

EASTERN NARRATIVE TRADITIONS AND ETHICAL VALUES IN BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON: A COMPARATIVE-INTERTEXTUAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines representations of the East and the mediation of Eastern narrative traditions in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron. Its central argument is that "Eastern influence" should not be treated as a single, self-evident category. The study distinguishes explicit Eastern settings and characters, historically traceable intermediary traditions, probable Mediterranean transmission, and broad typological parallels. Close readings of the tale of Melchizedek and the three rings (I.3), Alatiel's Mediterranean itinerary (II.7), and the reciprocal courtesy of Saladin and Torello (X.9) show that Boccaccio's East performs several functions: it tests religious judgment, expands the geographical range of fortune, and provides exemplary forms of intelligence, generosity, and recognition across confessional boundaries. At the same time, the Decameron does not offer a uniformly idealized or historically transparent image of Eastern societies. Its representations are shaped by medieval Christian knowledge, mercantile geography, circulating exempla, comic convention, and the requirements of individual narrators. The article therefore rejects both Eurocentric isolation and unsupported claims that the work derives directly from The Thousand and One Nights. It proposes a four-level evidentiary model for intertextual research and concludes that Boccaccio's principal achievement lies in transforming mobile Mediterranean story materials into an ethical laboratory in which identity is judged through conduct rather than confession alone.

KEYWORDS: Giovanni Boccaccio; Decameron; Eastern narrative tradition; Saladin; comparative literature; intertextuality; religious tolerance; Mediterranean; ethical values.

Introduction

Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron emerged from a Mediterranean world in which goods, people, languages, and stories moved across political and religious boundaries. The collection's geography extends far beyond Florence. Merchants travel through ports, rulers receive foreign visitors, captives and pilgrims cross seas, and narrative action links Italian cities to Alexandria, Acre, Cyprus, Armenia, North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean. These spaces are not simply exotic backgrounds. They expose characters to unfamiliar legal systems, confessional identities, codes of hospitality, and reversals of fortune.

Studies of East–West literary relations sometimes describe this material through a generalized language of "influence." Such a formulation is attractive but methodologically unstable. The

presence of Saladin, a Levantine port, a traveling merchant, or a plot also found in an Arabic tale does not prove that Boccaccio used *The Thousand and One Nights* as a direct source. Medieval narratives circulated through oral performance, trade, diplomacy, crusading contact, translation, Hebrew and Arabic scholarship, Latin exempla, French fabliaux, and Italian vernacular collections. A story could reach Boccaccio after several transformations, and similar motifs could also emerge independently within international tale traditions (Schoeler, 2009).

The aim of this article is to determine how Eastern narrative materials and ethical values function within the *Decameron* and how different kinds of intertextual evidence should be evaluated. The analysis focuses on three novellas: I.3, in which the Jewish sage Melchizedek answers Saladin through the parable of the three rings; II.7, which follows Alatiel across an unstable Mediterranean geography; and X.9, in which Saladin and Messer Torello recognize and repay courtesy across religious and political boundaries. These tales were selected because together they represent three distinct modes of Eastern presence: philosophical-religious dialogue, mobile geography and gendered fortune, and exemplary intercultural reciprocity.

The article advances two arguments. First, the *Decameron's* East is internally diverse and should not be reduced to a single positive or negative image. Second, Boccaccio's narrative ethics repeatedly makes practical intelligence, generosity, self-control, and recognition more decisive than inherited identity. This does not make the work modern in a simple sense, nor does it erase medieval hierarchy and stereotype. It does, however, create narrative situations in which Christian, Muslim, and Jewish characters must be judged through action and speech.

Scholarship and Methodological Problem

Boccaccio's narrative art is characterized by the creative reorganization of heterogeneous sources. The *Decameron* incorporates materials from classical literature, medieval exempla, romance, fabliau, saints' lives, urban anecdote, mercantile experience, and international oral tradition. Modern scholarship therefore approaches Boccaccio as both an author and a cultural mediator (Armstrong, Daniels, and Milner, 2015). His originality lies not only in inventing plots but also in assigning inherited materials new narrators, positions, tones, and ethical consequences.

The Thousand and One Nights offers an important comparative archive because its stories preserve and transform Indian, Persian, and Arabic narrative traditions and because the collection became a powerful Western symbol of "the East." Yet its textual history requires chronological caution. Evidence for an early *Thousand Nights* tradition reaches back to the ninth century, but the surviving manuscripts, later Egyptian expansions, and European translations belong to different historical layers (Abbott, 1949; Marzolph and van Leeuwen, 2004). Antoine Galland's influential French translation appeared only in the early eighteenth century, centuries after Boccaccio. Any claim that the *Decameron* depends directly on the

modern European form of the Nights is therefore impossible. Earlier individual tales or narrative patterns may have circulated, but each proposed relationship needs its own evidence. Historically documented intermediary traditions are more secure. Petrus Alfonsi's early twelfth-century *Disciplina clericalis*, composed in Latin by a Jewish convert from Islamic Iberia, transmitted Eastern-derived exempla into European learned and popular narrative. The Novellino and other Italian collections also preserve materials whose routes cross confessional and linguistic boundaries. Such intermediaries demonstrate mechanisms of transmission, although they do not justify assigning every mobile tale to one original source.

Narratological scholarship further shows why source identification alone is insufficient. Forni (2015) demonstrates that the meaning of a Decameron novella is affected by its teller, its position within a day, and its relation to the other members of the brigata. Gerhardt (1963) makes a comparable point about the artistic organization of the Nights, while Irwin (2004) and Marzolph and van Leeuwen (2004) emphasize that the collection's textual and reception histories contain multiple chronological layers. The present study consequently uses the Italian Decameron edited by Branca and McWilliam's English translation as its Boccaccian base, while Haddawy's translation based on Mahdi's Arabic edition supplies a controlled comparative text for the Nights (Boccaccio, 1992, 1995; Haddawy, 1990). The comparison concerns narrative functions and possible channels of mediation; it does not treat a modern edition of the Nights as a text directly available to Boccaccio.

To control the analysis, this study applies a four-level evidentiary model:

- 1. Explicit representation:** the Decameron directly names an Eastern place, Muslim ruler, Jewish character, or intercultural encounter.
- 2. Documented intertext:** a specific earlier text or intermediary tradition is recognized as a likely source or analogue.
- 3. Probable Mediterranean mediation:** the plot belongs to a mobile tradition and a credible historical route exists, but direct textual dependence cannot be proven.
- 4. Typological parallel:** two texts share a motif or ethical structure without sufficient evidence of historical borrowing.

This model separates representation from origin. A tale may depict Saladin while drawing on a European vernacular source; conversely, a tale set in Europe may preserve a plot that passed through Arabic or Hebrew mediation. The method combines close reading, comparative typology, and contextual interpretation. It asks how the tale functions within the Decameron, not only where an isolated motif may have originated.



Figure 1. Possible Mediterranean pathways of narrative transmission. Source: developed by the author.

Eastern Geography and the Mediterranean Narrative Space

The Decameron's world is structured by movement. Sea routes connect commercial ambition to danger, and geographic distance intensifies fortune's power. Eastern and southern Mediterranean locations often mark zones where familiar status can be lost and reconstructed. A merchant may become a captive, a noble person may become unrecognizable, and religious difference may either threaten or enable new forms of relation.

This geography reflects the experience of Italian mercantile culture. Boccaccio spent formative years in Naples, a politically and commercially connected city. His tales repeatedly demonstrate familiarity with contracts, credit, goods, ports, travel, and the uncertain conversion of reputation into value. The East consequently enters the Decameron not only through inherited literary images but also through a practical Mediterranean imagination. Distance is measured by ships, routes, ransom, hospitality, language, and the risks of misrecognition.

Nevertheless, literary geography is not ethnography. Alexandria or Acre in a novella is shaped by narrative economy and the expectations of Boccaccio's audience. The places produce meanings—wealth, danger, mobility, religious difference, or marvelous reversal—but they should not be read as transparent descriptions of historical societies. A critical interpretation must recognize both the intercultural breadth of the collection and the conventions through which that breadth is represented.

Table 1. Analytical levels for Eastern materials in the Decameron

Level	Main question	Type of evidence	Appropriate conclusion
Explicit representation	What Eastern person, place, or religion is named?	Primary text	The tale constructs an image of intercultural encounter
Documented intertext	Is an identifiable source or intermediary available?	Textual and historical scholarship	A specific route of adaptation may be argued
Probable mediation	Could a mobile tale have reached Italy through Mediterranean channels?	Tale analogues plus historical plausibility	Circulation is probable, but direct borrowing remains unproven
Typological parallel	Do works share a function or motif?	Comparative structural analysis	Similarity is meaningful without a genetic claim

The Three Rings: Intelligence and Religious Judgment

The third novella of the first day presents one of the Decameron's clearest encounters among Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Saladin needs money and decides to trap Melchizedek, a wealthy Jewish man, by asking which of the three religions is true. Any direct answer would expose Melchizedek to political danger. He responds with the parable of a precious ring inherited through generations. A father who loves three sons equally has two indistinguishable copies made, leaving each son convinced that he possesses the original. The identity of the authentic ring cannot be determined, just as each religious community believes itself to possess the true divine law.

The novella is important because tolerance is produced through narrative intelligence rather than abstract doctrine. Melchizedek does not deny difference, and he does not defeat Saladin through force. He reframes the question so that the ruler recognizes the injustice of demanding certainty where human evidence cannot provide it. The embedded parable creates interpretive distance: Saladin can understand the structure of the trap before explicitly acknowledging its religious implication.

The tale also complicates a simple hierarchy between ruler and subject. Saladin initially controls the situation through political power, but Melchizedek controls the interpretive terms through wit. Once Saladin recognizes this intelligence, he abandons deception, states his need openly, and receives assistance. The relation is reorganized by truthful speech and mutual respect. Thus, practical wisdom leads to ethical correction.

The three-rings tradition predates Boccaccio and circulated in several confessional settings. Scholarship has traced versions through Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts, while the Italian Novellino is often discussed as an important predecessor or analogue (Stewart, 2004). The exact route into Decameron I.3 is a question of documented and probable mediation, not

a reason to label the tale simply “from the Arabian Nights.” Its deeper comparative significance lies in a narrative form common to many wisdom traditions: a vulnerable speaker survives a ruler’s dangerous question by telling a story that transforms judgment.

The novella’s placement on Day I is also meaningful. The day contains tales that expose hypocrisy, corrupt institutions, and the instability of categorical judgment. Melchizedek’s answer offers neither dogmatic victory nor indifference. It asks the audience to recognize the limits of coercive certainty. Within a work produced by a medieval Christian author, this narrative equivalence is striking, even though it should not be confused with a fully modern theory of pluralism.

Alatiel: Mobility, Fortune, and the Ambivalence of the East

The tale of Alatiel provides a necessary counterweight to idealized accounts of Eastern influence. The daughter of the Sultan of Babylon is sent by sea to marry the king of Algarve, but shipwreck and a chain of violent transfers carry her through multiple Mediterranean locations and relationships. After years of displacement, she returns and is able to enter the intended marriage through a reconstructed story of chastity.

The novella turns the Mediterranean into a space of extreme contingency. Political rank cannot protect Alatiel once she becomes separated from the institutions that recognize her identity. Her beauty functions as both privilege and danger, and men repeatedly convert desire into possession, rivalry, and violence. The tale’s geography is broad, but its ethical world is unstable. Christian and Muslim spaces do not map neatly onto vice and virtue; power, appetite, and fortune cross confessional boundaries.

Alatiel’s story has sometimes been read primarily as comic restoration, because the final verbal reconstruction allows social order to resume. Yet such a reading must account for the asymmetry between the heroine’s experience and the male systems that exchange her. The tale demonstrates Boccaccio’s interest in linguistic performance: identity can be restored when a plausible narrative is accepted by those who control status. At the same time, the novella exposes the vulnerability of a woman whose body becomes the object through which men compete.

From a comparative perspective, the tale resembles international adventure narratives involving shipwreck, separation, serial displacement, recognition, and return. These motifs are common in Greek romance, medieval European narrative, and Eastern tale collections. The appropriate claim is therefore typological parallelism combined with probable Mediterranean circulation. The tale cannot be treated as evidence of a single direct source. Its importance for East–West relations lies in the way it imagines the Mediterranean as one interconnected but unequal narrative zone.

Saladin and Torello: Courtesy Across Confessional Boundaries

The ninth tale of Day X presents Saladin not as a distant enemy but as a ruler capable of gratitude, recognition, and magnificent reciprocity. Traveling in disguise, Saladin is hospitably received by Messer Torello. Later, during crusading conflict, Torello becomes a captive. Recognition reverses the situation: Saladin remembers the earlier courtesy and repays it with protection and generosity. The tale culminates in Torello's extraordinary return home before his wife completes another marriage.

The ethical structure of the novella is reciprocal. Hospitality is offered before identity and political advantage are known. Its value is confirmed only later, when the powerful recipient chooses to remember and exceed the original gift. Saladin's Muslim identity is not erased; rather, the tale allows ethical excellence to cross confessional lines. The crusading context establishes real political opposition, but personal conduct creates a relation not exhausted by collective conflict.

Day X is devoted to generosity and magnificence. Saladin's presence within this sequence gives an Eastern Muslim ruler a central role in the Decameron's highest register of exemplary conduct. The tale thereby challenges any assumption that moral authority in the collection belongs exclusively to Christian Europe. Yet the representation remains literary and selective. Saladin had already become a major figure in European legend, where historical memory, crusading ideology, and admiration for chivalric virtue interacted. Boccaccio works with that mobile reputation and reshapes it according to the day's theme.

The novella's most important value for comparative literature is not that it proves a direct line from one Eastern book to Boccaccio. It shows how a European author could use a Muslim ruler to test the universality of courtesy. Recognition depends on memory of an act, not membership in a religious group. Ethical identity is therefore performed through hospitality, gratitude, and fidelity.

Eastern Ethical Values and Boccaccio's Narrative Transformation

The three case studies reveal no single "Eastern code," but they repeatedly foreground values that travel across cultural borders: wisdom under danger, hospitality to the unknown guest, generosity after recognition, patience, self-command, and the ability to judge particular conduct rather than inherited labels. Comparable values occur throughout Arabic and Persian advice literature, adab traditions, folktales, and The Thousand and One Nights. They also belong to classical, biblical, Christian, and European chivalric traditions. Their recurrence is evidence of a connected moral vocabulary, not exclusive cultural ownership.

Boccaccio's method is transformative. He does not reproduce a source without change. He assigns each narrative to a speaker, places it within a thematic day, and connects it to the social experiment of the brigata. The Melchizedek tale becomes an argument about interpretive intelligence on a day concerned with verbal and institutional judgment. Alatiel's adventures

become a large-scale demonstration of fortune and narrative reconstruction on Day II. Saladin and Torello become an exemplary pair within Day X's exploration of magnificence.

The Decameron thus converts mobile story matter into a comparative ethical laboratory. Characters from different communities face analogous tests, and the audience observes how conduct changes judgment. The structure does not abolish medieval stereotypes, gender inequality, or confessional conflict. Instead, it repeatedly creates exceptions that prevent any community from monopolizing wisdom or vice.

This interpretation also clarifies the relationship with The Thousand and One Nights. The two works share an interest in rulers who must learn to judge, vulnerable speakers who use intelligence, unpredictable fortune, mercantile mobility, and generosity that restores social bonds. These are meaningful typological correspondences. Direct dependence, however, must be demonstrated tale by tale through a credible intermediary or textual relationship. The category "Eastern narrative tradition" is therefore broader and more accurate than an automatic claim of direct borrowing from the Nights.

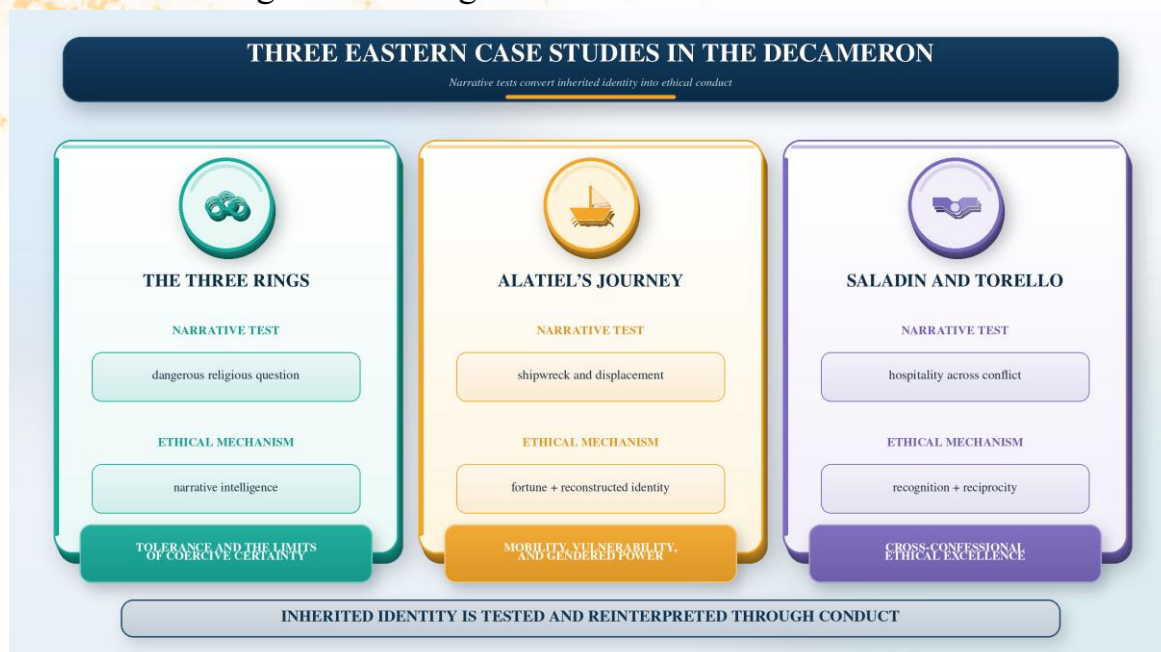


Figure 2. Ethical functions of three Eastern case studies in the Decameron. Source: developed by the author.

Discussion

The evidentiary model proposed in this study produces three broader findings. First, geography and genealogy must be separated. An explicitly Eastern setting does not identify the origin of a plot, and a plot with Eastern ancestry may appear in a European setting after extensive adaptation. Second, transmission is normally plural. Stories cross borders through chains of oral and written mediation rather than a single act of borrowing. Third, ethical meaning is

produced by placement. A tale's function in the Decameron depends on its narrator, day, neighboring tales, and relation to the frame.

These principles prevent two opposite errors. The first is Eurocentric isolation, which treats the Decameron as if Mediterranean cultures had contributed nothing to the narrative environment from which it emerged. The second is undifferentiated diffusionism, which assigns every resemblance to a direct Eastern source. A balanced account recognizes documented intercultural channels while demanding proportionate evidence for each claim.

The case studies also demonstrate that Boccaccio's treatment of religious and cultural difference is ethically dynamic. In I.3, a Jewish speaker corrects a Muslim ruler through a parable relevant to all three monotheistic religions. In X.9, a Muslim ruler and a Christian knight establish mutual obligation through hospitality. In II.7, by contrast, trans-Mediterranean movement exposes the violence of possession and the fragility of socially recognized identity. The East can therefore serve as philosophical mirror, exemplary space, or field of danger and contingency. This diversity is itself a significant result.

The study remains limited by the unequal textual histories of its materials. The Decameron can be related to Boccaccio's compositional choices with greater confidence than many tales in the Nights can be assigned to a precise period or manuscript layer. Moreover, a modern translation may normalize the stylistic features through which cultural difference is expressed. Future work should therefore combine tale-type comparison with philological analysis of dated Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Italian witnesses. It should also examine how later translators reconstructed the "East" for new audiences, because reception history can easily be mistaken for medieval transmission history. These precautions do not weaken the intercultural argument; they define the evidence required to make it verifiable.

Conclusion

The analysis confirms that Eastern narrative traditions form an important part of the Decameron's Mediterranean imagination, but their presence must be described with methodological precision. Explicit representations, documented intertexts, probable mediation, and typological parallels are different forms of evidence and support different conclusions.

The tales of Melchizedek, Alatiel, and Saladin with Torello demonstrate three major functions of the East in Boccaccio's collection. It enables reflection on the limits of religious certainty; it expands fortune across a connected and unstable maritime world; and it provides exemplary figures of hospitality, generosity, and reciprocal recognition. These functions do not produce a uniform image of Eastern societies. They reveal a literary field shaped by admiration, inherited convention, practical mercantile knowledge, confessional difference, and narrative necessity.

Boccaccio's achievement lies in transforming circulating materials into new ethical arrangements. Within the Decameron, identity is repeatedly tested by conduct, speech, memory, and response to fortune. This makes East–West relation not merely a question of geographical representation or source hunting, but a central mechanism through which the work examines judgment. Future research should extend the four-level model to additional novellas and compare their tale types with specific Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Latin, and vernacular intermediaries.

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