

Elissa as a New Dido: Greece, the East, and the Westward Movement of Culture in the *Decameron*

Boccaccio's age was one of two periods marked by large-scale emigration of Greek intellectuals westward. The better-known period is that of the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and its aftermath, when Greek-speaking refugees brought their learning and their native language with them to Italy and other lands where most people belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, or the "Latin Church" as Greeks of the time would have called it.

Less widely discussed but equally important was the influx of Greeks to the West some one hundred years earlier in the aftermath of a theological controversy between the Monk Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria, best known to scholars of Italian literature as the man who tried to teach Petrarch Greek and might have succeeded had he not died in 1348. Barlaam was a brilliant dialectician and a subtle philosopher, the type of man Petrarch would have admired. He is regarded today by the Eastern Orthodox Church as a heresiarch. In 1351 he was anathematized. His followers, whose ranks included many if not most Byzantine intellectuals, had little choice but to convert to Roman Catholicism from Eastern Orthodoxy and, under most circumstances, move to a region not under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The controversy between Barlaam and Gregory Palamas originated when Barlaam made a disparaging remark about certain ascetic practices undertaken by Greek Orthodox monks.¹ He was offended by the claim that monks could behold the uncreated energy of God manifested as a pure light. His theological views are difficult to reconstruct, as most of his polemical writings against Palamas were destroyed, and we are often forced to rely on his opponents to tell us what his views were. The result of the controversy was that the Orthodox Church declared that God's energies

¹ The standard study of Palamas's theology is John Meyendorff, *St. Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959).

are distinct from his essence. Human beings may participate in and perceive God's energies, but his essence remains utterly transcendent, beyond human comprehension. The Roman Catholic Church, in contrast, has rejected this view and maintains that God's essence and his energies are the same and that to separate them would be to deny the unity and simplicity of God.

This essay will be primarily about the Greek settings of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the theological subtleties of the Palamite controversy may seem distant from the environment of Boccaccio's work. It was not until 1360 that Boccaccio had the Calabrian Greek Leo Pilatus, also known as Leonzio Pilato, installed as the first instructor of Greek at the University of Florence.² If Boccaccio did not yet have a deep familiarity with the Greek language while he wrote the *Decameron*, several of the *novelle* reveal an interest in the Greek-speaking world. Students of the late Byzantine Empire and, in particular, of Greek-Italian relations in the late Middle Ages, may find Boccaccio's Greek tales valuable for their representation of Greeks by an Italian deeply curious about Greek culture.

Boccaccio's Greek teacher, Pilatus, was, like Petrarch, a student of Barlaam. Barlaam and Pilatus both came from Calabria and identified themselves as Greeks, although Pilatus seems to have felt a certain ambivalence about whether he was Greek or Italian. While in Constantinople, he identified himself as a Calabrian yet, according to Petrarch, claimed to be a Thessalonian while in Italy.³ It is difficult to understand why. Perhaps he was lying. By most accounts, Pilatus was a difficult person to get along with, and his contradictory statements about his country of origin suggest that he felt an outsider. His background afforded him no easy answer to the question, "Are you Italian or Greek?"

His teacher Barlaam came from the same region and spoke the same language. Barlaam was originally a Greek Orthodox Christian with evidently no interest in changing his religion, but, as the Palamite controversy unfolded, it became apparent that he had little familiarity with the mainstream of Orthodox spirituality. Greeks in the Byzantine Empire would pejoratively call him a "Latinophrone," or Latin-thinker, though

² The only book-length study of Pilatus to date is Agostino Pertusi, *Leonzio Pilato fra Petrarca e Boccaccio: le sue versioni omeriche negli autografi di Venezia e la cultura greca del primo umanesimo* (Venice and Rome: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1964). As his title suggests, Pertusi concentrates on the Homeric translations. Much work remains to be done on other aspects of Pilatus's career.

³ Petrarch, *Epistulae Seniles* 3.6, quoted in Pertusi 101.

there is little doubt that Barlaam would have preferred for relations between the Eastern and Western Churches to improve.

In reference to monks who practiced contemplating their own bodies as a way of realizing personal union with the divine, Barlaam coined the term *omphalopsychoi*, “men with souls in their navels,” and spawned the still-proverbial references to navel-gazing, contemplating one’s navel, etc. The dialogue could hardly proceed in an irenic manner after such a charge had been made. The Orthodox monk Gregory Palamas took it upon himself to defend the monastic practices of his church, particularly the practice known as hesychasm, in which monks are believed to witness the uncreated energies of God in the form of light. Barlaam, from what we can gather in the works of his opponents and ambiguous references in his own writings, apparently objected that hesychastic prayers denied the transcendence of God. It would be beyond the scope of our discussion to dwell at length on the nature of the hesychast controversy, but Barlaam of Calabria ultimately joined the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches in accordance with Thomas Aquinas, that the beatific vision of God in his true essence will take place in its fullness only after the death of the believer. Hesychasm teaches, in contrast, following Gregory Palamas, that vision of the divine is possible in this life, but that the vision, now and in the hereafter will only be of God’s energies, and that his essence will remain forever beyond human comprehension and perception. Thomists claim that the Eastern Orthodox view denies the faithful participation in the divine. For our purposes in studying the *Decameron*, its use of Greek settings and its portrayal of Greek people, we may point out that Western polemics against Byzantine spiritual practices from the 1340s depicted the Greeks as a people submerged in superstition and scarcely worthy of their own classical heritage. Italian humanists like Petrarch were happy to have genuine Greeks like Barlaam of Calabria from whom to study Greek antiquity, but Barlaam himself contributed to the image of contemporary Greeks as debased and ignorant.⁴ One of the constant criticisms he makes against Palamas and other hesychasts is that they did not understand Aristotelian logic, since if they did they would surely agree with Thomas Aquinas’s interpretation of it. In 1348, the year Barlaam died and Florence suffered the plague that would serve as backdrop to the *Decameron*, Greece was revered as the home of Aristotle and Homer, but the Greeks were looked down on as a backward people, lapsed into heresy and schism, a select few

⁴ Pertusi (103) has demonstrated that Petrarch, for all his objections that Calabria is in Italy rather than Greece, does in fact acknowledge Leo as a Greek.

of whom could be saved through religious conversion and cultural assimilation, and imported to Western institutes of higher learning where they could repay the West by spreading knowledge of their country's ancient past.

Eight of the *Decameron's novelle*, by my reckoning, have either Greek settings or significant Greek protagonists. Three of these are narrated by Panfilo (2.7, 5.1, 7.9), so it is fair to say that one of Boccaccio's narrators has a fascination with Greeks. Of the other narrators, Elissa (1.9), Emilia (3.7) and Filomena (10.8) tell one story each in which Greek lands or Greek people figure prominently, while Lauretta tells two (2.4, 4.3). Elissa is especially important as her narrative begins in Cyprus and follows the course of Dido's journey to Tunis, and then Aeneas's journey to Rome. (For reference, a list of Elissa's ten tales is given at the end of this article.)

The Greece of the *Decameron* is usually the Greece of the islands, especially Crete or Cyprus but sometimes others. Two stories take place in Athens, while one is set in Argos, a city described by the narrator Panfilo as "più famosa che grande."⁵ The Greek islands are the unfamiliar, fantastical terrain on which heroes prove their worth. The third story of Day Four and the first story of Day Five are both set partly in Crete, the legendary ancestral home of the Trojans which Aeneas must visit in Book 3 of the *Aeneid* before venturing on to found Rome.⁶ Days Four and Five of the *Decameron* both contain retellings of the *Aeneid*. This becomes evident as we look at the place names mentioned in the rubrics to *novelle* 3–5 of the Quarta Giornata and *novelle* 1–3 of the Quinta Giornata. In each case, we see the trajectory of Aeneas's journey, Crete to Tunis to Italy, being retraced as the different narrators tell their stories. It has been observed by Vittore Branca that the only North African story in the *Decameron*, tale four of Day Four, is narrated by Elissa, who bears the name of the ancient Carthaginian queen more commonly known as Dido.⁷ This is technically true, although Tunis is also an important presence in tale 2 of Day Five. This time however, Elissa does not narrate the Tunisian tale. It is narrated by Emilia, and Elissa follows it with a story set in Rome, the city for which her ancient namesake's life was ultimately sacrificed. At least if Vergil can be believed.

⁵ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 2 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 1980) 862.

⁶ *Aeneid* 3.104–62.

⁷ *Decameron*, ed. Branca 516 n. 4. See also Simone Marchesi, *Stratigrafie decameroniane* (Florence: Olschki, 2004), esp. ch. 3 "Didone e Lisabetta da Messina: *Fabula e historia* nel reticolo delle fonti di *Decameron* IV.5, pp. 67–104.

But can he? To examine what Boccaccio achieves through his retelling of the *Aeneid* in the Fourth and Fifth Days of the *Decameron*, we must first consider how he deals with Vergilian motifs elsewhere in his work. Before writing the *Decameron* he had portrayed a Vergilian Dido in his *Amorosa visione* (canto 29.1–30), in which the North African Queen succumbs to her sexual desire for Aeneas and dies as the consequence of her passion.⁸ A decade after the *Decameron*, however, he would undermine Vergil's authority in the *De mulieribus claris*, where he not only narrates an alternative version of the events, but explicitly tells us that Elissa had never even laid eyes on Aeneas.⁹ The sequence of stories in the *Decameron* suggests that, whatever might really have happened in history, Dido has now been relegated to the position of a tool for the glorification of Rome. In Boccaccio's elaborate system of interlocking narratives, the point where Rome's triumph over Carthage becomes complete is in Elissa's final story, the second novella of Day Ten, which is set at Rome in the papal court. Symbolically, Dido is forced to tell the story of how the city founded by Aeneas has now become the eternal city and home to God's chief representative on earth. Elissa's narrative ends with Ghino being made a member of the Hospitalers, who at the time the story takes place were involved in military campaigns on the present-day site of Dido's ancestral homeland.

If we seem to have gone far from the topic of Greek settings in the *Decameron*, let us turn to Elissa's first narrative, which is also the first story of the *Decameron* with a Greek setting: Day One, story nine. This is the shortest story in the *Decameron*, but it is significant in establishing Boccaccio's narrator Elissa unambiguously as a symbol of the legendary Dido's role in the shaping of literary tradition. Elissa's first tale is set in Cyprus, where Dido spent her childhood, as Boccaccio narrates in the *De mulieribus claris*. In barely two pages, Elissa's narrative introduces the complex system of power struggles that will characterize gender relations in the rest of her tales. A woman who has been raped while on her way back from pilgrimage in the Holy Land demands justice of the King of Cyprus. In a speech that sparkles with anguished sarcastic wit, she shames him into taking action and, ultimately, into transforming himself into a strong ruler. Knowing the king's reputation for weakness, the woman realizes it

⁸ Boccaccio, *Amorosa visione*, ed. Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton and Margherita Frankel (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986) 119.

⁹ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 174.

would be futile to ask him directly to take action against the men who wronged her. Instead, she says that since the king is so good at taking abuse, she would like some advice from him on how best to bear the wrong she has suffered. The indignant ruler punishes the rapists and never takes another insult from anyone ever again. It takes a woman to make a real man, Elissa seems to be telling us.

Cyprus functions in the story the way Greek islands function throughout the *Decameron*. It is not a destination, but a place where one stops on the way home. Its inhabitants are obstacles one must overcome, like the sorceresses and monsters overcome by heroes of legend. It is the land where you can remake yourself, provided you pass all the tests that the island puts in your way. Cyprus was a transitional point for the Phoenicians between their ancestral homeland and Carthage, and it is a transitional point for Boccaccio's protagonist not only between the Holy Land and France, but between different states of being. How she responds to what happens on the island determines whether she will return home fallen and disgraced or renewed, a pilgrim as well as a kingmaker.

When we consider the overall structure of the *Decameron* and realize that it is no accident that a story set in the ancient Elissa's childhood home is also the first story told by Boccaccio's Elissa, we are led to ask how Boccaccio comments on the legend of Dido. I believe his Elissa, the fourteenth-century woman who tells stories with her nine friends while escaping the Black Death that is ravaging Florence, can be read as an allegory of the tellings and retellings of the Dido legend that have helped shape the history of literature. The heroine of Elissa's story is, like the Dido of Roman mythology, a trickster. Both women are adept at verbal manipulation. Dido is famous for the ruse whereby she had the African natives agree to grant her as much land as one oxhide could cover, and then cut the oxhide into an enormous strip to encircle what would become the entire colony of Carthage. She then succumbs to trickery herself. A decade after writing the *Decameron*, Boccaccio is careful to tell us that, having been persuaded to present herself before the African king who will try to force her into marriage, "Non sensit regina dolos," "The queen did not detect the trick." While recognizing the danger of reading the *De mulieribus claris* backwards into the *Decameron*, we still ought to watch out for signs that, once a woman has triumphed through trickery, another woman in a linked narrative might be tricked. Let us look now at Elissa's other stories.

After setting her tale in the Prima Giornata in Cyprus, she makes a passing reference to Rome in the Seconda Giornata. She takes care to inform her audience that the story takes place "essendo l'imperio di Roma

da' franceschi ne' tedeschi trasportato." This initially might seem an insignificant detail, but Elissa mentions Rome in more different tales than any other narrator. She names the city a total of twelve times in three stories. Only Filomena mentions the city by name more frequently, and all of her references to it are in the eighth novella of the Tenth Day. The next story in which Elissa mentions Rome is tale 3 of Day Five, where she says that the city, "come è oggi coda così già fu capo del mondo."¹⁰ Placing this quip, as well as Day Two's observation that Roman power is no longer Roman, in the mouth of Elissa is, I believe, Boccaccio's way of giving Dido her revenge. It is particularly noteworthy that Elissa directs that insult at contemporary Rome immediately after hearing the Fifth Day's second story, in which a woman travels by boat to North Africa. It is probably no accident either that the day's second story is narrated by Emilia, who bears the name of Tertia Aemilia, the wife of the general who defeated Hannibal. Usually in the *Decameron*, the name Emilia is meant to invoke the heroine of Boccaccio's own *Teseida*, but in Day Five, I believe we also ought to be mindful of Scipio's wife. Like the ancient Elissa, the ancient Emilia is the subject of one of the biographies in the *De mulieribus claris*.¹¹ The verbal exchange between the two women thus amounts to a re-fighting of the Punic Wars while the sequence of stories retraces the voyage of Aeneas as told by Vergil.

Before Emilia's Tunisian story in Day Five, Panfilo begins the day's storytelling with a tale set partly in Cyprus, partly in Rhodes, and partly in Crete. Several times in the tale the narrator goes to the trouble of telling us that all the protagonists have old family connections in Crete, where they are warmly greeted toward the end of the story by their Cretan relatives before going on to their respective destinations. Crete thus functions in the first *novella* of the Quinta Giornata as it does in Book 3 of Vergil's *Aeneid*. In both cases, it is the ancestral homeland the hero must visit before proceeding to the journey's end. The first three stories of Day Five contain in their meticulous narrative sequencing a comic retelling of the *Aeneid*. Like all stories of the Quinta Giornata, they have happy endings. And the comic effect is heightened at the beginning of the third *novella* by Elissa's caustic remark about contemporary Rome. She lampoons Aeneas's achievements, and she remarks that the glory of Rome has not endured.

The same trajectory, from Crete to Tunis to Italy is mapped out as well in Day Four, but, naturally, in the Quarta Giornata, the outcome is tragic

¹⁰ *Decameron* 619, see also n. 5 for Branca's comments on the theme of Rome's decline.

¹¹ *Famous Women* LXXIV, pp. 310–14.

rather than comic. The second story of the day, which recounts the famous exploits of the duplicitous Frate Alberto, is tragic only for him, but its Venetian setting introduces the tragic retelling of the *Aeneid* contained in tales four, five, and six. I mention the detail of the Frate Alberto tale's Venetian setting here to highlight the exquisite care with which Boccaccio chose his geographic settings. We move from Venice in the second *novella* to the Venetian colony of Crete in the third. Next Elissa narrates a tale set in Tunis. The fifth tale takes us to Messina, where the journey comes to its tragic end after Elisabetta and Lorenzo fail to navigate the perilous journey between Scylla and Charybdis. Near Messina, at the straits where Scylla and Charybdis traditionally abide,¹² Lorenzo is murdered, and in the same city Elisabetta dies of a broken heart. In a curious remark at the story's end, the narrator tells us that Elisabetta's brothers left Messina for Naples, which seems to serve little narrative purpose unless we look to Vergilian parallels. It was near Naples, at the cave of Avernus that Aeneas descended into the Underworld. The next story, tale six is a dream narrative, at the beginning of which Panfilo gives a speech on the veracity of some dreams and the mendacity of others similar to that found at the end of Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. Indeed, similarities to *Aeneid* Book 6 are already evident in the fifth tale, when Elisabetta is visited in a dream by her murdered lover. Unlike Day Five, which hides a comic *Aeneid* within its narrative structure, Day Four's *Aeneid* is tragic, failing to reach Rome and running aground in a netherworld of dreams and shades. Elissa is probably happy to see Aeneas fail.

She has her triumph in Day Six. Here she is Queen, and she takes her revenge on Vergil by telling a story of the triumphant wit of Guido Cavalcanti, who, if Dante is to be believed, held Vergil in scorn. It has puzzled scholars that Dante tells Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti in *Inferno* 10 that his son had a low opinion of Vergil, but Dante must have known something about his friend's tastes that has otherwise been lost to posterity. Boccaccio wrote in his *Esposizioni* that Cavalcanti held not only Vergil but poets in general in scorn because, though a poet himself, Cavalcanti believed poetry was fundamentally inferior to philosophy.¹³ By celebrating Cavalcanti so highly during her day as queen, Elissa takes her revenge on poets,

¹² *De genealogia deorum gentilium* 4.14.4. Vittorio Zaccaria, ed. In *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, Vittore Branca, ed. Vol. 7 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998) 402.

¹³ Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia* 10.62–63, Giorgio Padoan, ed. In *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, Vittore Branca, ed. Vol. 6 (Milan: Mondadori, 1965) 526.

including Boccaccio, who had repeated Vergil's slanders in the *Amorosa visione* and continued to make her a pawn furthering the goals of Rome.

In several ways, Elissa's narrative in the ninth novella of Day Six makes us keep Canto 10 of the *Inferno* in mind. Elissa's story takes place in a graveyard, and the furnaces in Hell's sixth circle are described by Dante as "sepulchers." Elissa's emphasis on the Cavalcanti family's heterodox religious views makes us recall how they earned their place in Dante's Hell to begin with.¹⁴ She is not telling a story of just any Guido Cavalcanti, but of Dante's Guido Cavalcanti, who did not like Vergil. Boccaccio essentially tells us in the *De mulieribus claris* that Vergil slandered Dido, aka Elissa. Far from losing her mind in passionate desire for Aeneas, she never even saw him. She ended up dying in order to remain faithful to the memory of her husband Sichaeus. Vergil drastically alters her character to make her a tool used and discarded for the good of Rome, and the Boccaccian narrator who bears her name holds an anti-Roman bias openly in her stories of Days Two and Five, which then becomes an anti-Vergilian bias in Day Six, over which she reigns as Queen, after the *Aeneid* has been retold in different ways during the two previous days.

After being crowned, Elissa is briefly liberated from the task of retelling the history of Dido and Aeneas. On the Seventh Day, she tells of the female trickster who successfully conceals an affair with Rinaldo, her husband's godfather. Dido the trickster is back, it would seem. Elissa's tale in Day Eight is the humorous story of Calandrino's ill-fated quest for the heliotrope. This story ends on a disturbing note, however, as the duped Calandrino takes out his frustrations by beating his wife. When his friends Bufalmacco and Bruno see that he is about to beat his wife a second time, they say that it was in fact his fault not hers, that the stone lost its "magical" power. "Le femine," they explained, "facevano perdere la virtù alle cose."¹⁵ "Women make things lose their power/virtue." At the end of Elissa's tale in Day Eight, one man brutalizes his wife, after which his two friends, to make it up to women, attempt to disempower them and take away their voice.

¹⁴ For more on Dantean references in VI.9, see Robert M Durling, "Boccaccio on Interpretation: Guido's Escape (*Decameron* VI.9)," in *Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio: Studies in the Italian Trecento in Honor of Charles S. Singleton*, ed. Aldo S. Bernardo (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983) 273–304.

¹⁵ *Decameron*, ed. Branca, 919. The explanation continues: "e non le aveva ditto che ella si guardasse d'apparirgli innanzi quel giorno" [and he hadn't warned her beforehand not to show her face that day in his presence].

In Day Nine, Elissa tells the story of the nun who tricked her abbess into leaving her cell with a pair of men's trousers over her head in order to reveal the abbess's hypocrisy. Elissa and her listeners celebrate the tale as a triumph of youthful ingenuity, but under the surface Elissa's narrative is also a story of the undermining of female authority. The abbess is tricked and shamed. Her defeat foreshadows Elissa's own defeat as a voice that has sought throughout the *Decameron* to undermine the authority of Vergil and has directed subversive barbs against the authority of Rome. In Day Ten, Elissa tells a Roman story and ends it with a reference to Rome's backing of the Hospitalers in their attempt to conquer the lands from which the Carthaginians originally came.

Like the legendary Dido, Elissa begins in Cyprus, goes to Tunisia, and reigns as queen. After her reign, her tales then see women beaten, maligned and disempowered. Both women end up, through the manipulation of Boccaccio and Vergil, serving the glory of Rome.

Boccaccio's narrative structure brings the wisdom and civilization of the East to Italy. From the easternmost parts of the Mediterranean, Elissa's stories follow the path of Dido and then of Aeneas to Rome. Even her tales with non-Vergilian settings tend to have odd quips and asides that keep the Vergilian allusions in the audience's mind. Tales told by other narrators, particularly in Days Four and Five, lend an additional level of engagement with Vergil to Boccaccio's text. In particular, references to Crete, Tunis, and Rome, in that order in the rubrics, strongly suggest that Boccaccio had Aeneas's journey in mind.

Not all of the Greek settings in the *Decameron* are island settings. One story takes place in Argos and two are set partly in Athens. In Day Seven, tale nine, Panfilo uses the grandeur of Argos as humorous contrast to the ridiculousness of his characters, the deceitful Pirro and the gullible Nicostrato. Structurally, the exotic locale of Panfilo's Argos functions as a segue into the still more exotic subject of the afterlife dealt with in tale ten.

In the *Decameron*, the Greek world is always a place of journeying, whether Boccaccio is re-narrating the journeys of classical heroes, giving a pilgrim a set of obstacles to overcome before her homecoming, or crossing the threshold between the natural and supernatural worlds. Greece is often a transitional space, but at times it is an origin. When showing the westward progress of civilization, Greece is often as far east as the narrative needs to begin. Twice Boccaccio takes us from Crete to Tunis to Italy, but not once does he begin the voyage in Troy. Elissa's ten-story narrative journey begins in Dido's childhood home of Cyprus rather than her Phoenician ancestral homeland. We know that the pilgrim woman has come from the Holy Land, but the action begins in Cyprus. When a story begins

in the far East, it tends to end in the far East, or at least not to end up in the Christian West. In story seven of Day Two, as many lands, Greek Latin and other, as the Babylonian princess Alatiel visits while being passed from one man to another, she ultimately makes a journey from Babylonia to Algeria and remains intact. In other tales, as Boccaccio places references to the travels of Dido and Aeneas in his narrative structure, omissions of the easternmost origins of Roman and Carthaginian culture reveal the fascination with Greece that would lead Boccaccio later in life to study the Greek language, facilitating the westward movement of civilization, as he saw it, by bringing Greek scholars into Italy.

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APPENDIX

❖ Trajectories taken from the *Aeneid* in Days Four and Five:

Day 4: The Tragic *Aeneid*

- 4.3: Crete
- 4.4: Tunis
- 4.5: Messina, Naples
- 4.6: Realm of dreams

Day 5: The Comic *Aeneid*

- 5.1: Crete
- 5.2: Tunis
- 5.3: Rome

❖ The ten stories told by Elissa:

- 1.9: Cyprus, childhood home of Dido, aka Elissa. Female authority established.
- 2.8: Various locales, with a seemingly gratuitous dig at Rome.
- 3.5: Woman who has been silenced ultimately triumphs.
- 4.4: Tunisian story.
- 5.3: Responds to Emilia's Tunisian story with yet another dig at Rome. Emilia = Scipio's wife.
- 6.9: Triumph of Guido Cavalcanti, who despised Vergil according to Dante and held poets in generally low regard according to Boccaccio's commentary on the *Comedy*. Queen Dido's revenge on the poets who have slandered her.
- 7.3: The female trickster continues to rule.
- 8.3: Woman vindicated at the cost of being beaten.
- 9.2: Female authority figure undermined.
- 10.2: Rome's authority reestablished. Dido is forced to praise Rome, specifically the Rome that is fighting the crusades to conquer Dido's ancestral homeland.