exemplifies. The reason the prince can be a good thief is that he will be a good king. Perhaps, the story argues, there is not such a great difference between thieves and kings, given that each gain the wealth that sustains them by effectively stealing from those subservient to them, the courtesan through her charm, and the king through his taxes.

The prince's victory can be better understood in the light of an argument that Daud Ali has presented in his book *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*.<sup>8</sup> Ali argues that talent in India was a matter of public affirmation. This

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<sup>8</sup> As in this article, Ali explores the use of the literary texts to understand the political culture of first millennium South Asia. Daud Ali, (2004). *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Medieval South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

notion can be clearly observed at play in Daṇḍin's story. When Kāmamañjarī defeats Marīci, she is celebrated by the assembled multitude in the park. When the prince defeats Kāmamañjarī, he is equally publicly celebrated for his skill. Talent is an aesthetic form in the *Daśakumāracarita*, and in general in medieval India. It is appreciated in public by those cognoscenti who have the ability to recognize its qualities. Crucially, the category of "those cognoscenti" must include the very people who read the *Daśakumāracarita*. The readers are supposed to admire Kāmamañjarī's successes just as they will admire the skill with which the prince defeats her.

In this light, we can better understand that the reason why Kāmamañjarī can be defeated is ultimately because she does not possess a talent that equals that of the prince. She might be the greatest courtesan in the world, but the prince is a better thief, and ultimately a better king. Virtue is reestablished because the destroyer of virtue, the figure whose *svadharma* is to defeat virtue, is ultimately less effective than the prince whose *svadharma* is to reestablish it. The *Daśakumāracarita* story is therefore one of comfort. It reminds those in power, those who have ability and time to learn how to truly admire the arts of a thief, a prostitute, and a king, that they are ultimately more knowledgeable and more effective than the forces of chaos whom they must control. In some sense, because of their aesthetic sense, their ability to appreciate a good story and a good trick, they have the power to preserve social hierarchy. *Svadharma* can be subservient dharma for the simple reason that those whose *svadharma* is to destroy the social order are less talented than those whose role is to preserve it.

### **Prostitutes and Merchants in Medieval Italy:**

#### **A Tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.**

A similar story can be found in the last story of the eighth day of Boccaccio's ten-day story collection, the *Decameron*, whose theme aptly refers to "those tricks that

women are always playing on men, or men on women” (*The Decameron*, 643). This short story is told by Dioneo, the last of the storytellers, who has the unique privilege of not having to respect the theme of the day.<sup>9</sup> In this story though, Dioneo does follow the theme, and even more, he immediately and boldly claims his story will be the most entertaining of the day due to the extreme nature of the trick that is played on a consummate trickster. What sets Dioneo’s story apart is the double reversal that takes place in it. The ultimate victim of the trick is a woman, who is herself a mistress, a *maestra*, of the art of deceiving others. In Dioneo’s wording: “[...] for the woman who was tricked was a greater mistress in the art of deception than any of the dupes, whether men or women, you have told us about so far” (*The Decameron*, 737).<sup>10</sup> Not only does she possess the art of cheating, but she was, Dioneo claims, a greater trickster than any other of the protagonists of the tales of the eighth day.

After such an enticing introduction though, Dioneo does not immediately begin his narration. Rather, he launches into a complex digression explaining the common practice in coastal cities of keeping a record of all the merchandise that is exchanged and stored there, a custom whose Italian name “dogana” derives from the Arabic *dīwān* which can be roughly translated in English as “the office” or “the registry,” which in

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<sup>9</sup> Dioneo’s privilege consists also in the ability not to use it, see Emma Grimaldi, *Il privilegio di Dioneo: l’eccezione e la regola nel sistema Decameron* (Napoli: Ed. scientifiche italiane, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> For the *Decameron* I use the Italian text edited by Branca, in Giovanni Boccaccio and *Decameron I -2 edited by Vittorio Branca*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1987) shortened as *Decameron*. For the English text, instead, I used Wayne A. Rebhorn’s translation. Giovanni Boccaccio *The Decameron* translated by Wayne A. Rebhorn, (New York: W W Norton, 2017) from now on shortened as *The Decameron*. In the original Italian, note the emphasis on the word *beffa*, trick, and woman’s mastery of the art of the trickster: “colei che era beffata fu, era maggior maestra di beffare altrui che alcuno altro beffato fosse di quegli o quelle che avete contate.” (*Decameron*, 1008-1009).

this case refers to the customs ledger.<sup>11</sup> This elaborate explanation of mercantile procedures has attracted many scholars, as it fits perfectly with the interpretation that sees the *Decameron* as an epic of merchants.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in the narrative economy of Boccaccio's story, this description has the function of introducing the second protagonist, a Tuscan merchant. Moreover, this description serves an additional purpose. By showing how merchants' procedures are uniform in every harbor, it points to an established common ground shared by all merchants in the Mediterranean world. Hence, it follows that merchants enjoy a double status as both others and at the same time valued members of a community. They are foreign yet they still belong. They are new to a place and its way of life, yet somewhat known and respected as the representative of a "mercantile" way of life which is common, comprehensible, and necessary in any market hub.

By contrast, the woman foreshadowed earlier is revealed to be one of those "women who were physically quite beautiful, but hostile to virtue" (*The Decameron*, p. 738), namely a courtesan. She is, however, able to deceive those who do not know her, and she can thus appear to be one of those "great ladies of impeccable honesty." (*Ibidem*) This deception seems so big as to be impossible, and Dioneo's tale initially plays with the enormity of the trick that the courtesan performs on the gullible merchant. It asks how is it possible for a woman to be an enemy of honesty, yet at the same time convince the merchant of her honesty and good name. The position of the courtesan lies in this gray area. She operates within society, yet is always considered

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<sup>11</sup> This origin of the word "dogana" in Italian can be found in Fabrizio Franceschini, "'Salabaetto" e i nomi di tipo arabo ed ebraico nel *Decameron*." *Italianistica: Rivista Di Letteratura Italiana* 42, no. 2 (2013): 121.

<sup>12</sup> The interpretation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* as an epic of merchants, was first popularized by Vittore Branca, in books such as *Boccaccio Medievale*, (cit.) whose first edition was in 1954, which contains a chapter entitled "L'epopea dei mercatanti," pp. 134-164.

something other, and can only appear honest to those who do not know her status, to those who are more extraneous to the body of society than her, i.e. a foreign person, in most cases a merchant. The status of merchants and of courtesans in 14<sup>th</sup> c. Italian mercantile cities is at the core of what makes this traditional tale of the trickster being tricked unique, funny, and worthy of being part of the *Decameron*.<sup>13</sup>

Before even beginning the story, in fact, Boccaccio has Dioneo comment on the general state of affairs between foreign merchants and courtesans, in order to set up the expectations for what is about to happen. In his words:

Since their whole purpose is not only to give men a shave, but to skin them alive, as soon as they spot a foreign merchant, they use the customhouse book to get information about what he had deposited there and how much is he worth. Then, employing their alluring, amorous charms and the sweetest of words, they do their best to draw their victims into their love traps. (*The Decameron*, 738)

Courtesans are compared to “barbers” whose main activity is not only to “shave” foreign merchants, to take a share of their riches, but also to “skin them alive,” namely to relieve them of the entirety of their material possessions, resulting from the information they gathered in the Book of the Customs. Thus, Dioneo establishes a link between merchants’ procedures, such as writing the goods to be exchanged in the Book of the Customs, and courtesans’ practices such as deceiving their customers and robbing them of their goods. Specifically, courtesans employ their wiles, the tricks of their trade to make sure that the merchants are not only thoroughly cheated, but also blissfully unaware of having been robbed. In fact, he concludes this section: “there are

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<sup>13</sup> We find a similar interpretation of this tale in Ugo Dotti, *La rivoluzione incompiuta: società politica e cultura in Italia da Dante a Machiavelli*. (Torino, Aragno, 2014). Chapter III, *Il “Decameron” di Giovanni Boccaccio: la società come protagonista*, reads: “Mercanti, sensali e cortigiane combattono una comune battaglia per la conquista del denaro e divergono soltanto, semmai, nell’impiego degli strumenti usati” [Merchants, middlemen and courtesans are fighting a common battle for the conquest of money, and they diverge only, if even, in the tools they use], p. 75.

some who have left behind not just their ship and its cargo, but even their flesh and bones, so deftly did the lady barber know how to wield her razor.” (*Ibidem*) Yet this story is going to end differently. This time the courtesan, the “sweet barber,” is going to end up as the one deceived instead.

The question that remains concerns the reasons for this finale. In order to understand the ending of the story, it is necessary to analyze the circumstances that will lead to the demise of the courtesan in Dioneo’s narration. She was outwitted by this particular merchant due to her specific situation, namely that she was a courtesan in fourteenth-century Sicily. Hence, the social and economic background underlying the story plays a key role in the final resolution of the tale.<sup>14</sup> The narrator had already established the premises that will lead to the happy ending of the tale for the merchant in the first lines of his speech, when he described the mercantile practices of the times. These are presented as a set of well-known, accepted, almost “universal” mercantile customs, due to which the merchant from Tuscany can be considered, in a surprising turn of events, as a less foreign element in Sicilian society than the Sicilian-born prostitute.

Turning to Boccaccio’s tale more in detail, the merchant hero has a very Tuscan name: Niccolò da Cignano, also known as Salabaetto, a nickname that in contrast sounds exotic. Branca (*Decameron*, p.1010, n.7) notes that the “da Cignano” family was well-known in Florence, and specifically in the San Giovanni neighborhood. In particular, there was even a real Niccolò di Cecco da Cignano mentioned in archives as a wool merchant, and active in the south of Italy, as attested by his presence at the

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<sup>14</sup> On the role of courtesans in Florence from the 14<sup>th</sup> c. to the 17<sup>th</sup> c. see John K. Brackett “The Florentine Onestà and the Control of Prostitution, 1403-1680,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 2 (1993): 273-300. At the beginning of the article Brackett quotes Boccaccio’s *Decameron* VIII, 10 specifically in reference to the need that courtesans had to hide their profession and to look honest, in order to prosper (specifically pp. 278-279).

renowned Salerno fair. The nickname Salabetto, according to an old article by Trasselli (1955) could be interpreted as meaning “gaudente,” the bon vivant, or the pleasure seeker, in a clear anticipation of the sort of gallant adventure that is about to befall to the protagonist. More recently, Franceschini (2013) has convincingly argued that the name Salabaetto has an Arabic origin, thus contributing to the exotic feel of the tale, which according to him is the novella of the Decameron with the most Arabic references.<sup>15</sup>

The story truly begins when Niccolò enters Palermo with 500 florins worth of wool cloth, a remainder from his sales in Salerno, as the narrator clarifies in a parenthetical remark which serves the purpose of giving verisimilitude to the account and of proving Salabaetto’s status as a real merchant from Florence. Immediately upon arrival, he declares the value of his merchandice to the customs officer, stores it in a warehouse, and then proceeds to enjoy himself without displaying any particular hurry, “fretta,” in proceeding with his sales.

This is the beginning of a typical didactic tale of a merchant, specifically, as the tale of a young, arrogant, distracted and lazy merchant, exactly as the story of Andreuccio da Perugia, which can be found in the *Decameron*, day II, 5 narrated by Fiammetta. And in a very similar fashion, it is exactly in the moment of displaying wealth that one of the courtesans notices the young merchant and decides to make him her mark. Dioneo in Day VIII, story 10 refers to the prostitute with a euphemism. He calls her a “barber,” in a continuation of the analogy that he had previously established

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<sup>15</sup> Carmelo Trasselli, “Il Decameron come fonte storica,” *Rassegna di cultura e di vita scolastica* ix (1955) gives archival evidence for the presence of a courtesan named “Blanchifluri” in Palermo in 1305. Franceschini (2013), “Salabaetto” e i nomi di tipo arabo ed ebraico nel *Decameron*,” 120, describes this novella as “il testo più ‘arabo’ del *Decameron*” [the most ‘Arabic’ text of the *Decameron*]. Franceschini also explains the nickname “Salabaetto” as deriving from the Sicilian Arabic nickname and later last name “Sciar(r)abba” or “Scialabba” from the Arabic root *šarrāb*, meaning drink or wine (*Ibidem*, 125).

between courtesans and barbers. This courtesan, known as Milady Iancofiore, fakes falling in love with Niccolò, and proceeds to take advantage of him, rob him bare, and disappear. In Fiammetta day II's tale, the reader had already encountered another Sicilian prostitute, Milady Fiordaliso, who had convinced the young Perugian merchant Andreuccio of her good intentions only to cheat him and rob him out of his money, the 500 florins that he was going to use to buy horses. Andreuccio's fortune was lost to him, and he was saved only by a stroke of luck, which allowed him to gain a precious stone instead (*Decameron*, 176-199; *The Decameron*, 115-130). It is interesting to note that both prostitutes who appear in the *Decameron* have names that evoke flowers, Fiordaliso, blue lilly (or cornflower) and Iancofiore or White Flower. Courtesans like flowers are beautiful, alluring and potentially dangerous. So far, both stories could be interpreted as cautionary tales for naïve merchants, whose main aim could be to teach inexperienced traders how to avoid dangerous preying women.<sup>16</sup> Yet this is true only for half of Dioneo's story. Salabaetto is not Andreuccio, and his story is not one of good luck, but rather one of vengeance. Janet Smarr, citing Joan Ferrante, noted how in Day Two of the *Decameron* women are portrayed as agents of Fortuna, of luck. Moreover, she demonstrated that Fiammetta is a key to understanding Boccaccio's view of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Moving from this premise, Marilyn Migiel, in the second chapter of *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* entirely dedicated to the dichotomy Fiammetta vs

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<sup>16</sup> Aldo Rossi's 1982 article noted that the tale of Salabaetto "has many striking structural analogies with the novella of Andreuccio." Aldo Rossi, "Decameronian Combinations: Andreuccio". *Russian Literature* 12, no. 1 (1982): 133. Emma Grimaldi also points to the similarities and the differences between Andreuccio and Salabaetto's stories, see Grimaldi (1987). *Il privilegio di Dioneo*, 323-324 and 334.

<sup>17</sup> Janet Levarie Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta the narrator as lover* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pg. 196-197, and footnote 68, which quotes Joan Ferrante. "Narrative Patterns in the "Decameron", *Romance Philology* 31, no. 4 (1978): 585-604, especially p. 590.

Dioneo in the *Decameron*, argues for a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between these two narrators as characters in the *Decameron*'s frame. Migiel shows that Dioneo's tale of Salabaetto's double trick on Iancofiore at the end of Day 8<sup>th</sup> is in fact a polemical response to Fiammetta's portrayal of Andreuccio da Perugia being tricked by Fiordaliso in Day 2.<sup>18</sup>

In this light, we can identify the most original trait in this story with the second half of the tale, from the return of Salabaetto, to his second final departure, when he leaves Iancofiore with nothing in her hands, literally with "nothing but water and tow" (*The Decameron*, 737). We argue that the courtesan emerges then as the true protagonist of the second half of this story, since she also learns an important lesson in humility, taught by a Tuscan merchant. As Dioneo points out at the end of the story, "chi ha a far con Tosco, non vuole esser losco" (*Decameron*, 1024) "if with a Tuscan you vie, Don't you dare close an eye" (*Ibidem*, 750). This time both characters learn something. The young merchant learns to be more cautious about flaunting his merchandise, as Andreuccio learned. But this time, it is also the prostitute who is in need of a cautionary tale, since she did not know how dangerous Tuscan merchants could be.

At a first glance, though, the courtesan appears to be a well-established practitioner of her trade. Specifically, Dioneo qualifies as a master of her trade, well versed in all the arts of love, so much that even her servant "was a past mistress in the art of the procuress," and her countenance is described as one of "artificial pleasantness." When the narrator introduces the courtesan, Iancofiore, her own name

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<sup>18</sup> Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto, Ont: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 29-63. This argument becomes clear especially at p. 30 and the ways in which Dioneo's tale in Day 8 responds to Fiammetta's story in Day 1 are outlined at pp. 54-59.

immediately calls to mind the famous chaste and pure heroine of the famous medieval love story, the *Roman of Fleur and Blanchefleur*.<sup>19</sup> In an interesting inversion of the *nomen omen*, this Iancofiore instead is described as cunning, greedy, and dissolute. She does not have the scruples to use a perversion of love (and sex) to achieve her goals. She is an actress, she knows how to fake love, so her mark would progressively fall more in love with her.

In addition, Iancofiore knows how to appear generous in order to elicit Salabaetto's generosity, "with her show of passion and generosity" (*The Decameron*, 743).<sup>20</sup> She does so by appealing to traditional Christian and feudal values. The courtesan knows how to replicate the right behavior, how to appear virtuous and, in fact, generosity, or liberality as the original Italian reads, is one of the virtues that are at the core of both Christian and chivalric ethics. Only afterwards, once Salabaetto is convinced of her love and her good intentions, will she stage her trick and convince him to deliver her all of his money in order to save her brother's head. She manages to obtain the money on a verbal promise only, "alla sua semplice promessa"

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<sup>19</sup> This is a very famous medieval romance, its text edited and translated in 1966.

See Merton Jerome Hubert, *The Romance of Floire and Blanchefleur. A French idyllic poem of the twelfth century. Translated into English verse by Merton Jerome Hubert* (Chapel Hill; Valencia [printed]: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), Nicolas Perella "The World of Boccaccio's *Filocolo*." *PMLA* 76, no. 4 (1961): 330-39, proves that a young Giovanni Boccaccio already knew the story of Floire and Blanchefleur very well and that he used it in the *Filocolo*. V. Kirkham, "Reckoning with Boccaccio's *Questioni D'Amore*." *MLN* 89, no 1 (1974): 47-59, also agreed on Boccaccio use of the Roman of Floire and Blanchefleur in that part of the *Filocolo* known as *Questioni D'Amore*, especially pp. 48-49 and 56-59. Branca (*Decameron*, 1011, n 3) specifies that Iancofiore is Sicilian for Biancofiore, but does not point immediately to the medieval romance. Instead he quotes Trasselli (1955) who had identified a possible woman alive in Palermo in 1305 by this name.

<sup>20</sup> In the original Italian the word used is "liberale" with a direct mention of the virtue of liberality, the typical chivalric virtue in the Middle Ages. While liberality includes generosity, it is a more specific form of generosity. The original text reads: "col mostrar sé accesa e liberale." (*Decameron*, cit. pp. 1015). On liberality as a medieval virtue see also Richard Newhouser, "Justice and Liberality: Opposition to Avarice in Twelfth Century" in *Virtue and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, (Leiden: BRILL, 2005) pg. 295-316.

(*Decameron*, 1018), and at this point she stops responding to her lover's calls and eventually vanishes. Despite not being an official merchant, Iancofiore believes herself to have mastered all the tricks of commerce. She knows that words alone are not enough to protect Salabaetto from her scam, and she preys on the young Tuscan's gullibility due to his infatuation with her.

Iancofiore believes herself to be an insider, despite her profession as a courtesan, which immediately places her outside of the official network of merchants. And it will be exactly her position as an outsider that will eventually cause her demise. When Salabaetto realizes his stupidity, it is too late for him to pursue any legal action against Iancofiore, exactly because he did not have any written record nor any witness of their exchange that could force the woman to give him his money back. It is at this point that Salabaetto recognizes that he has been duped by the superior skills and the woman's artful cunning: "avvertendendosi Salabaetto dell'arte della malvagia femina," (*Ibidem*).

In a similar fashion, Iancofiore felt safe from any repercussions due to her understanding of mercantile procedures. She is arrogant, believing that she had learned all the tricks used by merchants. Yet her knowledge will prove inadequate, and her arrogance will bring on her ultimate financial loss. She is only superficially aware of the complexities of trade, and she is outside the protected network of Tuscan merchants, which is how she falls for the trick that will allow Salabaetto's revenge. Grudin M.P., Grudin R. (2012) have compared this act of revenge as a sort of Dantean *contrappasso*, which brings about the woman's punishment for having used sex in order to achieve material gain.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> MP. Grudin and R. Grudin "Boccaccio's Ship of Fools: Day VIII" in *Boccaccio's Decameron and the Ciceronian Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) pg. 106 reads "Exemplary in this

In fact, Salabaetto, fearing shame and humiliation back in Florence, decides not to go home to Tuscany, but to seek help in the Tuscan merchant colony in Naples instead. This is the place where Boccaccio himself had spent his youth, learning both the trade of merchant and that of the poet, as well as studying law under the famous poet Cino da Pistoia. Naples is also the setting for Andreuccio's tale in Day II. It was a well-established trade post for Tuscan merchants. Thus, it is logical that in Naples Salabaetto will meet the famous Pietro dello Canigiano, described as "a man of great intellect and subtle genius" (*The Decameron*, 745). Here Salabaetto will find assistance as Pietro will lend him money and help him plot his revenge.

The merchant's revenge hinges upon his exploitation of Iancofiore's assumptions about merchant practices. He plans to employ her own arrogance against her. In fact, Salabaetto goes back to Palermo with 20 empty oil barrels. Here, though, he declares this material to the customs as full-priced merchandize, declaring in addition that he was waiting for even more goods, so that Iancofiore would hear that his wares were worth at least 2000 florins, and maybe even 5000. The customs declaration becomes bait to lure out the greedy courtesan, who was outside the circle of merchants who protect and avenge each other.

Salabaetto's plan works because Iancofiore does not have a merchant insider friend to warn her, and thus she falls for his ruse. She immediately thought she had shortchanged herself, by having cheated him of a mere 500 florins, and rushes back to him. She gives him his money back, asks his forgiveness and pretends to be back in love with him. Yet Salabaetto was not content with this. His intent was to "deceive her and thus punish her for the trick she had played on him" (*Ibidem*, 748), and hence he

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regard is Iancofiore, the beautiful con artist of Palermo, who seduces the Tuscan merchant Salabaetto, and fleeces him to the tune of 500 florins (VIII. 10). Salabaetto's payback is a textbook *contrapasso*: betting on Iancofiore's proven greed, he takes her for 1500."

proceeded to cast his net. During their next dinner, he concocted a story about pirates from Monaco stealing his merchandise and asking a ransom for it. At this point, the courtesan, worried about losing the profits she could make on all his goods, offered him money, so long as Salabaetto would be willing to offer the rest of his goods stored in Palermo as collateral.

The merchant went ahead with the plan, but only after making a show of ensuring the legality of the transaction. In Boccaccio's words "fattesi loro scritte e contrascritte" (*Decameron*, 1023), which we found translated as "once they had signed and countersigned a number of receipts" (*The Decameron*, 749), but which literally means "having made between them writings and counterwritings." The repetition of the word *scritte* places emphasis on the role of writing to make trade official, a completely perfunctory role, as it shows an attention for the form over the content of human interaction.<sup>22</sup> The apparent proper legality of the transaction serves the narrative scope to put the mind of the courtesan at ease. She does not suspect anything when Salabaetto leaves for Naples a second time, which allows the Tuscan merchant to then disappear with the money. The retaliation is complete.

The story ends with Iancofiore's later realization that she had been outsmarted. When she finally had the doors of the storage opened, she discovered that she had been left with nothing, as the barrels were full of salt water and the bales were packed with tow. All the writings in the Book of the Customs and all the private written assurances could not repay her lost 1500 florins; she had fallen for Salabaetto's trap. The courtesan was too confident, too arrogant in her dealings with a foreign merchant. She assumed

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<sup>22</sup> Marco Codebò (2007) in "Scomodi compagni di banco: scrittori e notai fra Boccaccio e Manzoni." *Italica*. 84 (2-3), notes that while normally in the *Decameron* it is the oral word that leads to treachery, this is the only tale in which it is the written word that lies at the basis of Salabaetto counter-trick: 196, n. 5.

that she understood mercantile ways and the dichotomy between oral pacts as easy to break vs written contracts as safe. What Dioneo's Iancofiore did not realize is that in the world of trade the courtesan remained an outsider. In Boccaccio's story the courtesan fails because she was not part of the international brotherhood of merchants, who teach each other tricks and whose effects can be felt even across different regions of Italy, such as Tuscany, Campania, and Sicily.

To conclude, this parallel analysis of the stories of Kamamanjari in the *Daśakumāracarita* and of Iancofiore in the *Decameron* shows how two similar tale types of courtesans being tricked can be interpreted as the converse of each other when found in two different contexts. What changes in the two narrations is the social, economic, and religious background in which the courtesans operate. Their marks are different, an ascetic and a merchant, and the role that the courtesan plays in each society is comparable yet different. Both women have a place at the margins of their societies, they are both outsiders, yet the way in which their stories brings them back to the fold reveals what is valued in each context. In India the dangerous other is domesticated because of the superior power of the trickster elite, in other words, because the ruler is an even better trickster than the courtesan. The forces that destabilize society can be brought into the fold because ultimately the elite is more talented than the other.

In Medieval Italy, the other can be reined in because it remains other. It is the power of community, of the network of Tuscans merchants, that can defeat the destabilizing forces of the woman at the margins. Iancofiore gets her comeuppance because she is an Other and does not have the power of a social framework to support her. What remains the same in both stories though is the role of the courtesan as an Other, a woman at the margins. Moreover, both stories share a similar structure, from the initial trick to a second revenge scam. This comparative approach shows that good

stories precede the arguments they make. Stories travel but otherness is a universal, even if it does take different forms in different contexts.

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