PLAYING WITH LOVE VERSUS PLAYING WITH THE TEXT IN ELEGIA MADONEI FIAMMETTA BY G. BOCCACCIO

Lavinia BĂNICĂ[*]

Summary: *Through the Elegia di madonna Fiammetta, we are led through the psychological processes which govern not only abandoned women, and the grief and rejection they may experience; but we are also shown the psychological processes experienced by authors. It seems apt to use the same term corpus to describe a body of literature and a physical entity, since, as Boccaccio shows, texts are often a mere extension of an author's being.*

Keywords: *fictional gender identity, drama, narratives roles.*

The *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* is a drama story of the title character's extramarital love affair with Panfilo, who, having succeeded in seducing Fiammetta, returns to his native Florence, leaving her with nothing but empty promises of his return. Composed between 1343 and 1345, the *Elegia* is one of only two narratives produced by Boccaccio in which the narrator is also the protagonist. The second of these first-person narratives, the *Corbaccio* — a contentious dream narrative, in which the unnamed protagonist is visited by the ghost of his love-object's deceased husband, who lectures him about the faults of women — shares many similarities with the *Elegia*: both tales concern themselves with the psychological effects of unrequited love, both narrators are suicidal at times. However, what sets the *Elegia* apart, not only from the *Corbaccio*, but from the whole of Boccaccio's work, is the perspective from which it is written: Boccaccio authors the text from the point of view of 'Fiammetta', a pseudonymous adulteress, abandoned by her illegitimate lover, to whom she attributes the name 'Panfilo'.

Whilst the expected problems arising from a male-authored female narrative exist,the *Elegia* also presents issues ranging from authorial intentions to Boccaccio's engagement with his textual predecessors. Many scholars have commented upon Boccaccio's use of the character 'Fiammetta' as a *senhal* — a rhetorical figure, usually used to represent the object of a poet's desire — yet what sets Fiammetta's role in the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* aside from these other texts is that she is given a voice: Boccaccio no longer presents her as an object of male desire, but as a lover, a reader, an individual capable of experiencing real emotion, and, most importantly, he presents her as a woman able to tell her own story.

Perhaps the most important issue to arise from Fiammetta's melancholic tale is the question of her own motivation for composing her story. Whilst she states in her prologue that within her testimony you will find no Greek myths embellished with many lies, nor Trojan battles soiled with much blood] her reliance upon such sources is overwhelmingly apparent almost from the very beginning of her narrative. Suzanne C. Hagedorn suggests that Fiammetta's account of misery and abandonment is, in fact, intended to add to the very genre of literature to which she turns in her moments of lovelorn despair, literature addressed to "sympathetic (female) readers who sustain themselves by reading about her miseries, much as she has been comforted by reading about others' sorrows". Considering her unambiguous denial that she might manipulate mythological and classical sources in the narration of her experiences, one must

[*] University of Pitești, lavinia_banica@yahoo.com

BDD-A14500 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:07 UTC)

consider the impact the character of Fiammetta wished to achieve: is the recitation of her account a cathartic exercise, "an acceptable compromise between declaring her feelings openly and hiding them completely",

As a character, Fiammetta is complex. She invokes many literary issues, such as the "proper" use of rhetorical devices; how intertextual references can be manipulated within narratives; and the role of gender within texts which ensue from both masculine and feminine voices. In works of literature any author must stand at one remove from his characters, since the characters are presented by a narrator who is, in turn, a work of fiction created by the author. As the title character, Fiammetta's role in the *Elegia* is obviously pivotal. Whilst her voice is the only medium through which her account is given, what renders her character most problematic is her own confession that, in order to protect her own virtuous reputation, details – including the 'real' names of the characters – have been deliberately concealed. 'Fiammetta', therefore, is a fictional veil created by a fictional character, and Boccaccio has successfully distanced himself even further from the 'fiction' he has created. The information provided within a text is something determined only by the author, yet in the case of the *Elegia*, we must question the extent to which this comment is true. Boccaccio, as the text's author, is the sole creator of the narrative: his characters and their accounts are fictional. Yet Boccaccio is also allowing Fiammetta to possess a certain sense of autonomy, not only by giving her a voice, but also by allowing her character to 'make choices' regarding the accuracy of the information she provides within her testimony. There is, however, one crucial difference between Boccaccio as the author of the *Elegia* and Fiammetta as the author of her own account, as Eugenio Giusti quite rightly notes: "by choosing to become an elegiac heroine and to reject finally her nurse's pragmatic advice, Fiammetta falls into a literary trap from which she cannot escape. She actually has no choice, for, unlike her readers, she cannot choose between words and actions because she is a product of fiction".

Boccaccio has imagined a woman who imagines date rape, who tries to free herself of responsibility by depicting herself as the victim of male deceit and male force. When we inspect Fiammetta's initial description of her and Panfilo's love-making, we see that she makes clear that the sex is consensual, mutual, and joyous.

Fiammetta initially speaks of her sexual relationship as such: "[with more boldness than intelligence, he found a convenient time and place and obtained from me that which I wanted just as much as he did, although I feigned to the contrary] (*Elegia*,1, 25, 2); yet after the departure of Panfilo and her realisation that he will not return, our protagonist does, indeed, cry rape, claiming that her lover " [took me in the night-time while I was soundly sleeping, like someone who had been so deceptive many times before; firstly you took me in your arms and virtually violated my chastity, almost before I was even awake] (*Elegia*,5, 5, 12). Fiammetta, well-versed as she has proven herself to be in mythological characters, uses the weapon of language to contort the truth within her account, drawing upon established models of female virtue to enhance the promulgation of her own virtue.

The *Elegia*'s Fiammetta is complex: not only does she take on the role of both lover and scorned love-object, but she speaks to us from the very beginning to the very end, with the sole exception of the rubrics preceding each of the chapters.[22] Our dependence upon her within the story is important: her objective in narrating the *Elegia* is to elicit sympathy from her intended audience of women readers; she therefore has a clear objective to fulfil, which renders her narrative necessarily biased. To say that she is an untrustworthy story-teller would be a gross understatement. Various traits of her

BDD-A14500 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:07 UTC)

character are borrowed from the literature she reads to alleviate her misery, yet as hers is the only voice we hear throughout the entire narrative, the verity of such traits is dubious.

In the prologue to the *Elegia*, Fiammetta quite clearly states her intention that her account should be read by [compassionate ladies] and that [I do not care if my account does not reach men; in fact, if I could, I would keep it from them entirely] (*Prologo*, 1). However, as twenty-first-century readers, we must bear in mind the problems associated with this dedication: although no exact figures are known, female literacy rates in Trecento Italy were extremely low.[23] This alone raises questions regarding why Boccaccio chose to nominally address a female audience when composing the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*.

Fiammetta's character insinuates her recognition of this link between voicing (or writing) and sexuality within the concluding chapter of the *Elegia*. Addressing her [dear little book of mine] directly (*Elegia*, IX, 1), Fiammetta describes her narrative as an extension of her own body; she gives it human attributes, such as [uncombed hair] (*Elegia*, IX, 5) and the ability to bear mockery with humility (*Elegia*, IX, 10), and bids it to avoid the hands of those who [hold you by force] (*Elegia*, IX, 14). Fiammetta's reference to being held "by force" displays a fear that this account — a part of herself — be violated should it fall into the wrong hands; that is, Panfilo's hands. She will allow her story to be 'taken' by certain (female) readers, on the condition that they treat it gently and do not abuse their privileged position: [if you should come across another woman who fails to keep her eyes dry as she reads, but is sad and full of compassion for our misfortunes and, with her tears, multiplies your smudges and marks, collect them with my own, and consider them holy] (*Elegia*, IX, 11). It is difficult to read such an order without reading it as a direct metaphor for her own physical form: Fiammetta makes the book-object embody herself and, therefore, wishes to be treated with the same respect and care she asks for her text.

Although Boccaccio certainly did attract female readers, there are signifiers within the text — aside from low female literacy rates — which suggest that the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* was not, as Fiammetta claims, actually intended for an audience of love-lorn women.

Multiple levels of meaning can be generated by a single text, depending on the presumed readership, and this not only raises question regarding authorial intention, but also regarding gender. Considering the low female literacy rates, the most likely readership of Boccaccio's work would have been a predominantly male audience; his depictions of scantily dressed, love-lorn women, consoling one another in remote areas, therefore function to fuel male desire and fantasy. If, by (mis)directing his text to a gender-specific readership, Boccaccio is able to alter the meaning of Fiammetta's narrative, then we must also consider the extent to which the gender of the author/narrator impacts upon the reception of the *Elegia*.

Furthermore, Boccaccio presents his principal character as one so consumed by depression that she contemplates suicide: [Therefore, if the lesser evil is to keep my lover, as I already had him, rather than kill the body which houses the depressed soul, as I believe it is, then allow him to return and give him back to me] (*Elegia*, V, 35, 7). This suicide motif is commonplace amongst medieval narratives regarding turbulent love affairs.

Within the Middle Ages, depression became synonymous with scholarship, and was "an elite 'illness' that afflicted men precisely as the sign of their exceptionality, and the inscription of genius within them". It is therefore, especially important that

BDD-A14500 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:07 UTC)

Boccaccio should not only provide his female narrator with rhetorical skills, but that he should also attribute to her this sign of masculine 'genius': depression. However, in considering these two personality traits, we are left with one overriding question: has Boccaccio given his protagonist masculine characteristics to make her more appealing to a male audience? Or is Fiammetta's character – with her effeminized masculinity and her masculine femininity – intended to be purposefully repulsive (or, indeed, attractive?) to both men and

As twenty-first-century readers, it is perilous to back-project our own cultural ideals when reading medieval narratives, yet each reader must bring something of themselves to their interpretation of any given text. To read a female-narrated, male-authored narrative, which deals with important questions of gender expectations, it is almost impossible to avoid applying one's own experiences and opinions when attempting to decipher the true authorial intention of a literary piece, whilst also acknowledging that this 'true authorial intention' can never be accurately known. While Boccaccio uses such complex devices to expose his linguistic understanding and ability, it is almost impossible to draw only one conclusion from his texts.

In Fiammetta's dedication of her narrative to compassionate women, then, Boccaccio is immediately constructing reader expectations of a romance narrative: the text is supposedly intended for a female readership, so will include only subject matter which is 'female-friendly', yet we have seen this to be untrue. Boccaccio evidently realised, through his knowledge of literature, the elements of narrative which function successfully, and has adorned his protagonist with such characteristics. It is not by chance that Fiammetta is endowed with the talent of rhetoric: Boccaccio knows that she *must* show male characteristics, because, for a proto-humanist audience, these very characteristics are those which render a text successful. Yet, as has been shown, Fiammetta's character misuses these traditionally male devices in her over-employment of intertextuality, which inevitably force her to become an inferior version of the classical heroines whose tales she cites; inferior because, as a fictional construct, she does not have the ability to perform the most tragic act of loveless despair and commit suicide. If she were to do this, we would have no text whatsoever, as she is narrating past events, and so her fictional status renders her necessarily substandard as a literary heroine.

Through the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, and the way in which Fiammetta's story functions on many levels, Boccaccio cements himself as the medieval master of multiple-readings. Boccaccio uses the text as a way in which to explore therapeutic storytelling; something upon which he would place such a high importance in his later *Decameron*. The description of the text as "the first psychological novel in a modern language" is, indeed, problematic — not least because this description is essentially reductive to the multifaceted nature of the text — yet Fiammetta's account certainly serves as a tool for better understanding the psychological processes which accompany disorders, such as grief, depression, obsessions, and suicide ideation. Yet what this study has shown is that, aside from being an insight into the psyche of the protagonist; aside from being a declaration of the healing powers of literature, Boccaccio is using the platform of the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta* to put forward his feelings regarding the dissemination of any given author's work. By imbuing Fiammetta with both male and female characteristics — the "masculine" skill of rhetoric and the "feminine" hysteria which accompanies the grief she endures after being abandoned by her lover — her narrative voice becomes almost hermaphroditic. This offers the perfect vehicle for the author to express his own reservations, fears, and opinions regarding the potential

BDD-A14500 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:07 UTC)

mistreatment of his literary *corpus*; reservations and fears cleverly veiled by Fiammetta's language when she warns the physical copy of her "*picciolo mio libretto*" [dear little book of mine] to avoid being held by force, and to learn how to bear mockery with humility. Whilst Fiammetta's speech at this point may signal that she is again referring to the "rape" she claims to have endured, Boccaccio's writing — notoriously ambiguous as it is — allows us to read these commands as a reflection on his own anxieties regarding the publication of work, since, after it leaves the author's hand, he has no control over its reception.

Through the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*, we are led through the psychological processes which govern not only abandoned women, and the grief and rejection they may experience; but we are also shown the psychological processes experienced by authors. It seems apt to use the same term *corpus* to describe a body of literature and a physical entity, since, as Boccaccio shows, texts are often a mere extension of an author's being.

Bibliography

The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta, edited and translated [from the Italian] by Mariangela Causa-Steindler and Thomas Mauch; with an introduction by Mariangela Causa-Steindler. University of Chicago Press, Chicago,1990

BDD-A14500 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:07 UTC)