

Boccaccio's "Little Flame" Burns Herself: Fiammetta's Dissociative Identity

For someone who writes voluminously about love, Lady Fiammetta appears to know little about loving herself; the love she has to offer Panfilo seems grossly disproportionate to the love she shows herself. In her desperate attempt to grapple with the curse of her impassioned love, Fiammetta blames her charms, Fortune, Love, Panfilo, and Panfilo's father, and yet, none of these feels entirely satisfactory. After Fiammetta is arrested in Love's shackles, nostalgic thoughts and melancholy feelings for Panfilo come to define the discourse that surrounds her relationship with herself; Fiammetta is incapable of thinking about herself without thinking of Panfilo, too, as if their two souls merged into a single body. There is no denying Giovanni Boccaccio's blatant misogyny and sexist stereotypes in *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, but that certainly does not mean that female readers do not have anything to gain from it or should disregard the text altogether. I will engage in a negotiated reading of *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* in which I argue that it can also be read as an account of a deeply insecure woman who, through her own loveless marriage and affair, struggles to reconcile her own identity by means of disassociating from herself.

Approximately a decade after the publication of *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, Boccaccio casts an ironic glance back at it in the prologue of the *Decameron* when he says that women's domestication makes it more difficult for them to overcome the torments of love: "And if, in the course of their meditations, their minds should be invaded by melancholy arising out of the flames of longing, it will inevitably take root there and make them suffer greatly, unless it be dislodged by new interests" (2). Boccaccio diagnoses the madness Fiammetta faces as a symptom of her sheltered physical body, which fuels her roaming imagination and feelings of jealousy. Fiammetta's affliction with love enables readers to watch her become a recluse and

recede into herself, getting lost within the trenches of her soul. Fiammetta thereby takes on the position of a soul-searcher and uses her agony as an instrument to reconceptualize herself in relation to her own body.

As Fiammetta recounts her dream vision at the start of her account, she begins to think of herself in terms of a multiplicity of selves. Fiammetta is overcome with a deep sleep when she begins dreaming of herself picking flowers in a lush field and is unexpectedly bitten in the heart by a snake. In an attempt to console the vicious snake in all its unjust cruelty, she pulls it closer to her chest: “The snake, made bolder and fiercer by my gesture, fastened its evil mouth onto the bite it had given, and after a long time, having swallowed much of this blood of ours, it seemed to leave my bosom against my will and go away sinuously through the young grass, taking my spirit with it” (5). The snake swallows her spirit and slithers away with it, leaving Fiammetta as a cold, hollowed out shell of a body. Fiammetta uses the plural possessive pronoun when referring to herself, which could be interpreted as Fiammetta’s desperation to identify with all women who are victims of love, a nod in the direction of this collective and unified group of women.

However, the plural possessive pronoun could also be an indication of division as opposed to unity. While Fiammetta belabors the point that her heart has been wronged alongside many other women’s as if flaunting her membership of an elite group and to remediate her own loneliness, she also illustrates a dichotomized self of spirit and body; by using the phrase “this blood of ours,” Fiammetta collectively addresses her divided self out of a yearning to become whole again.

After Love has set fire to her heart, Fiammetta understands her possession in terms of being subjected to a tyrannical institution. Fiammetta’s grief is therefore doubled since she not only mourns losing her lover, but also her own autonomy. Fiammetta returns to the safe confines

of her room, determined to tame Love's flame by keeping it a secret, but knowing full well that it is already too late for her: "I will only say that I returned to the place where my soul used to be free, burning with a new passion and with a new soul now enslaved" (11). Fiammetta becomes a prisoner of Love and by thinking of herself as such, she relinquishes all hopeful thoughts of one day being set free. Foreshadowing Boccaccio's Prologue in the *Decameron*, Fiammetta reconstructs her bedroom from once being a space of freedom to now being a place of enslavement, much like a prison cell. While this suggests that Fiammetta's notion of freedom was distorted from the start and that as a woman, she was never truly "free" in the romanticized way she thinks, this is also suggestive of the new way she has come to think of herself with a "new passion" and a "new soul." For Fiammetta, the striking of love becomes a means of dividing time and herself into two epochs: her soul before falling in love and her soul after falling in love.

The compromised safety of Fiammetta's bedroom parallels Fiammetta's heightened sense of insecurity in her own body; Love causes her to feel a great deal of discomfort where she once felt safe and secure. As Fiammetta's mind becomes consumed by the desire to attract Panfilo, she grows less desirable in her own eyes: "To tell the truth, however, I lost the confidence I used to have in my beauty; and never did I leave my room without first having the trusted advice of my mirror: my hands, guided by some unknown teacher, each day found prettier ornamentations by which to add art to my natural charms and make me the most splendid of all women" (11-12). This is a direct contrast to the beginning of her account where Fiammetta describes her beauty as being the source of her pompousness and pride; at one time Fiammetta would consult the mirror for reassurance, but now she consults it for advice. Fiammetta's mirror acts as a tool she uses to revise and edit her own identity, along with the manipulations of "some unknown teacher" that

act like Fiammetta's puppet strings. Fiammetta's body, just like her bedroom, are both intimate spaces that are invaded and acted upon by belittling passionate forces. Her mirror illustrates the image of a doubled Fiammetta, a Fiammetta that splinters into two and turns on herself because of the superficial insecurity she harbors, a Fiammetta who feels trapped in the mirror's frame.

Fiammetta's loss of autonomy causes her to lose her sense of self. As Fiammetta grows fonder of Panfilo and Panfilo kindles her "little flame," Fiammetta grows weaker and more distanced from herself, losing a sense of recognition and self-awareness. Fiammetta describes herself as Love's plaything, depersonalized and disassociated: "And since desire occupied nearly all my feelings, it estranged me from myself, as if I had forgotten where I was... And besides this, Love frequently deprived me of nightly quietude and daily nourishment; he led me to utter strange words and made me do things that were mad rather than just impulsive" (12). Love takes hold of Fiammetta both mentally and physically to the point where she acts intoxicated. Fiammetta grows out of touch not only with reality, but also with herself; as she narrates these feelings of body-soul disconnection, it almost gives readers the sense that she is speaking *outside* of herself, much like an out-of-body experience. Fiammetta talks about herself as if she is talking about another person and it is through this disengagement that she attempts to make sense of the invisible forces acting upon her.

Fiammetta's nursemaid is another example of Fiammetta's employment of an external self. When Fiammetta's nursemaid finds her languishing in her own melancholy, she becomes the hard voice of reason that is a direct contrast against Fiammetta's soft voice overwhelmed with emotion: "You are all nothing but a mob of senseless young women burning with a fiery lust, and being driven by it you have discovered that Love is a god who should more appropriately be called madness, but you call him the son of Venus and say that his powers come

from the third heaven, as if you wished to plead necessity as an excuse for your folly” (15). Fiammetta has various inner conflicts throughout the text in which she pleads the cases for both Reason and Love, but her confrontation with the nursemaid brings this argument to life. The nursemaid does not only represent an intensely conservative rationale that shuns love altogether, but also acts as an older and wiser Fiammetta who speaks to a young and immature Fiammetta. The nursemaid functions as more than a foil for Fiammetta — she is the voice of a future Fiammetta that tries to talk sensibility into her younger misguided self. Once again, Fiammetta’s idea of time is warped as it centers around her attitude towards love; her present and future selves collapse into the same time.

Fiammetta does not only divide herself into separate identities, but also absorbs the identities of others. After Panfilo leaves her, Fiammetta is overcome with her loss and attempts to at least temporarily fill the void her lover has left her with by taking on his persona. Fiammetta lays on his side of the bed and mentally summons Panfilo: “Then I imagined that he had returned, and by making believe that he was with me, I told him and asked him many things, answering myself in his place” (50). Fiammetta turns to roleplay as a tactic to help her cope with the loss of her lover. The fact that she admits to her eyes sometimes even deceiving her into thinking that Panfilo actually stood in front of her suggests that this is more serious than simply longing for someone; Fiammetta’s own identity is compromised without Panfilo. Fiammetta does not know how to be with herself without also relating to Panfilo in some form, whether that be thinking of him or reimagining him.

Fiammetta feels abandoned by both Panfilo and her own soul, making her own sense of loss feel more profound and her own sense of self more fragmented. Even though Fiammetta hopelessly begs Panfilo to stay by dramatically suggesting her own death and the increased

likelihood of his death if he were to leave, her initial reaction to the thought of Panfilo leaving is modest: “I will simply say that when I heard these words, my Soul tried to run away from me, and I believe that she would have undoubtedly done so had she not felt embraced by the one she loved above all else, but left nonetheless afraid and filled with heavy sorrow, she deprived me of the capacity to say anything for a long time” (31). Fiammetta’s soul floats in and out of her throughout the text and a soulless Fiammetta is left in the wake of Panfilo’s heartbreaking news. Fiammetta disassociates herself from her tormented feelings by assigning them as a burden her soul must bear, so when her soul decides to leave her, who exactly is Fiammetta? Without Panfilo as a kindling lover and without her soul as a source of moral support, all that is left of Fiammetta is her body, but even that is deemed useless without her being able to function.

Upon Panfilo’s leave, Fiammetta’s soul leaves her again, except this time she falls unconscious. Fiammetta faints and is not only disconnected from herself, but from the world. Her maidservant recounts to Fiammetta what transpired after she left herself: “As soon as he saw you lying nearly dead in my arms, with your soul wandering I know not where, he took you gently into his arms, and with his hand on your breast he tried to find out whether your frightened soul was still with you, and when he discovered your heart was beating fast, I believe that he called you in tears more than a hundred times to respond to his last kisses (40). Fiammetta’s spiraling into dysfunction is integrated in glaringly misogynistic discourse as she is portrayed as a hysterical, spineless, and obsessive woman who needs the support of Panfilo in order to feel secure in herself. Fiammetta’s paralyzing despair, however, does not just come from Panfilo or Love’s wound, but also from her own imaginative and overanalyzing tendencies. In trying to figure out her own identity, Fiammetta dismembers herself by conceptualizing herself as soul or body and externalizes herself through disassociation. While self-criticism and

reflection is important, Fiammetta turns it into a self-destructive tendency, punishing and chipping away at herself, kindling her deep-seated insecurity.

The deeper Fiammetta falls into a hyper self-awareness, the more distant she becomes from being able to rationally conceptualize herself and reconfigure her own identity; the closer she draws herself inwards to be studied like a specimen, the more warped and distorted she becomes in her mind. In the midst of attempting to convince Panfilo to stay with her, Fiammetta ironically tells him: “Keep in mind that he who does not love himself possesses nothing” (33). It is not difficult to make the case that Fiammetta does not love herself and perhaps that is why she herself ends up possessed by Love rather than possessing it, but she also does not seem to even possess a coherent identity. Fiammetta constantly visualizes her own soul pass in and out of her own flesh and whips herself by incessantly thinking of nothing and no one else but Panfilo, completely ignoring the fact of her own marriage. Through many reassuring claims, Fiammetta tells readers that she is capable of *identifying* with other women in love, but whether or not she is capable of configuring her own identity is a separate issue.

Fiammetta begins her Prologue by stating that she aims and wishes to inspire pity in her female readers, but Fiammetta’s desires in writing this stream-of-consciousness novel is far more complex. Perhaps as a final effort to construct a sense of identity or legacy, Fiammetta writes this novel for and to herself. Writing becomes Fiammetta’s weapon of choice in helping her battle her anguish and anxieties, but also in fleshing herself out. When Fiammetta’s lover leaves her a loveless soul, she is struck with an identity crisis. Although writing seems to only drive Fiammetta more deeply into this crisis, that may just say more about the nature of writing itself rather than Fiammetta herself.

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment.

Bibliography

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