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The Racial "Other" in Italian Folklore: Analyzing "The Three Oranges" and Its Adaptations

Jeffrey Achierno

"The Three Oranges" is often regarded as one of the most quintessentially Italian fairy tales. It is a false bride narrative and is classified as tale type 408 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index, a system used by folklorists to categorize traditional narrative types based on plot structures.[1] It is absent from prominent Northern European tale collections, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, and Jack Zipes proposes that the story likely originated in Italy and gained popularity mainly in Southern Europe and the Middle East.[2] Besides "The Three Oranges," the tale goes by many other names, including *L'Amour des trois oranges* and *As tres cidras do amor*. These titles reflect the motif of the fantastical fruit found in the tale. However, it has another category of names as well: *la brutta saracina* (the ugly Saracen woman) or *la mora tuerta* (the one-eyed dark woman).[3] In the tale, a prince, who one day accidentally cuts his finger while slicing ricotta, is struck by the sight, and the contrast makes him long for a wife with a complexion as white as the ricotta and as red as his own blood. Driven by this desire, he embarks on a quest for true love and eventually discovers a magical fruit that holds a beautiful maiden. While he is away from her, the maiden is replaced by an ugly and typically dark-skinned imposter. Eventually, the truth is uncovered, the imposter is executed, and the true maiden is reunited with the prince, leading to their happily ever after.

"The Three Oranges" is a striking example of how fairy tales construct and reinforce racial hierarchies. In this story, a dark-skinned, "ugly" slave stands in direct opposition to a white, "beautiful" maiden, serving as her antagonist.[4] The characters embody evil and good respectively, and the racial component of this opposition is central to the narrative's structure. Cord J. Whitaker, in his analysis of medieval race-thinking, argues that whiteness and Blackness continually shift in both their physical manifestations and symbolic meanings, each taking precedence over the other

[1] The Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Index is a numerical classification system used in folkloristics to catalogue folktale types that catalogues over 2000 tale types. The system originated with Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne, who developed the historic-geographic method of comparative folklore and published the first version of what became the Aarne-Thompson tale type index in 1910. American folklorist Stith Thompson significantly revised and expanded Aarne's work in 1928. In 2004, German folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther further updated and reorganized the system. Uther critiqued earlier versions for being cursory, imprecise, and overly focused on oral traditions, which often obscured older written sources. His revision broadened the scope to include tales from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as briefer narrative forms, and it emphasized international attestation by removing types limited to a single ethnic tradition. See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), as well as Donald Haas, ed., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

[2] Jack Zipes, ed. and trans., *The Robber with a Witch's Head: More Stories from the Great Treasury of Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales* (New York: Routledge, 2010), n. 11.

[3] Christine Kawan, "Reflections on International Narrative Research on the Example of the Tale of the Three Oranges," 27 (2004): 26.

[4] Hans-Jörg Uther, in laying out the elements of tale type 408, clearly references "an ugly black woman," not merely a servant or slave whose identity is ambiguous, making her Black status a key element of the tale. See Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*, 242.

in turn, an effect that he terms the "black metaphor."[5] By black metaphor, Whitaker is referring to textual instances where black skin simultaneously represents both sameness and difference, spiritual purity and sin, as well as salvation and damnation.[6] Such moments illustrate how Blackness and its metaphors evolved into adaptable narrative devices, shaped by and responding to specific cultural anxieties. This paper examines the racial dynamics present in various iterations of "The Three Oranges" tale, arguing that the figure of the Black slave or ugly Saracen woman serves as a strategic narrative device that reinforces cultural hierarchies of race, gender, and power. Drawing on Heng's framework, this analysis demonstrates that these racialized figures are not incidental but central to the tale's epistemological and political commitments. It explores the ways in which racial differences are mobilized within the narrative to construct moral superiority, social order, and cultural identity. Rather than tracing historical shifts, it highlights the depiction of the slave character as perpetuating an orientalist expectation of inferiority and examines the broader historical and cultural context in which this occurs.[7]

Italo Calvino, in his renowned collection of Italian folktales, includes two stories he classifies under ATU 408: "Il pastore che non cresceva mai" ("The Little Shepherd") from Liguria (Tale 8) and "L'amore delle tre melagrane" ("The Love of Three Pomegranates") from Abruzzo (Tale 107). The two stories differ, however, in their foregrounding of race. Calvino is a useful place to start because his work on the folktale offers a perspective from which to trace the persistence of racial elements. In *Il pastore*, a diminutive shepherd is cursed to never grow until he marries "la bella Bargaglina delle tre mele che cantano" ("lovely Bargaglina of the three singing apples").[8] After a long journey, he finally finds her but, before they can wed, he leaves her by a well. While he is gone, a servant—referred to only as the "brutta schiava" ("ugly slave")—appears and throws her into the well. Unlike in other versions of the tale type, the slave is named only "ugly" and does not replace Bargaglina; she disappears after committing the act. The Abruzzese version follows a more conventional ATU 408 structure, featuring a prince and a Black slave, labeled "la brutta saracina" ("the ugly Saracen woman"), who takes the place of the beautiful, white bride. Calvino, who did not gather tales firsthand but instead compiled and adapted the work of folklorists, notes the sources of each story but acknowledges that the versions he presents are not definitive. In positioning himself as an Italian equivalent to the Brothers Grimm, Calvino sought to compile a folktale corpus that reflected Italy's regional diversity.[9] By including "L'amore delle tre melagrane," with its explicit racial framing, as a duplicate of the tale type, Calvino's collection implicitly reflects the discourse on Italian identity. The contrast between the white maiden and the racialized false bride serves as a narrative reinforcement of Italy's historical self-positioning as a Christian European nation in opposition to an Orientalized other. Regardless, his use of the term "Saracen" is particularly significant. First, it underscores the tale's racially charged dynamics,

[5] See Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2019).
[6] Ibid. 24.
[7] The term "orientalism" is used here differently than in the well-known work of Edward Said. The latter focused on the way European identity was formed in opposition to a stereotyped "Orient," often tied to colonialism and discourses of domination; I am using it more broadly here. My usage aligns with Ivan Kalmar's view of orientalism as a general concept that sets the Christian West in opposition to the Muslim East.
[8] Italo Calvino, *Fiabe italiane: raccolte dalla tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956), 31; Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales: Selected and Retold by Italo Calvino*, trans. George Martin (Orlando, Florida: A Harvest Book, 1980), 23.
[9] See the introduction to Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales: Selected and Retold by Italo Calvino*, trans. George Martin (Orlando, Florida: A Harvest Book, 1980).

emphasizing the contrast between the beautiful white heroine and her dark-skinned usurper. Second, while Calvino's collection is ostensibly an anthropological project that foregrounds Italian folklore, the choice of "Saracen" situates the tale within a specific racialized cultural tradition, beginning in the premodern era, where the term carried pejorative connotations in Christian contexts, having long been broadly applied to Muslim peoples—Arabs, Turks, and North African—often framed as infidel or heathen enemies in religious and military conflicts. By preserving this terminology, the version that Calvino uses reflects both the historical weight of such narratives and their persistence within an Italian context.

The earliest *literary* version of "The Three Oranges" appears in Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36, *The Tale of Tales*). In this text, the tale—titled "I tre cedri" ("The Three Citrons")—mirrors events in the frame narrative, serving as proof of Princess Zoza's rightful place, which has been usurped by a Black "imposter." The Black slave's narrative role is deeply racialized—her ultimate punishment is to be buried alive while pregnant, which is both violent and irreversible, and becomes necessary to ensure (the white) Princess Zoza's happy ending. This all underscores the fact that a Black woman occupies a central yet vilified position in one of the foundational texts of the European fairy tale tradition.[10] This paper is not the first to acknowledge her presence. Suzanne Magnanini, in her essay on racial representation in Basile's text, argues that both white privilege and the classification of Basile's tales as "Italian" or "Neapolitan"—categories sometimes imagined by scholars as exclusively white—lead critical readings *of Lo cunto de le cunti* to overlook the Black slave character. "In doing so," Magnanini asserts, "we commit a sort of violence to her, intellectually burying her, just as she will be buried alive and pregnant at the end of the text."[11] The variations in the tale's title across versions reflect and perpetuate racial animus and the fear of the racial other, underscoring its enduring relevance within Italian culture. For the purposes of this analysis, race is understood following Geraldine Heng's framework: not as a matter of inherent characteristics but as a strategic mechanism for organizing human differences.[12]

While the primary focus is racial prejudice, the analysis also acknowledges the underlying religious biases implicit in the story. By situating the tale within the broader history of racial thought, this paper considers the portrayal of Black slave characters and the treatment of Saracens in these narratives, emphasizing their role in shaping racial perceptions within Italian society. This is particularly evident in Carlo Gozzi's *L'augellino belverde* (1765, *The Green Bird*), the sequel to his *L'amore delle tre melarance* (*The Love of Three Oranges*). In this later adaptation, the racial element is significantly diminished, allowing the slave figure to be granted noble characteristics—an impossibility within the framework of racial otherness in the Christian West.

Basile's *Three Citrons*

Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* is notable for being the first collection in Western Europe comprised entirely of literary fairy tales.[13] Taking as its model Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the model *par*

[10] Suzanne Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves: Representations of Race in Giambattista Basile's Fairy Tales," in *Teaching Race in the European Renaissance: A Classroom Guide*, ed. Matthieu Chapman and Anna Wainwright (Tempe: ACMRS Press, 2023), 203.
[11] Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves," 206.
[12] Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 19.
[13] While it is the first collection to be comprised entirely of literary fairy tales, it is not the first collection to include literary fairy tales. The first to contain any was Straparola's *Le Piacevoli Notti* (1550-1553).

excellence for tale collections, Basile's collection is situated around a frame tale in which Princess Zoza is cursed by an old woman to marry Prince Tadeo, who lies in an enchanted sleep. To awaken him, Zoza learns she must fill a pitcher with her own tears, and when she reaches Tadeo she begins to weep. Just before the pitcher is full, however, she falls asleep from exhaustion. At that moment, a passing Moorish slave, Lucia, seizes the pitcher, completes the task, and marries the prince in Zoza's place. Lucia soon becomes pregnant, while Zoza enchants Lucia with an uncontrollable craving for stories. Lucia threatens to punch her belly and abort her child if her hunger is not satisfied—"Se non venire gente e fiabe contare, mi pugni a ventre dare e Giorgetiello acciaccare!" ("If people no come and with tales my ears fill, me punch belly and little Georgie kill").[14] Alarmed for his heir, Tadeo summons ten old women to tell stories over several days. At the end of this storytelling session, Zoza steps in as the final narrator, recounting "I tre cedri"—a tale that mirrors her own. Following the typical pattern, a prince initially reluctant to marry changes his mind after cutting his finger and seeing his blood mix with white ricotta cheese. Determined to find a bride of the same red-and-white complexion and "of his blood," he searches until he receives three citrons.[15] After freeing fairies from the citrons and giving the third one water, he leaves her waiting in a tree while he prepares a royal welcome. Meanwhile, a Black slave also named Lucia arrives at the nearby fountain.[16] Mistaking the fairy's reflection for her own, she believes she has turned white and begins to rebel against her mistress, refusing to fetch water. When she inadvertently amuses the fairy by puncturing a goatskin of water, she realizes her mistake. Seizing her chance, Lucia pretends to offer to fix the fairy's hair but instead attempts to kill her. The fairy narrowly escapes by transforming into a dove and flying away. When the prince returns to find "una botte di caviale dove aveva lasciato una tinozza di latte" ("a barrel of caviar where he had left a vat of milk"), he delivers a lament contrasting whiteness and Blackness.[17] In this lament, he casts the former as purity and the latter as defilement: "'Chi ha fatto questo sgorbio d'inchiostro alla carta reale, dove pensavo scrivere i giorni miei più felici? Chi ha parato a lutto quella casa biancheggiata di fresco, dove credevo di prendere tutti i diletti miei? Chi mi fa trovare questa pietra di paragone, dove avevo lasciato una miniera d'argento per farmi ricco e beato?'" ("'Who put this ink blot on the royal paper where I planned to write my happiest days? Who draped with black mourning the freshly whitewashed house where I thought I would take all my pleasures? Who would have me

[14]The Italian text is from Benedetto Croce's translation from the Neapolitan: Giambattista Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*Il Pentamerone*), ed. Edoardo Mori, trans. Benedetto Croce (n.p., 2017), 30, https://www.mori.bz.it/rinascimento/Pentamerone.pdf. For the English translation, see Basile, *Giambattista Basile's The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 41.

[15] "Gli venne capriccio di possedere una femmina cosi bianca e rossa come quella ricotta tinta del sangue suo. Onde disse al padre: «Messere mio, se non ho una sposa di questo colore, sono distrutto! Non mai femmina mi andò a sangue e ora ne desidero una simile al sangue mio" ("He got the fancy to find a woman as white and red as that very ricotta stained with his blood. And he said to his father, 'My sir, if I do not have a little something with this sort of complexion, I'm done for! Never has a woman moved my blood, and now I desire a woman like my own blood." Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*Il Pentamerone*), trans. Benedetto Croce, 436; Basile, *Giambattista Basile's The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 434.

[16] The name is not only meant to obviously reveal the truth of Zoza's predicament, but also a reference to the Moorish "dance of Lucia" that was performed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Naples. Transformed into a ritualistic Carnival performance, the role of Lucia was performed by a man in blackface, dressed as a woman, with his song and movements alluding to sexual acts, birth, death, and resurrection. The accompanying chorus derogatorily called Lucia a "bitch." See Nancy L. Canepa, "Introduction to First Day," in *The Tale of Tales*, n6. See also Roberto De Simone's translation of the tales from Neapolitan into Italian: Giambattista Basile, *Il cunto de li cunti*: *riscrittura di Roberto De Simone*, trans. Roberto De Simone (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).

[17] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 442; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 439.

find this touchstone where I left a silver mine destined to make me rich and blissful?'").[18] The tale's conclusion—the revelation of deceit and violence perpetrated by the Black slave—foreshadows Lucia's fate in the frame narrative. Once her deception is revealed, the pregnant Lucia is buried alive, while Zoza assumes her place as Tadeo's rightful wife. Her story serves as a negative exemplum, illustrating the punishment of pride and reinforcing the contrast between the virtuous white princess and the deceitful Black slave.[19]

The relationship between the tale and the frame story of Basile's text is obvious—the diegetic layers reflect each other, and it is through this reflection that Zoza is able to use the inner tale as evidence of Lucia's deceit in the frame tale and the rightful bride is restored. Upon listening, Lucia was "dimenandosi tutta, mentre si narrava il racconto…avendo visto nella storia di un'altra schiava il racconto preciso degli inganni suoi" ("wiggling all over as the tale was told…since she had seen in the tale of the other slave the spitting image of her own deceits").[20] However, as Magnanini points out, this is an exaggeration—the two Lucias do not commit identical crimes, nor are they perfect reflections of each other. Unlike her counterpart in the frame tale, the Lucia of "I tre cedri" does not commit murder, actively deceive anyone, or even initiate wrongdoing. Instead, she merely completes a task begun by another woman.[21] In fact, there is little evidence of deception on her part before she becomes Tadeo's wife: "Non si tosto fu colma, il principe, come se si svegliasse da un gran sonno, si levò da quella cassa di bianco marmo e die di piglio a quella massa di carne nera. E, subito traendola al suo palazzo, con feste e luminarie meravigliose, la rese sua moglie" ("The moment it was full to the brim, the prince got out of his coffin of white stone as if he were awakening from a long sleep, took hold of that mass of black flesh, and carried her off to his palace where, amid festivities and royal fireworks, he made her his wife").[22] Here, the violence and deceit committed by one Lucia are projected onto the other, encapsulated in the phrase "Lucia fece veramente da Lucia" ("Lucia truly acted like a Lucia").[23] As a result, both are subjected to the same punishment, despite the stark differences in their actions. Interestingly, the frame tale is best categorized as tale type 437, "The Supplanted Bride" or "The Needle Prince,"[24] rather than type 408.[25] Uther's outline of tale type 437 describes how the true bride delegates the final task of waking the sleeping prince to a female slave, who then supplants her when the prince mistakes the slave as his savior.[26] However, the frame tale's invocation of a tale of type 408 introduces a racialized dimension, weaponizing its narrative to condemn frame Lucia for the crimes of tale Lucia. In this way, the tale performs what Noémie Ndiaye calls "performative blackness," which

[18] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 442; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 439.
[19] Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves," 202.
[20] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 445; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 443.
[21] Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves," 219.
[22] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 27; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 39.
[23] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 445; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 443.
[24] In European traditions, the tale is frequently known as "The Needle Prince" due to its plot, in which the heroine discovers what appears to be a lifeless prince whose body is covered in pins or needles. As she carefully removes them, she is interrupted—either stepping away briefly or falling asleep—before completing the task. In her absence, a servant girl or another figure finishes removing the last few needles and falsely claims credit for reviving the prince, ultimately marrying him. The deception is later revealed and corrected. See the types and motifs for the twelfth tale in A.K. Ramanujan's *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[25] In her translation of Basile, Canepa notes that the frame tale corresponds to tale type 437, "The Supplanted Bride." See Basile, *Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 35.
[26] Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*, 519.

she defines as "racial impersonation that brings into being and fashions what it claims to mimic."[27] This performativity operates not only in an artistic sense but also in the critical, ideological sense—what Ndiaye terms "racecraft."[28] Racecraft describes the processes through which the concept of Blackness is constructed and maintained, resulting in the formation of racial stereotypes, narratives, ways of thinking, and related social perceptions. Tale Lucia, through her characterization and depiction, functions as an indexical sign, becoming a literary device that anchors meaning and inscribes ideologically preferred interpretations onto frame Lucia. Through the narrative conflation of the two Lucias—specifically, the framing of "Lucia acting like a Lucia," including the allusion to the performative Blackness of the "dance of Lucia"—the tale enacts racecraft.[29] By projecting the guilt of one onto the racialized figure of the other, it not only constructs but also affirms Blackness as inherently deceitful and punishable. This conflation not only reinforces racial anxieties but also affirms biases against Black characters and racial others.

Color symbolism plays a crucial role throughout the tale, shaping its aesthetic and ideological framework. When the prince cuts his finger, Basile describes the contrasting red and white color as "due stille di sangue sulla ricotta, ne venne una mischianza di colore così bella e graziosa" ("his blood fell onto the ricotta, and they blended together to create a color that was so beautiful and full of grace").[30] Here, beauty and grace emerge from the fusion of noble blood with whiteness, reinforcing the racialized hierarchy of the tale. The interplay of color extends beyond this moment, structuring the central antagonistic conflict between white and Black.[31] In traditional Black-and-white dichotomies, whiteness and light are privileged over Blackness and darkness.[32] This dichotomy is especially evident in the relationship between the true bride and the Black Lucia—"e, arrampicandosi la schiava, ed essa porgendole quella mano bianca bianca che, nell'afferrare i neri stecchi, pareva uno specchio di cristallo in cornice d'ebano" ("as the slave scrambled up she put out her little white hand, which grasped by those black sticks looked like a crystal mirror in an ebony frame").[33] While the two figures touch, the metaphor collapses them into a single object,

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[27] Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 2.

[28] Ndiaye borrows the term "racecraft" from Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, whose *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2012) defines the concept as "one among a complex system of beliefs, also with combined moral and cognitive content that presuppose invisible, spiritual qualities under lying and continually acting upon the material realm of beings and events" (17). While acknowledging the Fieldses' formulation, which plays on "witchcraft" to describe the ideological hold of racial thinking, Ndiaye adapts the term to foreground stagecraft, using it to underscore the role of performative practices in shaping early modern racial formations. As she notes, her usage departs from the Fieldses' emphasis on race displacing class-based discourse: in the early modern period, she argues, discussions of phenotype, rank, and religion operated within a shared vocabulary and formed a unified racial concept. Still, she shares the Fieldses' concern with how racial thinking can "hijack the mind" by producing a sense of "obviousness." In this context, Ndiaye sees early modern performative scripts of Blackness as key to constructing a European "structure of feeling" about Afro-diasporic people (17).

[29] Ndiaye notes that techniques of performative Blackness, black-up, blackspeak, and black dances, did not carry a single, fixed meaning. Instead, she argues, they functioned as tools of racecraft, their meaning shaped by what Stuart Hall calls "indexical" signs: literary or performative cues that serve to close or "fix" the otherwise fluid meanings of "iconic" signs of Blackness, whether cosmetic, acoustic, or kinetic, into ideologically charged "dominant" or "preferred" meanings. See both Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness* and Stuart Hall's *Representation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), particularly the chapters titled "The Work of Representation" and "Spectacle of the Other."

[30] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 436; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 434.

[31] Magnanini points to the phrase "two black things had brought her [Zoza's] downfall: sleep and a slave" (Basile, *Tale of Tales*, trans. Canepa, 8) as a concrete example of this. See Magnanini's "Ogres and Slaves."

[32] Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 102.

[33] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 441; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 439.

binding them in visual opposition that defines whiteness through its contrast with Blackness. Through what Whitaker terms "black metaphors," Lucia's racial identity functions as a narrative device that encodes anxieties about disorder and usurpation. Blackness is not simply a descriptor, but a tool strategically deployed to define and elevate the white character and whiteness as the site of legitimacy and virtue.[34] By visually and metaphorically mirroring each other, the two figures are inextricably bound, even as the tale positions them as moral opposites. This dynamic recalls Jacqueline de Weever's analysis of the *chanson de geste*, where the Black Saracen princess functions as a Thanatos/Atropos figure—an agent of death and destruction wielding a scythe to annihilate the Franks in direct opposition to her white counterpart.[35] Similarly, the Lucia in the tale becomes an agent of destruction, threatening the white bride and, later when pregnant, the royal bloodline. Even in the frame tale, where she commits no such crime, the mere association of her Blackness with deception and death marks her as culpable, ensuring her punishment.

The fruit at the heart of "The Three Oranges" tale type is not incidental; its color, cultural associations, and geographic specificity all reinforce the tale's chromatic logic. The citron in Basile's version, distinguished by its golden hue symbolizes love and desire while also anchoring the tale within the warm climates of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. This regional specificity may explain the tale's limited presence in Northern European traditions. Later versions, such as Calvino's Abruzzese "L'amore delle tre melagrane," substitute the pomegranate, a fruit similarly associated with passion and fertility due to its deep red color and historical symbolism.[36] The specific fruit in the tale has varied widely through its many versions.[37] However, the choice of fruit carries mythological weight as well. The golden citron in Basile's version recalls the golden apples of the Hesperides, reinforcing the tale's ideal of beauty, which is inextricably tied to whiteness.[38] This chromatic symbolism extends to the tale's central conflict: the magical bride, marked by extraordinary beauty and skin as white as ricotta, is supplanted by a dark-skinned, ugly, exotic usurper. The contrast between the two figures is not merely aesthetic but moral, with beauty and whiteness signifying purity and legitimacy, while darkness and ugliness become shorthand for deceit and inferiority. The golden fruit from the sunny South, like the bride it produces, is both coveted and contested, embodying the tale's racialized vision of desirability and exclusion. The two female figures represent good and evil respectively, an opposition that in this case entirely depends upon the racial component. After all, another name for the tale is *la brutta saracina*, or "the ugly Saracen woman,"[39] and signals this animus explicitly, linking the tale's imagery to a

[34] See Whitaker's *Black Metaphors*.

[35] Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughter: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), xxi.

[36] For a full discussion of the botanical and chromatic importance of the fruit in Basile's text, see Cristina Mazzoni, "The Fruit of Love in Giambattista Basile's 'The Three Citrons,'" *Marvels & Tales* 29, no. 2 (2015): 228–44.

[37] Calvino notes that there are around forty different versions of the tale, and the fruits used to contain the girls vary widely, including walnuts, hazelnuts, chestnuts, watermelons, lemons, oranges, apples, pomegranates, and even different types of oranges. See Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, n107. Cristina Mazzoni also analyzes the choice of fruit in Basile's literary version. See Mazzoni, "The Fruit of Love."

[38] Mazzoni, "The Fruit of Love," 229, 238. As Mazzoni highlights, Giovanni Gioviano Pontano's 1501 Latin poem *De Hortis Hesperidum, sive de Cultu Citriorum* (On the Garden of the Hesperides, or About the Cultivation of Citrus) identifies the golden apples in the mythological garden of the Hesperides. sought by Hercules during his eleventh labor, as citrus, typically citrons or bitter oranges. Due to Pontano's influence, these mythical apples were often regarded as citrus during the Renaissance. The choice of citrons, associated with beauty in Pontano's poem, is understood through their chromatic affinity with the apples of the Hesperides. Moreover, Pontano links the golden fruit to the white beauty of Adonis, contrasting with the red blood and flower in Ovid's version.

[39] This is the name that the false bride goes by in Calvino's version.

long-standing Western literary tradition in which Blackness is equated with moral and social corruption.

La Schiava: Race, Enslavement, and the Moralization of Blackness

Versions of the three oranges tale titled "La brutta saracina" or "La mora tuerta" shift the narrative focus away from the magical fruit and toward the figure of the enslaved false bride. Despite the overtly pejorative titles, the characterization of the slave figure is notably contradictory. As Christine Shojaei Kawan observes, while the character is initially marked by naivete and a tenuous grasp of reality, she later demonstrates cunning and agency, elevating her status through deception. She fabricates a plausible explanation for her change in appearance, manipulates the prince, and successfully identifies the protagonist through all her transformations.[40] At first glance, the tale presents a straightforward opposition between a villainous dark-skinned slave[41] and a virtuous fair maiden, but the slave's complex characterization indicates a broader narrative function.[42]

Heng's concept of race as a strategic framework for managing human differences provides a useful theoretical lens, but the racial narratives of the tale must also be situated within their sociopolitical contexts. She describes race as an essentializing mechanism that constructs hierarchies and legitimizes differential treatment. "Racemaking," she argues, "thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment."[43] In tale type 408, the slave's Blackness is not merely a physical descriptor but a symbolic marker of moral corruption and deceit.

While the dynamic between Tale Lucia and Frame Lucia in Basile's text exemplifies racecraft—the production of racial meaning through performance,[44] spectacle, and interpretive framing—the tale also reveals the structural logic of *racemaking*. The shift in emphasis from the false bride's individual deceit to her identity as a slave or Saracen underscores how systems of power produce and exploit human difference through strategies of essentialization and exclusion.

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[40] Christine Shojaei Kawan, "Reflections on International Narrative Research on the Example of 'The Tale of the Three Oranges,'" *Folklore* 27 (2004): 43.

[41] In late medieval Italy, *schiava* (the term used here) specifically referred to enslaved women, possibly from the Slavic regions bordering the Adriatic Sea. However, the word for slave in both English and Italian is traced back to Latin and Greek where the word was used as a generic term for "prisoner." By contrast, the term "villain" originally meant "farm worker" in Latin ("of the villa") but in French developed a broader meaning, encompassing a person's social status, occupation, and even moral character. It could refer to a peasant, serf, or someone of low social standing. See Anna Kłosowska, "The Etymology of 'Slave.'"

[42] It is worth noting here that in Calvino's version the antagonist is only ever referred to as a "brutta saracina" ("ugly Saracen woman"), while Basile's version refers to her instead as a "schiava" ("slave"). However, the ugly Saracen woman is in a servile position getting water for her mistress, and so while her position as a slave is more muted, it is still present.

[43] Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 27.

[44] Not only are the expressions "Lucia acting like a Lucia" and the reference to the "dance of the Lucia" part of this racialized performance, but so too is Lucia's distinct patois, which exemplifies what Ndiaye refers to as *blackspeak*. According to Ndiaye, blackspeak is a theatrical technique that "codifies the sound of Afro-descendants' speech forms for stage purposes," relying on grammatical errors (such as incorrect conjugation, agreement, or gendering), lexical borrowings from early modern African languages, and exaggerated phonetic distortions. These elements combine to produce a standardized, recognizable, and repeatable stage accent marked as Black (Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness*, 138). While this paper does not focus on accent or sound, it is important to note that Lucia's stylized language opens an additional avenue for exploring how race is constructed performatively in the tale. For a fuller discussion of blackspeak, see "Blackspeak: Acoustic Blackness and the Accents of Race" in Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness*.

In this sense, race emerges not just through performance, but as a political and epistemological tool that orders the social world. The opposition between Black and white becomes the primary mode of articulating broader cultural anxieties about legitimacy, social hierarchy, and moral virtue.[45] Thus, the antagonist's racial coding operates as racemaking: it does not simply illustrate personal moral failure but rather enacts and reinforces longstanding tropes and communal fears about the racialized other.

The slave's perceived inferiority is inextricably linked to her physical appearance, which is explicitly coded as both grotesque and morally corrupt. Medieval and early modern physiognomy, drawing from classical sources, posited that external corporeal traits revealed internal character.[46] Ancient Roman poets like Juvenal and Seneca reinforced beauty ideals centered on light olive skin, excluding both Germanic and African features as naturally defective.[47] As David Goldenberg notes, while prejudice against non-Romans was widespread,[48] Black individuals were uniquely judged not for their customs or temperament but for their physical attributes—particularly skin color, which visibly marked them as "other."[49] This "somatic dissonance" carried symbolic weight, reinforcing negative associations within Roman culture and society.

Debra Higgs Strickland's analysis of monstrous bodies in medieval art further contextualizes this physiognomic framework, emphasizing how bodily characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and body proportions, were interpreted as indicators of virtue or vice.[50] This tradition is reflected in "I tre cedri," where Basile exaggerates the antagonist's deformities, describing her as "una certa schiava gamba-di-grillo" ("a certain cricket-legged slave girl").[51] Such animalistic descriptors align with medieval artistic traditions that framed racialized others as subhuman, a trope that Basile repurposes within his literary narrative.[52] These grotesque exaggerations render the antagonist not only visually repulsive but morally suspect, reinforcing a system where Blackness is equated with monstrosity and deceit.[53]

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[45] Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 41–42.

[46] This perhaps stems from Classical attitudes towards the nature of the "barbarian." Athenians contrasted their democracy with Persian monarchy, depicting Greeks as free and rebellious while portraying "barbarians" as naturally enslaved by tyrants. Herodotus, Plato's *The Laws*, and Aristotle's *Politics* reinforced this view, arguing that Greeks were natural rulers, whereas barbarians were inherently suited for subjugation, justifying Greek dominance and enslavement of other peoples. In the chapter on proto-orientalism in his book, Kalmar cautions that there is no evidence to suggest this sentiment was universally held across Greece. He proposes that Greek city-states allied with the Persians might have had different perspectives, and these attitudes could be specific to Athens. See "Proto-orientalism: Ancient and Medieval Views of the East," in Kalmar's *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (London: Routledge, 2012), 30–39.

[47] Lloyd Thompson also mentions that "facial morphology" and "overly large breasts" in Black women were part of this 'natural' deficit. See Lloyd Thompson, "Roman Perceptions of Blacks," *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 2, no. 1 (1993): 17–30.

[48] David Goldenberg writes that other groups of the somatic norm were criticized for nonphysical attributes: Syrians and Asians were considered to be born for slavery, effeminate, and servile; Phoenicians were seen as cheats and faithless; Greeks were viewed as soft, degenerate, and morally inferior, lacking virility and courage. See Goldenberg, "Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice," in T*he Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac, and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88–108.

[49] Ibid., 88.

[50] Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 38.

[51] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 27; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 38.

[52] See note 18 in Canepa's translation of Basile.

[53] For the medieval visual traditions, see Strickland's *Saracens, Demons & Jews*.

Building on classical and physiognomic traditions, early Christian thought intensified the association between Blackness and sin. Goldenberg argues that while Christianity did not originate this connection, it intensified its reach. Ethiopian Blackness, for example, became a central metaphor in the cosmic battle between good and evil, a theme pervasive in patristic writings.[54] While the Bible does not explicitly equate dark skin with moral depravity, first-century thinkers like Philo introduced this idea by linking Ethiopian blackness to Nimrod's rebellious nature.[55] By the second century, early Christian sources referred to the devil as the "Black One,"[56] cementing the metaphorical link between Blackness and spiritual darkness.[57] From as early as the second century, it became specifically associated with Black Africans, particularly Ethiopians.[58] In this tradition, the biblical Ethiopian came to symbolize all who, without Christian baptism, remained spiritually "black," deprived of divine light.[59]

The slave character Lucia in "I tre cedri" reflects these associations. Her racialized features are not incidental but function as narrative markers of moral and physical deviance. The racial logic of the tale operates within a framework of Whitaker's "black metaphors," constructing whiteness as the site of virtue. This dynamic is evident in Lucia's deception, particularly her attempt to mislead the prince in pidgin Italian: "'Non maravegliare, principe mio, ché stare uccia è fatata: un anno faccia bianca, un anno culo nero'" ("'Not to marvel, my prince, for presto! Me be enchanted, one year white face, one year black ass!'").[60] This framing suggests that her Blackness is temporary, an affliction that might be reversed, restoring her to whiteness and, by extension, desirability. A similar idea appears in Calvino's "L'amore delle tre melagrane," where an ugly Saracen woman justifies her dark skin by claiming that "È venuto fuori il sole, / M'ha cambiata di colore" ("Out came the sun / and made me dun").[61] This invocation of sunburn as an explanation for her complexion aligns with early modern European discourses in which Blackness was occasionally framed as an environmental effect rather than an inherent racial trait.

Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness* contextualizes such references within early modern England's racial discourse, arguing that the use of sunburn as a narrative device creates a fluidity between racial absolutes. This fluidity momentarily allows movement between the Black/white dichotomy while ultimate reinforcing the racial hierarchy.[62] Lucia's claim to be enchanted functions similarly, enabling a temporary performance of whiteness while maintaining the broader narrative of racial inferiority. The association of darkness with paganism further reinforces this dynamic. In the Christian tradition, Blackness was frequently linked to religious otherness, particularly Islam, with

[54] Goldenberg, "Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice," 96.

[55] Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher Philo, in analyzing the story of Nimrod, who rebelled against God, associates Nimrod's nature with his father Kush's dark skin, allegorizing the Blackness of the Ethiopians as evil. Goldenberg cites Philo as stating that "Nimrod's evil nature is hinted in his father's blackness, 'because pure evil has no participation in light, but follows night and darkness'" (5).

[56] The devil is referred to by this name in *The Epistles of Barnabas, The Life of Saint Melania,* and Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, among others.

[57] The early Christian scholar and theologian Origen of Alexandria, in the second to third century, systematically applied this association throughout the Bible, influencing subsequent exegetical efforts.

[58] Goldenberg, "Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice," 97–98. Goldenberg notes that the term "Black One" was racialized, i.e. applied to peoples of African descent. He points to the *Acts of Andrew* and the *Acts of Peter*, second-century apocryphal texts in which devils or demons are depicted as Ethiopians.

[59] Goldenberg, "Racism, Color Symbolism, and Color Prejudice," 94–95.

[60] Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, trans. Benedetto Croce, 442; Basile, *The Tale of Tales*, trans. Nancy L. Canepa, 439.

[61] Calvino, *Fiabe italiane*, tale 107; Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, 390.

[62] Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 97.

Muslims often depicted as sunworshippers.[63] By invoking sunburn as the cause of her complexion, the tale does more than racialize the antagonist—it aligns her with non-Christian idolatry or heresy, deepening her status as an outsider.

While these deeply entrenched European racial ideologies, which originated in the Middle Ages, help to shape the antagonist's portrayal, the tale's early modern context, particularly in Naples—a hub of Mediterranean trade and slavery—introduces new layers of racial complexity. Suzanne Magnanini's work on Basile's treatment of race underscores how these narratives reflect the lived realities of racialized subjects in seventeenth-century Italy, where Blackness was not only a literary metaphor but a social fact. Unlike the transatlantic system, Mediterranean slavery operated through a network of reciprocal enslavements between Europeans, Ottomans, North Africans, and sub-Saharan Africans.[64] Enslavement was often impermanent, with individuals captured, ransomed, and re-enslaved multiple times over their lifetimes. Further, slavery was legally and culturally framed more as a function of religion than race—while no baptized Christian could be enslaved, religion was often inferred based on ancestry and place of origin, preserving an association between race and slavery. [65]

While slavery in early modern Italy was smaller in scale than in the Atlantic world,[66] Basile's Naples nevertheless included enslaved, freed, and free Black Africans. That "I tre cedri" racializes enslavement, by casting its slave figure as both Black and morally depraved, signals the emergence of a racialized ideology in which the people of the Italian peninsula are defined in opposition to a non-European, non-Christian other.[67] The tale mobilizes what Ndiaye calls the "diabolical script of blackness"—a representational system of exclusion that links blackened characters with demonic forces.[68] This association functioned through a hermeneutic framework that visually and symbolically conflated the Devil with any figure in blackface. When this interpretive lens was activated, characters marked by Blackness became scopic signifiers of an internal threat, endangering Christian Europe from within.[69] Within this framework, the antagonist's position as a Black, enslaved woman reinforces the association between racial identity and moral corruption.

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[63] Ibid., 103.

[64] Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves," 208.

[65] Sally Mckee, "Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy," 321-322.

[66] McKee, "Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy," *Slavery & Abolition* 29, no. 3 (2008): 306.

[67] Sub-Saharan African slaves appeared in northern Italian records by the mid-fourteenth century, primarily acquired through Muslim merchants until the mid-fifteenth century. However, they never made up more than a small fraction of the slave population in northern Italian cities. In contrast, their presence in Southern Italy, especially Sicily, was more significant and long-lasting due to the island's ties with Aragon and its proximity to North African markets. Black Africans possibly comprised about half of Sicily's enslaved population in the sixteenth century, but their numbers declined as the transatlantic slave trade redirected captives to the Americas. To compensate, Sicilian traders increasingly turned to enslaved Muslims from the Maghreb. Black African slaves were consistently valued lower than those from Central Asia or Eastern Europe, suggesting both lower demand and a prevailing bias against dark-skinned individuals in Italian society. See Mckee's "Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy."

[68] Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness*, 37.

[69] On stage, the medieval blackface devil occupied a dual role, as both a comedic figure channeling popular frustrations and a theological entity embodying profound spiritual threat. Audiences oscillated between laughter, fear, and censure, but consistently perceived the devil as a destabilizing force. As Ndiaye notes, drawing on John Cox's work, stage devils functioned to define communal values by dramatizing what society rejected. Their opposition helped to delineate the moral and spiritual boundaries of the Christian community. For Renaissance spectators steeped in the interpretive habits of religious drama, blackened figures were readily associated with demonic forces that threatened to corrupt society from within. Theater makers strategically activated these associations through poetic cues, reinforcing existing racialized ideologies and sustaining exclusionary representational systems onstage. See "A Brief History of Baroque Black-Up" in Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness*, 35–82.

Her dark skin does not merely mark her as socially inferior; it serves as an externalized sign of her inner wickedness. In contrast, the fair-skinned protagonist's beauty is implicitly aligned with Christianity. The antagonist's identity—defined by the labels "slave" and "Saracen"—reinforces a system in which race, religion, and social hierarchy are deeply intertwined.

The Lie of the Saracen

The antagonist of the three oranges tale embodies a stereotypical enemy archetype, represented typically as a dark-skinned African or Moorish/Saracen woman depending on the regional variation of the narrative. [70] This reflects a broader ethnographic ambiguity in which African and Muslim identities are merged into a singular, racialized other. The term *Moor* historically encompassed Muslims, Black Africans, or both, underscoring the imprecise and fluid usage of racial and religious classifications in medieval and early modern Europe. Scholars have pointed out that such terminology, *Moor* and *Saracen*, was inconsistently applied. While *Moor* often signified an ethnic association with Arabs or North Africans, *Saracen* was often a religious identifier for Muslims of any ethnicity. By the late fifteenth century, terminology for Middle Eastern individuals with dark complexions who practiced Islam was evolving. *Saracen* was largely replaced, with *Turk* signifying religious identity as a Muslim and *Moor* persisting as a racialized descriptor.[71] However, the distinction between religion and ethnicity remained unstable, reinforcing the conceptual interchangeability of African and Muslim identities in European thought.

As Magnanini notes, Basile describes Lucia as both "black" and "Moorish" while using "Saracen" to refer to another enslaved Black woman.[72] This in turn aligns with critical race theory's understanding of race as a constructed framework for organizing human differences, rather than an inherent biological reality wherein race has no singular, stable referent.[73] The alternative title *la brutta saracina* draws on medieval ethnographic myths, including Isidore of Seville's mapping of Ham's cursed descendants onto Africa and the fabricated genealogy that cast Muslims as dishonest descendants of Sarah. These associations collapsed race and religion into a single identity of inherent inferiority.[74]

Medieval European perceptions of Islam shaped the conflation of racial and religious difference that Basile inherited at the outset of the seventeenth century. From the early spread of

[70] The type of enemy changes depends upon the geographic location of the version. Christine Shojaei Kawan says that "in Spain, Portugal, Italy, as well as in Turkey and Persia, it is an African girl (on the Iberian Peninsula mostly a Moorish, in Italy a Saracenic girl), in the Balkans it is a Gypsy girl, while in Greece and Malta sometimes a Turkish girl. The character may also be demonized to a witch and may be called a Moorish or a Gypsy witch." See Shojaei Kawan's "Reflections on International Narrative Research on the Example of the Tale of the Three Oranges, " 43.
[71] Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 14.
[72] Magnanini, "Ogres and Slaves," 207.
[73] Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 19.
[74] The work of Isidore of Seville, the sixth-century Spanish archbishop, provides early evidence of such racial categorization. Using biblical ethnography, Isidore mapped the world's geography by assigning the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa to the descendants of Noah's three sons: Shem, Japheth, and Ham, respectively. This narrative, in which God condemns Ham's descendants to serve Shem and Japheth's lineage, later provided theological justification for African enslavement, further reinforcing racial hierarchies that conflated geography, religion, and servitude. Kalmar states that "[Isidore] labeled Asia as the land Sem, the son of Noah whose name would much later be given to an imagined race called 'Semites.' Europe became the land of Japhet (Iafeth), another of the three sons, whose descendants would eventually be equated with the Indo-Europeans or 'Aryans.' Following the then customary interpretation, the Africans were to Isidore descendants of Ham (Cham)" (34–35). Kalmar, *Early Orientalism*, 35.

Islam across the Mediterranean, Christians used terms like "Saracen" or "Moor" as catch-all labels that collapsed cultural distinctions and cast Muslims as a unified enemy. Depending on the region, recent converts to Islam were given various names such as Ishmaelites, Saracens, and Moors, but to medieval Europeans their presence was seen as a singular existential threat.[75] The broad and imprecise use of these terms blurred cultural, linguistic, and ethnic distinctions, reducing diverse peoples into a monolithic adversarial bloc of heretics and schismatics. Heng argues that the medieval Christian West was able to grant an essence-imparting feature to Islam, conferring it with a unified identity that transcended historical and regional variation.[76]

The term Saracen became the primary label for enemies of Christendom, carrying theological weight as well as political significance.[77] This ideological framing was particularly evident in the *chansons de geste*, medieval French epics centered on the Crusades where Saracens frequently served as infidel adversaries to Christian knights.[78] These narratives, which heavily influenced Italian literary traditions, helped entrench the association of Saracens with villainy.[79] Positioning Muslims as agents of corruption and deception, earlier literature and art demonized them, often aligning Muslims with the devil or other markers of corruption, deception, and monstrosity. [80] This tradition extended into genealogical myths that reinforced their supposed degeneracy.[81] Christian sources inconsistently reinforced this claim, at times attributing Saracen origins to figures like Cain, Nero, or Muhammad in order to further vilify them.[82] As Strickland observes, the association with Cain was particularly potent, linking Saracens to both the biblical mark of sin and medieval

[75] Cristian Capelli et al., "Moors and Saracens in Europe: Estimating the Medieval North African Male Legacy in Southern Europe," *European Journal of Human Genetics* 17, no. 6 (2009): 848.
[76] Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 111.
[77] From the late eleventh century onward, *Saracen* functioned as a catch-all term for all adherents to Islam, further consolidating their identity into a homogenous oppositional force. Due to the Italian focus of this paper, as well as the previous point made of the flattening of identity, this is the term being explored here.
[78] William Wistar Comfort, "The Literary Rôle of the Saracens in the French Epic," *PMLA* 55, no. 3 (1940): 630. Comfort suggests that the term *Saracen* in medieval literature could serve as any group of non-Christian peoples. Thus the Saxons are often conflated with the Saracens, not only in Jean Bodel's *Chanson des Saisnes* but in many other poems as well: the Northmen in *Aquin*, the Irish in *Gormont et Isembart* (where they are referred to as "ceus d'Irlande"), the Danes in *Chron. de Phil. Mouskes* and *Horn et Rimenhild*, and the Vandals in *Garin le Loherain*.
[79] William Wistar Comfort, "The Saracens in Italian Epic Poetry," *PMLA* 57, no. 4 (1942): 882. These texts were imported into Italy and a sizable amount of the epic corpus was composed in the Franco-Italian hybridized language before eventually and finally being composed entirely in Italian. The use of the hybridized Franco-Italian language allowed for easier transmission of chivalric epic, particularly in Lombardy and Veneto. For a fuller discussion on this importation, see John Sunderland, "Linguistic and Political Ferment in the Franco-Italian Epic," *Exemplaria* 23 (3): 293–313.
[80] Kalmar, *Early Orientalism*, 37. Although Christians and Muslims occupied the same Mediterranean cultural space, medieval European narratives and Christian artworks sometimes portrayed Muslims as devils, a strategy of demonization that was extended to other marginalized groups, including pagans, Jews, and heretics.
[81] A persistent medieval belief held that the Arabs falsely derived the name Saracen from Sarah, the wife of Abraham, rather than from Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden with whom Abraham fathered Ishmael. The story that fabricates the name's rationale comes from St. Jerome. See Jerome's *Commentary on Ezekiel* or Tomaz Mastnak's discussion of Jerome in his *Crusading Peace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Heng, in *The Invention of Race*, states that according to this theory, Muslims sought to obscure their "true" genealogy by casting themselves as descendants not of a concubine and slave, but of the wife of Abraham (111). This narrative accused Muslims of distorting biblical history, misrepresenting their faith, and engaging in deliberate deception to obscure their subservient lineage. It is for this reason that Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh argues that the term *Saracen* is more than just a geographical or religious descriptor: rather, it serves as a derogatory label specifically targeting Muslims, rooted in racism and embodying a deep-seated antagonism toward Islam. See Rajabzadeh's "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure," *Literature Compass* 16, nos. 9–10 (2019).
[82] Comfort, "Literary Role of Saracens in French Epic," 629.

representations of monstrous races.[83] In this framework, Cain embodied the archetype of the unrepentant sinner, marked not only by fratricide but by his failure to seek redemption. His supposed descendants, likewise bearing the guilt of their own transgressions, were believed to have given rise to deformed and misshapen offspring.[84] This association reinforced the idea that racial and religious outsiders were inherently degenerate, which in turn shaped the artistic and literary depictions of non-Christian adversaries. Basile's tale draws on this legacy, reducing the Black antagonist to a racial and religious stereotype that signals inherent otherness.

This false racial narrative is exemplified in the three oranges tales, where the antagonist functions as a "nefarious infidel" who attempts to remove the stigma of subservience through deceitful transformation.[85] Her efforts to claim the prince and the throne parallel the medieval Christian claim that Muslims sought to rewrite history and falsify their own lineage. Just as Saracens were accused of distorting their ancestry, the false bride disguises her own identity, usurping a status that does not belong to her. The tale thus reinforces a deeply ingrained suspicion of Muslim and Black figures, portraying them not merely as threats to social order but as inherent deceivers, their existence an affront to Christian claims to religious legitimacy.

Gozzi's Plays: *L'amore delle tre melarance* and *L'augellino belverde*

It is possible, however, that across time the tale of the three oranges is not always charged with racially ideological motivations. In eighteenth-century Venice, as a counterpoint to the middle-class comedies of Carlo Goldoni, the aristocratic playwright Carlo Gozzi aimed to launch a new poetics in commercial theater, writing and staging plays that fused *fiabe*, *commedia dell'arte*, and pointed social and aesthetic critique.[86] A conservative figure, Gozzi viewed the public's taste as unsophisticated and sought to elevate theater through fantastical plots that incorporated fairies, wizards, and familiar comic characters.[87] The material for these plots were based on *fiabe* of Italian and Eastern origin, as well as their French theatrical adaptations, blending folklore with literary drama in ways that significantly departed from earlier storytelling traditions.[88]

The first of his ten *fiabe*-inspired plays, *L'amore delle tre melarance* (*The Love of Three Oranges*) premiered in Venice in January 1761.[89] The play diverged so greatly from the norms of

[83] Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews*, 49.
[84] Strickland states that an idea seemingly original to the eleventh-century *Vienna Genesis* suggests that with Cain's progeny the once-perfect human form began to outwardly reflect the corruption of sin. This association between Cain and monstrosity appears elsewhere in medieval literature, most notably in *Beowulf*, where Grendel and his mother are described as "Cain's kin." See Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews*.
[85] It is possible to draw a parallel between the antagonist of the tale and the prophet Muhammad, as Muhammad was originally seen as a heretical Christian attempting to take the place of Christ. See Kalmar, *Early Orientalism*, 38.
[86] Domenico Pietro Paolo, "Gozzi's *The Love of Three Oranges*: A New Horizon of Expectations," in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, ed. Dassia N. Posner and Kevin Bartig (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 94.
[87] Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, xv.
[88] Albert Bermel and Ted Emery, "Introduction: Gozzi in Context," in *Five Tales for the Theatre* by Carlo Gozzi, trans. Albert Bermel and Ted Emery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5.
[89] Gozzi's play has only been preserved in the form of a "reflective analysis," *Analisi riflessiva della fiaba 'L'amore delle tre melarance*.' In it, Gozzi provides a detailed description of the plot, comedic elements, occasional dialogue, and commentary detailing instances in which characters, dialogue, plot twists, and even props serve as an allegorical attack on his enemies. See De Simone's translation of Gozzi's "Reflective Analysis of the Fairy Tale 'Love of the Three Oranges'" in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 37–72

the time that it surprised observers and created doubts about its authorship.[90] Gasparo Gozzi, Carlo Gozzi's brother, attributed the source material of the play to Basile's "I tre cedri." However, some scholars dispute this claim.[91] Gozzi himself noted his intentions clearly: "Nella scelta di questo primo argomento, ch'è tratto dalla più vile tra le fole, che si narrano a' ragazzi, e nella bassezza de' dialoghi, e della condotta, e de' caratteri, palesemente con artifizio avvilitti, pretesi di porre scherzevolmente in ridicolo…e molte altre plebe, e trivialissime opere del Signor Goldoni" ("By choosing this first plot, which is taken from the most common of all the fairy tales that you tell children, and by using simple language, actions, and characters, which are clearly and intentionally simplified, I aimed to jokingly ridicule…many...very plebeian and trivial works by Goldoni").[92] Regardless of whether Basile's specific version is the source or not, the play unmistakably relies on the folktale tradition of the three oranges.

Gozzi's adaptation notably revises the *servetta* character. In *L'amore delle tre melarance*, the role of the false bride is filled by Smeraldina, a variant of the *commedia dell'arte* stock character Columbina.[93] Traditionally a comic servant figure, Columbina sometimes carried associations with prostitution or trickery. Here, Smeraldina is described as a "turca italianizzata" ("Italianized Turk,")[94] a designation that aligns with *commedia dell'arte* portrayals of Turkish or Saracen figures.[95] Typically, such characters were depicted as hot-tempered, violent, and combative, traits shaped by audience expectations.[96] However, unlike the narrative of *la brutta saracina*,

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[90] Alberto Beniscelli, "*The Love of Three Oranges*, Venice 1761: A Theatrical Provocation," in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 12. Beniscelli cites descriptions of the play as being a "mysterious absurdity," a "novel oddity," a "trifling fairy tale," and a "magical trifle."

[91] Beniscelli points to the prologue in the Colombani edition which states that the plot is taken from the most common fairy tale told to children. Whereas Natalya Baldyga notes that "if Gozzi did draw from Basile to construct his *fiaba*, his cross-genre adaptation would have entailed a significant linguistic and cultural transformation, given the fundamentally Neapolitan identity of the *Pentamerone*" (126). See their respective chapters in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*.

[92] Carlo Gozzi, *Opere del CO: Carlo Gozzi*, tomo I (Venice: Colombani, 1772), 80; Carlo Gozzi, "Reflective Analysis of the Fairy Tale 'The Love of Three Oranges'" in *Three Loves for Three Oranges,* 49–50. De Simone cites it in her introduction, 42–43.

[93] Other names for Columbina, besides Smeraldina, include Franceschina, Oliva, Nespola, Spinetta Ricciolina, and Corallina Diamantina. See Barry Grantham's *Playing Commedia: A Training Guide to Commedia Techniques* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001).

[94] Gozzi, "Analisi riflessiva della fiaba 'L'amore delle tre melarance'," in *Opere del CO*, 102; Gozzi, "Reflective Analysis of the Fairy Tale 'The Love of Three Oranges,'" in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 63. Gozzi refers to her as a Moorish girl in his own reflective analysis. De Simone says in her note on the translation that "in Italian, *mora* simply means 'dark.' The adjective was used indistinctly for people of North African descent or of dark complexion (who were considered less attractive for the beauty standards of the time). As Gozzi specifies at the beginning of act III, Smeraldina was a 'Turk,' a vague ethnic descriptor referring to people of Muslim faith. For eighteenth-century Europeans, Turks were not residents of contemporary Turkey but an ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse group residing within the Ottoman Empire. At the time, this empire included parts of North Africa (contemporary Algeria, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and northern Egypt), Greece, the Balkans, and contemporary Syria and Iran. It is thus hard to pinpoint Smeraldina's skin tone and geographic provenance. Nevertheless, it is clear that she plays the fiaba's *servetta*." See "Reflective Analysis of the Fairy Tale 'The Love of Three Oranges,'" in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 69.

[95] "Turk" or "Turkish" was loosely applied to Arab and Berber peoples. See Richard Andrews' introduction in *The Commedia dell'arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios*, ed. Richard Andrews (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), xlviii.

[96] Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Migrations and Cultural Navigations on Early Modern Italian Stages," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 272. For a fuller discussion on race in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition see Jaffe-Berg's "Migrations and Cultural Navigations on Early Modern Italian Stages,"

Smeraldina does not function as the main antagonist. Instead, she is subordinate to the evil witch Fata Morgana, serving as her pawn rather than as an autonomous schemer. Morgana aids Smeraldina in replacing the Orange Maiden by magically transforming her speech, giving her "nella lingua un diavolo toscano" ("a Tuscan devil on her tongue") so that she defies all poets in her literary correctness.[97] This magical intervention underscores Smeraldina's lack of agency: she follows orders rather than acting on her own volition. Further, the reduction of the racialized antagonist to a mere puppet suggests a shift in the racial imaginary, from a threatening Black woman to a passive figure of racial degeneration. Gozzi's broader aim was to deliver allegorical satire and parody against theatrical and ideological rivals he disdained. The character of Fata Morgana, who controls Smeraldina, is often interpreted as a caricature of Gozzi's contemporary Pietro Chiari.[98] In this context, Blackness is displaced from an embodied racial enmity to a symbolic register of moral failure, while true enmity is focused on a larger *ideological* threat of the Enlightenment. Although Smeraldina's role is diminished in power, she still shares the same fate as her folkloric predecessor and is ultimately burned alive at the stake.

While *L'amore delle tre melarance* preserves certain racial undertones, *L'augellino belverde* presents a striking contrast through the erasure of race. A fantastical sequel to Gozzi's *L'amore delle tre melarance*, the play blends commedia dell'arte with fairy-tale motifs to follow the story of royal twins who, unaware of their lineage, undertake a journey of self-discovery guided by prophetic visions and aided by magical beings, including the titular green bird, to reclaim their rightful place. As with his other *fiabe*-inspired dramas, Gozzi uses fantastical devices and commedia dell'arte devices to mount a satirical critique of Enlightenment rationalism and prevailing theatrical trends. This five-act play, fast-paced and structurally complex, weaves together multiple plotlines including the moral decline of twins Renzo and Barbarina, the romantic pursuits of Tartaglia, and the machinations of Tartagliona. Along the way, the play mocks philosophical pretensions, social ambition, and blind rationalism, contrasting them with the intuitive wisdom of folk traditions. In the opening of act one, scene two, we learn that Smeraldina, burned alive at the end of *L'amore delle tre melarance*, has been miraculously resurrected. Yet Truffaldino laments her transformation. Where she was once clever and wicked, she is now honest and foolish, traits that he finds intolerable.[99] His frustration underscores how her former intelligence was coded as moral deviance, while her reformed simplicity suggests a sanitization of her racialized past, in which deviant Blackness is replaced with naivety and docility.

This change is symbolically reinforced through imagery of charcoal, evoking both fire and Blackness. Smeraldina's previous self, marked by cunning and malice, is associated with darkness, while her transformation after death aligns her with innocence and naivety. Though the racial element is not explicitly articulated in the text, the implication remains: her negative traits were bound to her former identity, and her resurrection represents a loss of that identity. This thematic

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in *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration*, as well as her book, *Commedia dell'arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping "Others"* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[97] Gozzi, "Analisi riflessiva", 106; Gozzi, "Reflective Analysis," 63.

[98] Gozzi admits in his "Reflective Analysis" that the character of Fata Morgana is a caricature of Pietro Chiari. See Gozzi's "Reflective Analysis" (pp. 52, 64) and De Simone's introduction.

[99] "Truffaldino, gridando, che non può più soffrirla, che quando fu abbruciata, era una scellerata utile, e che, se doveva risuscitare una minchiona, era meglio che se ne restasse un carbone, maledice il punto in cui l'ha sposata, ch'è il suo ultimo esterminio ecc" (Truffaldino proclaims, "Smeraldina, I happen to hate your guts. In the old days, before they burned you alive, you were smart but wicked – a useful broad. Then, as soon as you came back to life, you grew honest and silly and a pain in the ass. I liked you a lot more as a heap of charcoal") (Gozzi I.2). Carlo Gozzi, *L'amore delle tre melarance; L'augellino belverde* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1883) .

shift resonates with Christian notions of conversion and redemption, particularly the recurring motif of positive transformation from Black to white. In late medieval texts such as the fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi*, Black Saracens undergo miraculous whitening as a sign of their spiritual purification.[100] Although there is no evidence that Gozzi knew *Cursor Mundi*, the medieval poem exemplifies a Christian trope in which Black Saracens are "whitened" through miraculous conversion. Smeraldina's symbolic whitening through fire resonates with this long-lived cultural trope at the level of narrative logic, even as Gozzi deploys it within a satirical, Enlightenment-era context. The point is not genealogical but comparative: Gozzi's erasure of racial markers reactivates, in altered form, a well-established Christian discourse that links nobility with whiteness. In *L'augellino belverde* Smeraldina's symbolic rebirth parallels this trope, as she is stripped of her former characteristics and rendered both socially acceptable and morally benign. The erasure of her skin color enables the character to embody a form of nobility that would have been inaccessible to the racialized other in the Christian West.

The omission of explicit racial elements in *L'augellino belverde* is not necessarily an engagement with eighteenth-century racial politics, but rather a byproduct of the play's broader critique of Enlightenment ideals. As Ted Emery observes, *L'augellino belverde* is "liberally peppered with derogatory references to the Enlightenment," suggesting that its primary thematic concern is a rejection of contemporary philosophical thought rather than racial discourse.[101] As Ndiaye notes, "the meaning of performative blackness is always strategically defined by history and poetics in response to glocally articulated ideological needs."[102] In other words, Gozzi's turn away from racialized characterizations in his plays reflects a shifting ideological focus shaped by the satirical needs of the moment. In this context, race ceases to function as an essential narrative device not because it is irrelevant, but because Gozzi's satire is aimed elsewhere. Yet even this omission reveals a surviving fragment of racial logic: the deliberate removal of racial markers in order to redirect thematic focus acknowledges the underlying narrative structures shaped by earlier racial representations in the *fiabe*-based tradition. The erasure is itself meaningful, as it marks a conscious departure that depends on the audience's familiarity with the racialized scripts it leaves behind.

This explanation for the racial erasure does not attempt to situate Gozzi's adaptation within any specific epistemological or political discourse on race in the eighteenth century, but rather suggests that such a framework may not be necessary. While *L'amore delle tre melarance* does belong to tale type 408, the three oranges, *L'augellino belverde* is instead categorized as belonging to tale type 707, the three golden children.[103] In this narrative tradition, a woman gives birth to children of wondrous aspect, but they are stolen away, either by jealous relatives or a malevolent mother-in-law, leading to her unjust punishment by her husband. Only years later is the family

[100] Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 16. Heng cites the exact line as "'Als milk thair hide bicom sa quite/And o fre blode thai had the hew'" ("'Their skin became as white as milk/And they had the hue of noble blood" [Morris ll. 8072, 8120–1])". Heng cites Richard Morris's *Cursor Mundi (The Cursur O the World), Part II: A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth Century in Four Versions, Two of Them Midland* (London: Pub. for the Early English Text Society by N. Trübner & Co, 1875).

[101] Bermel and Emery, "Introduction: Gozzi in Context," 7.

[102] Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness*, 35.

[103] Italo Calvino includes *L'uccel bel-verde* ("The Fine Greenbird") as tale 87 in his collection, noting that it was widely known across Europe. The earliest literary version appears as *Ancilotto, King of Provino* in Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (IV, 3), which later influenced Madame d'Aulnoy's *Princess Belle-Étoile*. These tales are classified under tale type 707, "The Three Golden Children." Calvino also notes that Gozzi adapted it into his *L'amore delle tre melarance*.

reunited, and the scheming relatives receive their comeuppance. While the tale type engages with themes of separation, fraudulent substitutions, and eventual restoration, these elements are not identical to those in tale type 408.[104] Notably, Uther makes no mention of a racialized figure when categorizing tale type 707, suggesting that race is not an intrinsic or epistemologically relevant feature of the narrative structure. Instead, the simple shift of focus removes race as a necessary structuring element, and without that focus its presence in the tale dissipates.

Conclusion

Tale type 408, the three oranges, reflects a long history of racial and religious antagonism embedded in European storytelling. While originating within the Mediterranean, the tale participates in a broader ideological project that conflates African and Muslim identities into a singular, demonized figure. This conflation is not incidental but rather symptomatic of a worldview in which race and religion were jointly deployed to define human difference. The racialized false bride serves as a narrative mechanism through which whiteness, Christian legitimacy, and moral virtue are constructed in opposition to Blackness, Islam, and deceit.

With its Italian origins, "The Three Oranges" contributes to the construction of a proto-Italian identity, reinforcing the dichotomy between the Christian European self and the racialized Saracen other. The motif of physical transformation, whether through the false bride's usurpation or her ultimate destruction, further underscores the longstanding cultural association between outward appearance and moral worth. Whether literal or symbolic, these transformations reinforce the notion that only through conversion to Christianity could the racial other attain nobility.

Later adaptations of the tale reflect shifting ideological priorities, in which alignment with the Christian moral frameworks necessitated the erasure of explicit racial difference. Gozzi's plays demonstrate two contrasting approaches: *L'amore delle tre melarance* preserves racial undertones, while *L'augellino belverde* erases them, shifting thematic focus toward Enlightenment critique. The explicit whitening of Smeraldina illustrates how the racial other persists not through its presence but through its erasure, where the choice of absence itself is evidence of the thematic weight it holds. This persistence highlights the enduring cultural salience of the racialized other. These narratives do more than reflect the biases of their time; they actively shape and reinforce the racial and religious identities in European culture. The continued evolution of the racialized antagonist, from a cunning and malicious outsider to a supposedly "enlightened," race-blind, and manipulable naif, persists even in modern adaptations,[105] highlighting their enduring influence: these texts not only reflect but actively shape the European racial imaginary. Basile and Gozzi participate in the historical construction of race and otherness, and their legacy is not merely one of a literary tradition but of a cultural formation that continues to inform perceptions of identity and difference in ways that extend into contemporary discourse.

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[104] Linda Dégh proposes a shared origin for various tale types, including types 408 and 707, because they appear more commonly in a blended form rather than as separate tales. Uther further positions tale type 707A in relation to tale type 894, which also corresponds to tale type 437, the supplanted bride. This interconnectivity may provide insight into why Gozzi chose *L'augellino belverde* as a continuation of *L'amore delle tre melarance*. See Dégh, *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration* (Bloomington: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica; Indiana University Press, 1995), and Uther, *The Types of International Folktales*.

[105] Hillary DePiano's script of *The Love of the Three Oranges* makes no reference to race and refers to Smeraldina only as "Fata Morgana's slightly less dimwitted minion."