

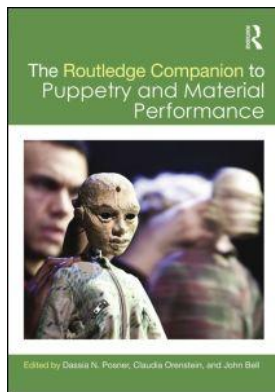
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 02 Oct 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance

Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, John Bell

The Saracen of Opera dei Pupi

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315850115.ch14>

Lisa Morse

Published online on: 15 Jul 2014

How to cite :- Lisa Morse. 15 Jul 2014, *The Saracen of Opera dei Pupi from: The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* Routledge

Accessed on: 02 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315850115.ch14>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The Saracen of *Opera dei Pupi*

A Study of Race, Representation, and Identity

Lisa Morse

During my first research trip to Sicily, I witnessed an *opera dei pupi* performance featuring stereotyped Saracen warriors, whose racially charged image and fierce treatment made me question why this art form remains popular throughout Sicily. *Opera dei pupi* productions showcasing the Saracen are rooted in the epic adventures of Charlemagne and his “Paladin” warriors, made famous by both medieval French and Italian Renaissance poetry and then popularized in Sicily by Giusto LoDico in his *La storia dei paladini di Francia*. Consistent throughout the branch stories of the Paladins is the ongoing pursuit and destruction of the Saracens in a battle for Christian supremacy over Islam. Following the through-line of the epic narrative, I watched Paladins “kill” Saracens in a grotesque comic battle, which was so artfully performed that the religious and racial markers of Christian/Muslim and Paladin/Saracen fell away. Both “Saracen” and “Paladin” shifted from representational characters to symbolic hero and villain in a mythic battle of good versus evil. At the conclusion of the fight sequence, the figures returned to their original meanings within the medieval narrative, and the once-comic pile of dismembered Saracens suddenly took on a sinister significance echoing the history of human loss in religious and ethnic warfare. At this point I couldn’t help wondering, “Should I be laughing at this?” Considering the current state of racial and religious conflict in the Muslim world and the massive influx of immigrants fleeing Northern Africa for asylum in cities such as Palermo, the troubling pro-Christian/anti-Islamic polemic inherent in the chivalric narrative seems wildly out of place on the contemporary puppet stage.

Though *opera dei pupi* has declined in popularity among Sicilian audiences who engage in more modern forms of entertainment, *opera dei pupi* aficionados promote it as a treasured symbol of Sicilian culture. In 2001 UNESCO designated *opera dei pupi* an outstanding example of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage. Decades of conservation effort by the Association for the Preservation of Popular Heritage resulted in the creation of the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette Antonio Pasqualino, which boasts an extensive *opera dei pupi* collection along with over 3,000 volumes of material on marionettes and popular traditions. The Museo also sponsors the annual Festival Morgana, which celebrates puppetry from around the world

while featuring *opera* performances by resident puppeteers. In addition, agencies within the city of Palermo provide a small subsidy supporting ongoing daily puppet shows during the tourist season. Given the growing status of the *opera* tradition, extensive preservation efforts, and its increasing prestige as a cultural treasure, it is critical to examine and question the significance of these seemingly racist performances and their anti-Muslim content. What can we learn about Sicilian culture, both past and present, by the persistence of the Saracen figure, and how can such controversial performance practices survive in a changing community comprising increased numbers of Muslim immigrants?

Antonio Pasqualino's research offers insight into how Sicilians viewed the Paladin/Saracen stories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pasqualino suggests that, for traditional audiences, the tales of the Paladins and Saracens were not meant as an escape from reality but rather a confrontation with it (Pasqualino 1978: 184). The battles between Paladin and Saracen transcend the epic narrative and parallel a long history of invasion and occupation in Sicily by both internal and external forces continually upsetting the status quo. The Saracen is symbolic of the outsider, and through the ritualized destruction of the Saracen, the Sicilian audience affirms their collective identity. Considering the meteoric rise of *opera dei pupi* from the departure of the Bourbon rulers in 1860 through two subsequent world wars, it is easy to accept Pasqualino's analysis of the *opera's* function as a politically centralizing force in a chaotic postwar culture. The "chivalric code" within the epic provided a "behavioral code" for Sicilians, which was idealized in the image and actions of the puppets.

Yet what significance does the Saracen figure possess for a twenty-first-century Sicilian audience, as the visceral memories of occupation and invasion slip away? What need is there to collectivize and classify people as Paladin or Saracen? Recent ethnographic studies conducted by Jeffrey Cole (1997) for his book *The New Racism in Europe: A Sicilian Ethnography* provide new research prompting insight into these questions. Cole shows an ongoing sense of marginalization experienced by most Sicilians, which might account for the ongoing need for the Paladin and Saracen heroes as Sicilians attempt to exorcise oppression. Accompanied with this marginalization is a vague understanding of what constitutes race, calling forward the Saracen figure to take his place once again as the generalized historical "other." To gain a better understanding of the Saracen and his progression from page to stage, it is important to examine the literary figure at the center of this controversy.

As a symbolic figure of the "foreign invader," the Saracen of medieval literature embodies significant relevant characteristics that form the basis of the Saracen's representation on the *opera* stage. Interchangeably termed Moor, Pagan, Turk, and Infidel, the Saracen comprises both racial and religious signifiers, which underscore its historically confusing character. According to Norman Daniel in *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste*:

The word Saracen came into use in late antiquity in both Greek and Latin, and meant simply "Arab." After the rise of Islam and throughout the middle ages, academic and historical writers used *Saracen* to mean "Arab" or "Muslim," or both, according to context.

(Daniel 1984: 8)

Suzanne Conklin Akbari, in *Idols in the East: European Representation of Islam and the Orient 1100–1450*, points out “The Saracen identity, like Jewish identity, is depicted in medieval texts as being the product simultaneously of religious and ethnic difference, it partakes in both the binarism of religious alterity and the spectrum of bodily diversity” (Akbari 2009: 161).

As will be shown later, it is within the realm of ethnic difference that the Saracen figure intersects most clearly with Sicilian issues of identity. Jaqueline de Weever emphasizes the importance of the Saracen’s dual identity as an ethnic and religious figure when she notes:

While modern constructions of Orientalism center on the idea of the “Arab” or the “Muslim,” focusing alternatively on the ethnic and religious identities, medieval constructions conflated categories of ethnicity and religion within a single term that served as a marker of both: “Saracen.”

(de Weever 1998: 155)

As described by Lynn Tarte Ramey in *Christian, Saracen and Genre in French Literature*, “At its essence, the term ‘Saracen’ seems to hold the same place in the medieval imagination that ‘foreign,’ ‘exotic,’ or ‘outlandish’ represent for us.” (Tarte Ramey 2001: 8). Additional ethnic identities attributed to the term “Saracen” include invaders from southern Spain, Asia, and much of Northern Africa.

One does not need to look very far into the twelfth-century French poem *The Song of Roland* to find an example of the exoticized Saracen. Within the scene set at the famous Battle of Roncesvalles, the poet describes a formidable and exotic challenger in the Saracen Chernubles, whose native land serves as metaphor for his appearance, behavior, and “overall Saraceness,” to use a phrase coined by Conklin Akbari. In the following passage, Chernubles possesses great power and strength and is set off as stark, solitary, and barren:

Chernubles is there, from the valley black,
His long hair makes on the earth its track;
A load, when it lists him, he bears in play,
Which four mules’ burthen would well outweigh.
Men say, in the land where he was born
Nor shineth sun, nor springeth corn
Nor falleth rain, nor dropeth dew;
The very stones are of sable hue.
'Tis the home of demons as some assert.

(O’Hagan 1880: 89)

His estrangement is further amplified by implied damnation on Earth, which renders him a social and religious outcast. The combination of multi-ethnic and religious signifiers, along with a vague characterization of race, form a Saracen stereotype whose facial characteristics, clothing, and behavior are codified on the puppet stage.



Figure 14.1 Saracen soldier created by Vincenzo Argento. Photo courtesy of the author

In an effort to capture the wide-ranging racial characteristics suggested by the medieval literary sources, and to clearly distinguish it from the light-faced Paladin, the Saracen puppet is shown in an assortment of nonwhite skin tones, from tan to shades of black. Additional marks of “difference” identified as “visual signifiers of discredited blackness” by Michael Harris in his text *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Harris 2003: 29) include a wide nose, thick lips, and a heavy brow. The harsh facial expression of the Saracen puppet underscores a lack of refinement, which is set in sharp contrast to the heroic male Paladin depicted as pale with thin lips, narrow nose, and a fine brow. The contrasting facial features distinguishing a villain (grotesque) from a hero (refined) is a common practice in other puppet traditions, such as the *wayang kulit* shadow puppets of Southeast Asia. However, in the case of the Saracen, the soldiers are meant to be lifelike in their proportions rather than stylized, which makes the image noticeably racial. In addition to stereotypical “African” traits, the image of the Saracen puppet also features elements of costuming historically associated with Arab labels. The Saracen wears silk trousers, symbolic of the exotic fabric of the Orient, and bejeweled armor, suggesting what Clara Gallini describes as the “fabled richness” of the Arab (Gallini 1988: 172). The Saracen is depicted wearing a turban as well as armor embossed with crescent moons and stars to signify the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia. In her article “Arabesque: Images of a Myth,” Clara Gallini examines the racist and ethnocentric stereotype of the Arab in post-1945 cinema and print in Italy. She raises questions about the media’s ability to make anti-Arab sentiment more apparent and acceptable in the circulation of stereotypes and questions the political power of these images:

It [racism] exists, but its existence is not recognized. It is so obvious and daily that it is not seen. But this is also because you do not want to see it, since that would mean you would have to denounce it in a world that claimed to be non-racist.

(Gallini 1988: 172)

The consistent repetition and circulation of the Saracen image from one puppet family to the next, as well as throughout the island of Sicily, suggests that the puppet figure with its “African” facial features and “Arab” costuming was a successful rendering of the Saracen in the minds of a nineteenth-, twentieth-, and now twenty-first-century audience. Interestingly, the uniform skin tone and facial features of the Paladins have a strong visual and psychological impact, as they would with any army. However, the various exaggerations given to the Saracen, whether light- or dark-skinned or with varying heights and features, effectively diminish their power.

Medieval texts not only offer a source for the bizarre physical characteristics of the Saracen, but more importantly, provide highly imaginative action describing feats of fantastic strength required to destroy this formidable adversary. The following confrontation between Chernubles and Orlando from *The Song of Roland* is emblematic of many such confrontations that result in the destruction of the Saracen. Similar action is preserved and interpreted on the puppet stage:

He smote Chernubles' helm upon,
Where, in the center, carbuncles shone:
Down through his coif and his fell of hair,
Betwixt his eyes came the falchion bare,
Down through his plated harness fine,
Down through the Saracen's chest and chine,
Down through the saddle with gold inlaid,
Till sank in the living horse the blade,
Severed the spine where no joint was found,
And horse and rider lay dead on the ground.

(O'Hagan 1880: 105)

In an astonishing display of force, the Paladin Orlando cuts in half not only the Saracen but also his horse. In this verse, superhuman strength and religious superiority are a key part of the literary figure of the Paladin and a significant portion of the puppet performance as well. Francis M. Guercio, as far back as 1939, notes the destruction of the Saracen as wildly popular and appreciated by the Sicilian audience:

... struggle against the Moors had become a great national tradition, permeating every form of art and exasperating religious fanaticism. Although now relegated to the sphere of popular tradition, this fanatical aversion to *mori, turchi, infedeli, saraceni, pagani*, as the Moors are indiscriminately named on the marionette stage, still lingers in the Sicilian popular mind.

(Guercio 1939: 249)



Figure 14.2 Saracen trick puppet designed to split in half, created by Vincenzo Argento. Photo courtesy of the author

Coupled with the image of the Saracen is a set of performance conventions regarding his voice and action in performance. Since the Arabic language is not performed, argument is an opportunity to emphasize the “foreignness” of the enemy invader, shown through the inferior pronunciation of his Italian, which further diminishes his status. The Saracen’s voice is given an “obscure, throaty, and raucous” timbre and his words are unintelligible (Pasqualino 1983: 238). The following battle sequences from a performance of *Orlando e Rinaldo per amore di Angelica* by Vincenzo Argento e Figli demonstrate the character Orlando and a Saracen King engaging in a brief argument. The *pagano* growls and moves aggressively towards Orlando and the two fight. The *pagano* is knocked repeatedly in the head and eventually (humiliatingly) runs offstage. Orlando chases him into a mysterious wood and, with a mighty blow from his sword, slices the Saracen in half from head to groin. The newly split figure (painted red on the inside for effect) then jumps about screaming in a high-pitched voice (further emasculating the soldier) as the two halves of his body hop farther apart and eventually fall to the ground. Although the action of riving a Saracen in an earnestly fought battle is sincere, the ingenious skill with which it is designed and manipulated undercuts the serious tone of the fight and results in humor.

In a subsequent encounter with another Saracen, the Paladin Rinaldo meets a low-ranking soldier. He is a small-headed, dark-skinned foot soldier who has no shield or armor but carries an oversized spear. In his laborious, slow, and awkward attempts to kill Rinaldo, he misses repeatedly until finally Rinaldo smacks him on the head with the flat of his sword with an outrageously loud “thump,” which is emphasized by the puppeteer, who stomps his foot on the floor to underscore the blow. The

soldier howls “aiiee yiee yiee” in a high-pitched falsetto voice, leans heavily on the proscenium, and rubs his forehead, confused and delirious. This humorous exchange of blows happens repeatedly until the soldier makes his final attempt and is decapitated. The vandalized body hops about the stage, stops for a moment as if suddenly realizing it has no head, and then drops straight to the floor. In an alternate ending for the same scene, the soldier is decapitated and can be seen running off the stage with his arms held high over his headless body, howling like a wounded animal. Puppeteers indulge the violence to comic effect as characters shriek, howl, and stomp about the stage, simultaneously undermining the Saracen’s status as a fierce enemy soldier while delighting an audience of tourists. Humor, irony, and reversals are an important part of an *opera* performance, so amusing confrontations are rife among the various battle sequences leading to a stage filled with butchered bodies. Audiences give meaning to the scenes through laughter and applause as their heroes get the better of the Saracen villain. When the Paladin hero is the butt of a joke, notes Pasqualino, it is intended for a specific purpose. “Derision of Charlemagne is derision of the state; derision of Orlando is a derision of a model of self” (Pasqualino 1987: 22). But what is meant by the derision of the Saracen?

As noted above, customary methods persist in the design and performance of the Saracen, but significant changes in the content of the show strip the Saracen of his complexity. To their credit, puppeteers in recent years diminished the focus on the Crusades at the request of the Catholic Church, though religious difference is still inherent in performance, and instead turned their attention to the romantic pursuits of the Paladin knights. However, the battle scenes are what people want to see, despite the negative connotations in the pro-Christian/anti-Islamic binary. Battles were very popular among traditional audiences, as Guercio notes, yet they were historically less frequent. The serialized stories published by LoDico followed the Paladin and Saracen through a wide range of adventures, romances, and encounters with mythical creatures wherein heroes experienced both failure and success. Over the course of many verses, Saracen warriors were given opportunities to show positive traits along with their stereotypically negative traits, which aligned them more closely with their Paladin counterparts. Sicilian audiences followed their heroes night after night for an entire year, just as a modern-day audience follows a soap *opera*. A traditional audience might see a Paladin lose a battle or fall prey to human failings; they might also hear a Saracen express the same honor code and religious passion as his Christian counterpart. The complex matrix between Paladin and Saracen and their equal balance of positive and negative traits have fallen into obscurity, leaving a modern audience with stark, antagonistic characters and a superficial understanding of the action. In this overly simplistic version of the form, the Sicilian puppet theatre may be encouraging a more negative stereotype of the Saracen than was previously intended in a traditional performance cycle and, thereby, upholding an unfair view of both Arab and African. Pasqualino suggests the Saracens are simply “negative comic characters” functioning as “meaningful comics,” for the Saracen is an object to be “laughed at” while the Sicilian audience “strengthens itself and excludes what appears peripheral, inadequate to the central values of the culture” (Pasqualino 1987: 22). Although Pasqualino’s theory sees the function of the Saracen figure as a comic foil, his analysis fails to fully appreciate the meaningfulness of the Saracen as a

problematized image of Sicilian identity seeking uniformity among an ever-changing demographic.

From 1970 to 1990, as Jeffrey Cole outlines, a lack of immigration control led to a massive influx of foreigners into Sicily from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Asia seeking residence permits. The impact of this unregulated influx made its immigrant population the third largest in the country: a whopping 7.9 percent by 1990. In his ethnographic study of Sicilian perceptions of race among immigrants living and working in Sicily, Cole characterizes the average Sicilian's opinions on race as "vague" and observes that working Sicilians "tend to lump all immigrants under several Sicilian terms signifying dark skin, such as *marocchini* ('Moroccans'), *nivuri* ('blacks'), and *tuichi* ('Turks')" (Cole 1997: 47). The vague understanding of race noted by Cole echoes earlier comments by Guercio regarding the imprecise identities assigned to the Saracen character. While surveys by Cole show "racist categorizations of immigrants," he suggests the use of these terms is a result of poor education on a variety of levels (Cole 1997: 47). Perhaps the ongoing performance of racial stereotypes in the Saracen of *opera dei pupi* adds to this confusion since the nonwhite, non-Christian is falsely historicized in this beloved cultural tradition. In *Race and Culture: A World View*, Thomas Sowell states that "Race is one of the ways of collectivizing people in our minds. ... How important it is in a given setting can only be determined empirically from an examination of that setting" (Sowell 1994: xiii).

Historically, Sicilians viewed themselves as oppressed by invaders from within and from without, resulting in an overall paranoia of anything remotely foreign. According to Cole, Sicilians today "see themselves as hounded by insecurity and humiliated by marginalization" (Cole 1997: 34). If humiliation and marginalization are significant fears among Sicilians, surely it can be said that the Saracen puppet embodies these same experiences and acts as a metaphorical sacrifice for the cleansing of that fear. In this way, the Saracen functions as a way to destroy their fears of humiliation and marginalization in a satirical manner, making him both Sicilian and Saracen.

What other meanings may be at play in the representation and derision of the Saracen? Cole reveals that Sicilians, as southerners, view themselves as victims of racism by the north of Italy and are often stereotyped as "lazy, rude, and dangerous" (Cole 1997: 20). When migrating to northern Italy for work, Sicilians are labeled as "blacks" and "Africans" by their northern counterparts. In this paradigm, Sicilians are placed in the "ambiguous position of being 'black' in relation to Italy's north, but 'white' in relation to new immigrants" (Cole 1997: 20). Furthermore, Cole's research and surveys indicated, "Just as northern Italians thought themselves superior to southern emigrants, so too do Sicilians consider themselves above Africans and Asians" (Cole 1997: 59–60). In light of Cole's ethnographic discoveries, perhaps the modern-day Sicilian is situated in the uncertainty of a continuum between black and white, and he or she is actively experiencing difference as imagined participants in both the action and characterizations of the Saracen. If so, it may be that Sicilians are using the *opera* to work through issues of identity, and the ongoing performance of these stories provides an opportunity to examine the uniquely tenuous position they occupy between north and south.

Interpretation of the Saracen figure given by Pasqualino, when viewed with recent ethnographic research by Cole, underscores a significant need for *opera dei pupi* preservationists to contextualize the Saracen as a complex figure codifying centuries of ambiguity concerning race and issues of marginalization experienced by Sicilians. As much as the *opera* is problematic with its xenophobic content, it is simultaneously regarded as a symbol of “Oral and Intangible History” and imbued with cultural, political, religious, and social significance, resulting in a highly charged art form. Given the noteworthy change in production format, which was meant to appeal to a “new” audience of tourists, most viewers fail to experience more than one hour of an *opera* show, which pales in comparison to the yearlong season of shows witnessed by a traditional Sicilian audience actively experiencing conflicting identities in the victories and failings of their puppet corollaries, both Saracen and Paladin. The continued performance of *opera dei pupi* is certainly in jeopardy, as remaining puppeteers advance in their years and offer fewer and fewer productions. As performances shrink, so may any understanding of the underlying tensions that separate this distinctly homegrown art form from other cultures. With a greater focus and sensitivity about issues of race at play in the *opera dei pupi* performance, Sicilians have an opportunity to recognize both past and present anxieties regarding marginalization and identity, while discovering ways to address these issues going forward. Preservationists, performers, and historians must work together to educate audiences about the social record contained in the noble figure of the Saracen and his role in the Sicilian’s quest for identity, rather than risking misinterpretation of the Saracen figure as an essentialist view on race or culture.

Works cited

- Akbari, S. C. (2009) *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Cole, J. (1997) *The New Racism in Europe: A Sicilian Ethnography*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniel, N. (1984) *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- de Weever, J. (1998) *Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 2077. New York, NY: Garland.
- Gallini, C. (1988) “Arabesque: Images of a Myth,” trans. I. Chambers, *Cultural Studies* 2: 168–180.
- Guercio, F. M. (1939) *Sicily, The Garden of the Mediterranean: The Country and Its People*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Harris, M. D. (2003) *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel-Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- O’Hagan, John, (ed. and trans.) (1880) *The Song of Roland*. London: C. Kegan Paul & Co.
- Pasqualino, A. (1978) “Transformations of Chivalrous Literature in the Subject Matter of the Sicilian Marionette Theatre,” in A. Dundes (ed.) *Varia Folklorica*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton Publishers.
- (1983) “Marionettes and Glove Puppets: Two Theatrical Systems of Southern Italy,” *Semiotica* 47: 219–280.

- (1987) “Humor and Puppets: An Italian Perspective,” in D. Sherzer and J. Sherzer (eds.) *Humor and Comedy in Puppetry: Celebration in Popular Culture*. Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Sowell, T. (1994) *Race and Culture: A World View*. New York, NY: Basic Publishing.
- Tarte Ramey, L. (2001) *Christian, Saracen and Genre in Medieval French Literature*. New York and London: Routledge.