

Can we trust Fiammetta?

Moral judgment and narrative reliability in Boccaccio's *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*

Heloísa Abreu de Lima
Sapienza Università di Roma



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The many guises of Fiammetta

- Boccaccio's poetic muse, a pervasive presence across his literary works:

Rime

Filocolo

Teseida

Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine

Amorosa visione

Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta

Decameron

- Her traits and portrayal change from one work to another.



Rime

- celebrated in many of Boccaccio's lyric poems;
- Beatrice-like figure: she dies and goes to heaven.

Filocolo

The commissioner

- her real name is **Maria**, and she is the natural daughter of King Robert of **Naples**;
- she requests that the author write the *Filocolo*.

The character

- she is the daughter of the King of **Naples**, named **Maria** but nicknamed **Fiammetta**;
- she is loved by a character named **Caleon**;
- at a certain point, she distances herself from her lover.

Teseida

- the poem is dedicated to her;
- she is never called Maria, only **Fiammetta**;
- she initially reciprocated the poet's love;
- she later cruelly distances herself from him;
- the author writes the poem to win back her love.

Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine

- one of the seven nymphs encountered by the shepherd Ameto;
- she is always called **Fiammetta**, never Maria;
- allegorical framework: she represents hope;
- her story: she is **Neapolitan noblewoman** from the **Aquino** family, possibly King Robert's natural daughter;
- she is married, but maintains a romantic relationship with a man named **Caleone**.



Amorosa visione

- allegorical poem that narrates a dream of the poet;
- the poem is dedicated to her, but she also appears in the poem as the poet's beloved;
- her presumed real name is revealed: **Maria d'Aquino**;
- prefatory sonnet: her name appears in association with Boccaccio's name;
- this suggests Fiammetta's historical reality;
- the text combines clear literary elements (allegorical framework) with others that suggest her historical reality.

Adunque a voi, cui tengo Donna mia ,
Et chui senpre disio di servire ,
La raccomando , madama Maria :
E prieghovi , se fosse nel mio dire
Difecto alcun , per vostra cortesia
Correggiate amendando il mio fallire .
Cara Fiamma , per cui 'l core ó caldo ,
Que' che vi manda questa Visione
Giovanni è di Boccaccio da Certaldo .

Elegia di madonna Fiammetta

- Fiammetta is the first-person narrator of her own story;
- she is a married **Neapolitan noblewoman**, but begins a secret affair with a man named **Panfilo**;
- he abandons her, leaving her in complete despair;
- the book describes Fiammetta's tormented wait for Panfilo's return and her descent into despair and jealousy;
- she even tries to kill herself, but fails;
- the book ends without a resolution: Panfilo does not return, and Fiammetta finds solace only in her own despair and in literature, obsessively comparing her situation to that of tragic heroines.

Decameron

- one of the ten storytellers in the frame story;
- she is a **Florentine woman**, with no evident continuity with her previous stories;
- a potential continuity: her portrayal is still marked by jealousy, just as it was in the *Elegia*.

The *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*

- Fiammetta's story changes radically compared to previous works;
- The work attenuates the character's historical referents and its connection to Boccaccio's biography;
- Fiammetta, victim of her own obsessive love, is no longer the woman who abandons her lover, but becomes the woman who is abandoned;
- Highly innovative aspect: the entire work is narrated in the first person by Fiammetta herself.



A scholarly debate regarding Fiammetta and the *Elegia*

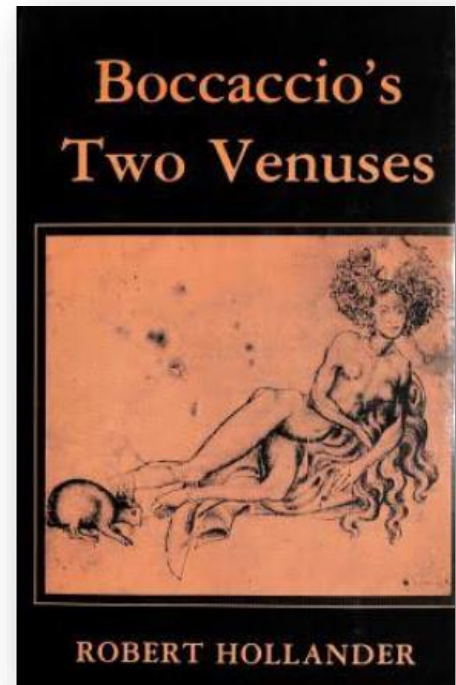
*Is Fiammetta a reliable
narrator?*

- The character's autonomy and the lack of explicit authorial judgment have led critics to focus on one main problem;
- This debate is shaped by the critical issue of Boccaccio's own stance toward Fiammetta and of the work's potential moralizing intent;
- In response, scholars have tended to moralize the work.

Moral judgment on Fiammetta

Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses* (1977)

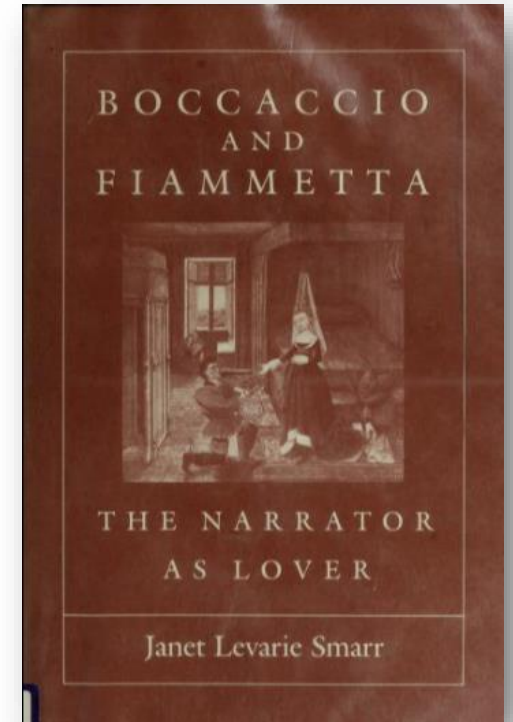
- Boccaccio follows a Christian conception of love, based on the idea of free will;
- Fiammetta sacrifices her freedom for the sake of a love that is morally condemnable;
- She fails to take responsibility for her choices, descending into madness and suffering the destructive consequences of her obsessive love;
- The author's perspective doesn't coincide with Fiammetta's, but rather with that of her nurse, who seeks to dissuade her from having an affair with Panfilo;
- Boccaccio assumes an ironic stance regarding Fiammetta's conduct: comic effects that highlight the excessive nature of Fiammetta's suffering, as seen in her suicide attempt.



Moral judgment on Fiammetta

Janet Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta. The narrator as lover* (1986)

- Distinction between narrator and author in Boccaccio's works: evident in the case of the *Elegia*;
- Fiammetta presents herself as a victim of love, but gives up on the use of reason;
- Fiammetta's conduct in love contradicts Boccaccio's vision;
- The author's perspective doesn't coincide with that of Fiammetta;
- Fiammetta wants her book to be read by empathetic female readers;
- Boccaccio seeks a discerning readership capable of understanding the consequences of sin illustrated by Fiammetta's example.



The unreliability of Fiammetta's voice

- These interpretations of Fiammetta shape how readers should engage with the text as a whole;
- Moral intent:
 1. Hollander: the book is a critique of the celebration of sensual love;
 2. Smarr: Boccaccio intended the work to be read as an edifying text, presenting Fiammetta as a negative example;
- Divergence of perspectives: shows the unreliability of Fiammetta's narrative voice;
- The moral judgment leads to an intellectual judgment;
- Two notable features characterize Fiammetta's prose: its rhetorical sophistication and its pervasive references to the literary tradition;
- Hollander and Smarr: both features act as strategies of self-deception used by the protagonist.

The unreliability of Fiammetta's voice

- Through her use of rhetoric and literary tradition, Fiammetta seeks to dignify her personal situation and to justify herself in the eyes of her female readers;
- She fails to recognize the distinction between literature and reality, and between the pagan and Christian worlds;
- This incapacity to comprehend her own situation demonstrates that her version of events is unreliable;
- Hollander and Smarr's critical reading is opposed to the empathetic reading that Fiammetta demands from her female readers;
- This approach distrusts the narrative voice, calling into question the protagonist's self-characterization, her self-awareness, and her ability to provide a reliable account of the facts;
- This reading is followed by many scholars, who emphasize Fiammetta's many failures as a character and as a narrator.

The unreliability of Fiammetta's voice

Giuseppe Chiecchi, *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta: in margine alla mitologia del personaggio* (2015)

- Fiammetta is fundamentally incoherent as a narrator;
- Evidence of her inconsistency: a contradiction in the Prologue → Fiammetta highlights the deceptive nature of Greek mythological tales, but, at the same time, constantly relies on these same tales as *exempla*, showing an extensive use of mythological material;
- This contradiction is evidence of Fiammetta's identity crisis and literary pathology, as her use of myth traps her in a web of self-deception;
- By identifying herself with classical heroines, she misinterprets her own situation, failing to distinguish reality from illusion;
- Irony of her failed suicide: exposes the divide between Fiammetta's tragic models and her ordinary reality.

The unreliability of Fiammetta's voice

Flavia Palma, *Il potere della narrazione e le potenzialità del racconto nell'«Elegia di madonna Fiammetta»* (2023)

- Fiammetta progressively reveals herself as an unreliable narrator, incapable of a faithful reconstruction of the facts;
- Evidence: Fiammetta's shifting accounts of her first romantic encounter with Panfilo in her chamber, shaped by her evolving perceptions of her lover.

Chapter I: the episode is described in a romanticized manner.

Chapter V (following the discovery of Panfilo's betrayal): the same episode is described as a rape;

- The character overlaps with the narrator: she is depicted as a liar, a masterful storyteller who deceives to manipulate those around her, including her husband.



The unreliability of Fiammetta's voice

- Fiammetta tends to deceive not only others, but herself: she crafts plausible yet false narratives to console herself and justify Panfilo's absence, ultimately losing her ability to distinguish reality from illusion;
- Fiammetta's features as a character shape her role as a narrator, characterized by her capacity for deception;
- This renders her entire narrative fundamentally unreliable: she uses narrative to manipulate facts, cast herself as a victim and elicit empathy from her female readership;
- The scholar highlights the unreliability of Fiammetta's voice, but also her active role as a narrator: her unreliability is a product of both her lack of self-awareness and her active capacity to manipulate facts;
- To restore Fiammetta's *auctoritas*, scholars often emphasize the active, deliberate nature of her narration.

From narrator to *auctor*

Maria Luisa Doglio, *Il libro, «lo 'ntelletto e la mano»: Fiammetta o la donna che scrive* (2005)

- The *Elegia* gives life to a new literary model: the woman who writes;
- Fiammetta is portrayed in a radically different manner: as a woman who writes, she frees herself from the passive role usually attributed to women in the Middle Ages;
- Her active role is further highlighted by her position as the subject, rather than the object, of romantic desire;
- There is no ironic treatment of Fiammetta by Boccaccio: her attempted suicide is not comic but rather reveals the character's modernity. Fiammetta chooses to live and endure her suffering.



From narrator to *auctor*

Maria Serena Sapegno, *Il discorso dell'auctor nell'Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (2013)

- The *Elegia* is the first example in vernacular of a female voice that seeks authorial legitimacy;
- The scholar aims to understand how Fiammetta's authorial persona is constructed within the text;
- Highlights metatextual reflections, in which Fiammetta asserts her control over the story, with full literary self-consciousness;
- Fiammetta's literary culture is not a tool for self-deception, but an instrument for achieving full self-awareness;
- The construction of the *auctoritas* of the female narrator is achieved through her literary culture and her rhetorical mastery.

From narrator to *auctor*

Elena Lombardi, *Donne che leggono (e sono lette): Francesca, Fiammetta e la vedova del Corbaccio (e la Sirena)* (2018)

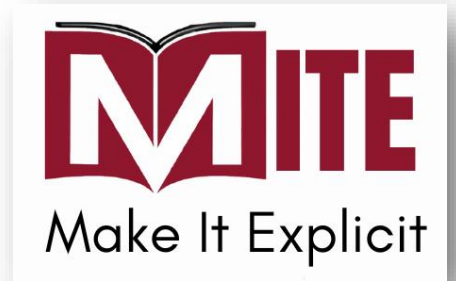
- Analyzes the character of Fiammetta in her representation as a woman reader;
- Fiammetta's literary passion is a crucial feature of the character;
- The act of reading serves to legitimize Fiammetta as an author;
- By comparing herself to classical heroines, Fiammetta engages not in self-deception, but attempts to insert herself into the literary canon and to subvert it;
- The *Elegia* therefore depicts Fiammetta's transformation from reader to author.

Unreliable narrator; authoritative author

- The *Elegia* introduces a key innovation in medieval literature: a female narrator and her autonomy from the male author;
- This new literary model has given rise to divergent interpretations;
- Her position as a woman narrating her own story of adultery makes her a subject of critical reflection on her moral and intellectual status, with direct consequences on how we assess the reliability of her narrative voice;
- Other scholars have noted how this model is developed to establish the *auctoritas* of a female voice;
- Beyond moral judgments, her very capacity to manipulate the narrative is what grants her the active role of an author.



Fiammetta and MITE: some considerations



- Our project aims to represent complex theses from literary studies, such as those that constitute the debate on Fiammetta;
- In each study we analyze, we seek to elucidate its core argument and the evidence on which it is based;
- We propose an approach to the analysis of literary characters which integrates philosophy, literary studies, and criticism;
- The critical debate on Fiammetta offers a valuable perspective for the philosophical reflection on literary characters;
- In some readings, Fiammetta is treated as a real person: scholars judge her by the same standards applied to actual individuals;
- This specific critical debate proves to be a valuable case study for our research goals.