

The Questioni d'Amore Reconsidered: Contextualizing Boccaccio's Amatory Manual

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2021

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Abstract

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This dissertation focuses on Giovanni Boccaccio's *questioni d'amore*, a text that, despite its immense richness, has been overlooked within the field of Boccaccio studies. It has been the subject of surprisingly little scholarship, and the sparse work that has been done on them has relegated them to tight and unimaginative spaces. This project, which seeks to fill this critical lacuna, is innovative in three respects: it is the first study to consider all thirteen *questioni* individually; it offers a new, essential translation of the *questioni*; and it is the only analysis to date that considers the *questioni* through a historicizing lens. To this end, I conduct a detailed analysis of the *questioni* that is contextualized by social history and supplemented with relevant literary intertexts. This study ultimately demonstrates the considerable social, legal, and literary significance of the *questioni d'amore* and provides new perspectives on Boccaccio's authorial trajectory and intellectual interests.

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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, without whose generous support I would not have been able to complete my graduate studies. I am particularly grateful to the faculty and staff of the Italian Department, who offered companionship, intellectual support, and valuable advice over the years.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my advisor, Teodolinda Barolini. Her wisdom, wit, and passion for this field are without equal, and these years under her tutelage have shaped me in ways I cannot ever hope to express. Many thanks also to Jo Ann Cavallo, Pier Mattia Tommasino, Carmela Franklin, and Patricia Grieve for so generously sharing their expertise and providing vital feedback on this dissertation.

My fascination with the *questioni d'amore* began during my undergraduate studies at Georgetown, where two professors in particular planted the seeds that would eventually grow into this project. I thank Francesco Ciabattini and Laura Benedetti for introducing me to Boccaccio's works and for their gentle guidance and unquestioning support over the years of my undergraduate and graduate studies. Of course, once I arrived at Columbia, I needed someone who could teach me how to grow these seeds. Meredith Levin did precisely that, as she shared her immense knowledge of our library's collections and gave me the tools necessary to do the research for this dissertation; I thank her for her invaluable assistance and for her friendship.

Writing a dissertation is a solitary enterprise, even more so during a pandemic. Teaching has been the greatest remedy for this isolation, as it has given me the chance to make intellectual and personal connections in a period characterized by separation. I therefore wish to thank my

students, whose curiosity, sense of humor, and genuine engagement were a source of joy in these challenging times.

I am indebted to a network of family and friends, without whom I would not have been able to fulfil this lifelong aspiration. I am immensely grateful to my parents, Michael and Mary Lou, and my sister, Victoria, for their love and encouragement; their unwavering belief in me gave me the confidence to pursue this goal. I am deeply thankful to my mother and father-in-law, Cheila and Henry, and my brothers-in-law, David and Ayodiran, for their constant love and prayerful support. I would not have been able to reach this point without the loving care of my friends, Anastasia, Scarlet, Breanna, Renata, Ximena, and Walter, who saw me through every challenge and celebrated my every accomplishment, and to whom I offer my most heartfelt thanks.

Finally, I want to express my profound appreciation for my husband, Gabriel. For enthusiastically supporting this project, for reading every page, for listening to every idea, for lifting me up when I felt low, for giving me the courage to explore new avenues, for helping me find my voice, and for showing me more love than I ever thought possible, I thank him. His gentleness, constancy, and love have helped bring this dissertation from abstraction to reality.

For my husband,
*l'agnolo Gabriello, il quale più che sé m'ama, sì come la più bella donna, per quello che egli mi
dica, che sia nel mondo.*

Introduction

On a frigid January day in 2014, I was wandering through the stacks of Lauinger Library looking for books on Boccaccio. I was in my junior year at Georgetown and, having recently encountered the *Decameron* in an Italian survey course, I was eager to learn more about this author whose *novelle* I found so captivating. Amidst the myriad editions of the *Decameron* there was a shabby, dirt-colored volume whose thin spine bore the title: *Boccaccio's Thirteen Questions of Love*. Intrigued, I slipped it from the shelf and began to skim its contents. In spite of the turgid translation, I was fascinated by these *questioni*; even as a novice student of Boccaccio, I could tell that they had much in common with the *Decameron* and I suspected that they were probably worth studying in greater depth. I checked the book out, read it (twice, in fact, because I enjoyed it so much) and then, like most books I read for pleasure, I returned it and never gave it another thought.

Years later, when I began studying for my comprehensive exams, Prof. Barolini shared a draft of her essay on *Dec.* 8.7 with me, thinking it would be useful as I prepared a list on Boccaccio and his works. Though neither of us realized it at the time, this was an important moment for me: it reconnected me with the *questioni d'amore* and, ultimately, shaped the course of my research. Upon reading her reference in that essay to the third *questione*, I was reminded of my experience with the *questioni* back in college, and I wondered if it would be worth revisiting them for my dissertation research. Prof. Barolini encouraged me to pursue them as a potential dissertation topic, but I did not dare to believe that they could be a viable course of study. Surely, I thought, these *questioni d'amore* had been extensively researched and commented upon by other scholars – they were much too rich to ignore. Yet, to my great

surprise, the tomes and essays and critical editions I had envisaged were nowhere to be found; the *questioni d'amore* had indeed been neglected by the field of Boccaccio studies.

Before I provide an overview of the sparse scholarship that does exist on the *questioni d'amore*, it is essential to clarify what they are and why I will refer to them in this way over the course of this dissertation. The *Filocolo*, one of Boccaccio's earliest works, is a lengthy retelling of the popular French romance of Floire and Blanchefleur. In Book 4, there is a particular episode that digresses from the overall plot in which the eponymous protagonist, shipwrecked at Naples, is taken in by a group of thirteen young men and women. Seeking refuge from the oppressive midday heat, the group retreats into a shaded garden where they pass the afternoon by posing and debating questions of love. Various editors and scholars have therefore dubbed this textual excursion the *questioni d'amore*.

By the end of this study, readers will have experienced for themselves the incredible richness of the *questioni d'amore* and I imagine that they might ask themselves – as I did – why they have not generated greater scholarly interest. There are, in my view, two culprits to blame: the relatively negative critical response to the *Filocolo*, and a fundamental misapprehension of the *questioni* themselves.

Historically, the critical consensus has been largely unfavorable, and scholars have mostly judged the *Filocolo* as a second-rate text thrown together by a young and inexperienced author. It has been criticized for its excessive length, confusing digressions, and overall banality.¹ The *questioni d'amore*, which circulated as a standalone text without the frame of the

¹ The last few decades have seen a revived interest in the *Filocolo*, however; there are several major contributions to the study of the *Filocolo* that I will not be discussing in this dissertation since they do not address the *questioni* in a meaningful way. They include essays by Salvatore Battaglia (“Schemi lirici nell’arte del Boccaccio”), Natalino Sapegno (in his volume, *Il Trecento*), Antonio Enzo Quaglio (“Tra fonti e testo del Filocolo”), Nicolas Perella (“The World

Filocolo beginning in the 15th century, enjoyed an overwhelmingly positive reception not only in Italy but across Europe.² The critical tradition has nonetheless misunderstood the *questioni d'amore* as a collection of arid courtly precepts, effectively devaluing their significance and viewing them as little more than a dry run for the *Decameron*. There have, however, been a handful of monographs, two of which are cited as the foremost studies on the *questioni*.

The first of these two studies is Pio Rajna's thorough and erudite essay, "L'episodio delle questioni d'amore nel *Filocolo* del Boccaccio," which relates the *questioni d'amore* to the French tradition of the *jeu parti*. Even before delving into his analysis of the Occitan connections to the *questioni*, Rajna declares their importance, categorically connecting the *questioni d'amore* to the *Decameron*: "rendersi conto dell'episodio del *Filocolo*, significa intendere, donde germinasse il *Decameron*"³ ("to delve into this episode of the *Filocolo* is to understand where the *Decameron* took root"). Indeed, the link between the *Decameron* and this episode of the *Filocolo* is impossible to deny: in portraying a mixed gender group who engage in discussion and storytelling, Boccaccio was developing the prototype for his *Decameron*. Ultimately, Rajna's essay offers two fundamental contributions to the study of the *questioni*, firstly by underlining their significance within Boccaccio's authorial trajectory, and secondly by carefully examining their relationship to the medieval Occitan lyric tradition.

of the *Filocolo*") and Jonathan Usher ("Boccaccio's Experimentation with Verbal Portraits from the *Filocolo* to the *Decameron*"), as well as books by Steven Grossvogel (*Ambiguity and Allusion in Boccaccio's Filocolo*), Janet Smarr (*Boccaccio and Fiammetta: The Narrator as Lover*), and Robert Hollander (*Boccaccio's Two Venuses*).

² On the various translations and publications of the *questioni d'amore*, see Robert R. Edwards: "Lessons Meete to Be Followed': The European Reception of Boccaccio's 'Questioni d'Amore'" in *Textual Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2016, pp. 146–163.

³ "L'episodio delle questioni d'amore nel *Filocolo* di Boccaccio," *Romania*, vol. 31, no. 121, 1902, p. 35.

In addition to Rajna's article there is Victoria Kirkham's book, *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio's Filocolo and the Art of Medieval Fiction*.⁴ In discussing the *questioni d'amore*, Kirkham highlights the strangeness of this extended digression yet rejects the notion that they are the result of a young and inexperienced Boccaccio. Instead, she posits that they are indicative of his overall narrative agenda, as they represent a meditation on the relative supremacy of eros versus the absolute supremacy of God; since she considers the *Filocolo* an extended conversion narrative, the carnal-divine binary is central to her reading. Her conception, which relies heavily on numerological and allegorical interpretations, works to both legitimize the presence of the *questioni* and explicate their function within the *Filocolo*. While I agree with Kirkham that the *questioni* were the carefully constructed product of an author who was in the process of developing a unique narrative strategy, I am not convinced by the numerological and allegorical approaches she utilizes in her reading of the *questioni*.

The *questioni d'amore* are far too significant to languish in obscurity – they merit thoughtful and thorough reconsideration. This dissertation seeks not only to fill a critical lacuna but to introduce the *questioni d'amore* as a vital intertext for understanding the *Decameron*. It is not sufficient, as other scholars have done, to refer to the *questioni* as the *Decameron*'s precursor simply because they depict a *brigata* engaged in storytelling and debate. They are early indicators of Boccaccio's intellectual interests and authorial trajectory and, as such, they have a crucial role to play in the field of Boccaccio studies. Through this project, I hope to bring the *questioni d'amore* out of their undeserved state of neglect and demonstrate their importance to an intellectual community that has long overlooked them.

⁴ Victoria Kirkham: *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio's Filocolo and the Art of Medieval Fiction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

My dissertation is novel in three respects: it is the first study to consider all thirteen *questioni* individually; it offers a new, essential translation of the *questioni*;⁵ and it is the only analysis to date that considers the *questioni* through a historicizing lens. By examining all thirteen *questioni*, I am able to tease out the core concerns of each, which ultimately enables the reader to appreciate how they operate both individually and as a collective narrative unit. In turn, a fuller comprehension of the *questioni d'amore* provides invaluable insights into the *Decameron*. As I have just alluded to the respective individual and collective functions of the *questioni*, I feel a brief explanation regarding the structure of this dissertation is in order. I do not proceed chronologically through the thirteen *questioni*, but rather categorize them according to theme. After reading through the *questioni* several times, I began to detect a pattern: each of them addresses a particular phase in the life cycle of a romantic relationship. This pattern inspired me to group them accordingly, thus each chapter presents *questioni* that address issues arising over the course of a love affair: how to think about love, how to choose a lover, how to demonstrate love, and how to use love as a tool for manipulation.

The decision to utilize social history in this project is defined by my conviction that historicization can yield rich insights into medieval literature and provide new perspectives in a

⁵ Whereas a reader of the *Decameron* has several quality translations from which to choose, the *questioni* are long overdue for an updated, accessible translation. The first translation into English was completed in 1587 and remained the authoritative translation for the better part of four centuries. Several new translations were subsequently undertaken in the later part of the twentieth century: Victoria Kirkham's in her 1972 dissertation on the *questioni*; Harry Carter's in 1974; and Donald Cheney's in 1985. The *questioni* are often quite complex and thus require a comprehensible translation, yet none of these editions offer such lucidity. I felt it was necessary to provide a new translation that would allow readers to experience them in a clearer way. I will, of course, cite my own version throughout this dissertation, but I will also include my translation of all thirteen *questioni* in order in an Appendix, entitled "A New Translation of Boccaccio's Thirteen *Questioni*."

field that can sometimes feel devoid of novelty.⁶ I should underscore, however, that I do not bring history to bear on every single *questione*. Rather, I take the opportunity to bring historical contextualization into my reading wherever it is appropriate or fruitful; not every *questione* lends itself equally well to historicization. The application of social history allows us to identify the ethical and social issues that Boccaccio was exploring in his legal studies (indeed, he began writing the *Filocolo* while still occupied with his juridical training) and illuminates the genius of his project. The brilliance of the *questioni d'amore* lies in Boccaccio's clever use of courtly love – the lingua franca of the educated, moneyed class – as a vehicle for the investigation of moral, legal, and social concerns. In this sense, “*questioni d'amore*” is a misnomer: rather, these are *questioni* of marriage, law, gender, and class.

The figure that Boccaccio uses to articulate these sociolegal questions is the queen, Fiammetta. The *questioni* unfold in a formulaic manner: someone will pose a question, the queen will issue her ruling, the questioner will object to her decision, then she will conclude their debate by defending her initial ruling. In his essay on the European reception of the *questioni*, Robert Edwards comments, in a baffling misreading of the queen's role, that: “Fiammetta gives ‘liete risposte,’ light and gracious answers that consciously avoid plumbing the depths of the topics.”⁷ This could not be farther from the truth, as she argues rigorously and eloquently, showcasing not only Boccaccio's legal training but, more significantly, his engagement with

⁶ In this respect I have been inspired by Teodolinda Barolini who, in advocating for a historicizing approach to medieval Italian literature, has offered groundbreaking insights into the themes of gender, social class, wealth, management, and gender in the writings of the *tre corone*. Her essay, “‘Only Historicize:’ History, Material Culture (Food, Clothes, Books) and the Future of Dante Studies” (*Dante Studies*, no. 127 [2009]), outlines her approach and demonstrates the profitability of generating scholarship that views literature through the lens of history.

⁷ “‘Lessons Meete to Be Followed’: The European Reception of Boccaccio's ‘Questioni d'Amore,’” p. 147.

issues both philosophical and social. Astonishingly, no one has addressed the incredible significance of Boccaccio's invention of a brilliant female judge whose arguments often surpass those of her male counterparts in complexity and cogency. Women in medieval Italy were considered incapable of representing their own interests and, consequently, were relegated to a separate, inferior legal class to men. Fiammetta thus defies the sociolegal realities of Boccaccio's time: she is skilled in the art of rhetoric, objects confidently to the arguments of men, and resolves every *questione* astutely and articulately. One wonders if Boccaccio created the figure of the queen precisely in order to problematize the supposed intellectual handicaps of women, as Fiammetta demonstrates that women were indeed capable of complex argumentation and could advocate for themselves. This conceptualization, of course, foreshadows the *Decameron*, where he depicts numerous women who, through both their words and deeds, outsmart men, craft clever arguments, and make autonomous decisions for their own wellbeing.

Over the course of the next four chapters, I will present thirteen *questioni d'amore* that, at face value, may seem to regurgitate the tired tropes of courtly love. Through a careful reading of the *questioni* contextualized by social history and supplemented with relevant intertexts, I will demonstrate their immense social, legal, and literary import. Indeed, the *questioni d'amore* are not a frivolous fiction, but an impressive innovation that laid the groundwork for Boccaccio's long and prolific literary career.

Chapter 1: How Do We Think About Love?

“Until a man knows the truth of the several particulars of which he is writing or speaking, and is able to define them as they are, and having defined them again to divide them until they can be no longer divided, and until in like manner he is able to discern the nature of the soul, and discover the different modes of discourse which are adapted to different natures, and to arrange and dispose them in such a way that the simple form of speech may be addressed to the simpler nature, and the complex and composite to the more complex nature – until he has accomplished all this, he will be unable to handle arguments according to rules of art” (Phaedrus, 277b-c).

Ora mi s'è più volte per la mente rivolto il loro dolore, e alcuna volta ho fra me pensato qual doveva essere maggiore, e l'una volta consento quello dell'una, l'altra quello dell'altra: e le molte ragioni per le quali ciascuna mi pare che abbia da dolersi non mi lasciano fermare ad alcuna, onde io ne dimoro in dubbio. Piacciavi che per voi io di questa erranza esca, dicendomi quale maggiore doglia vi pare che sostenga (4.23).

I've wondered to myself who actually has been hurt more, sometimes sympathizing more with first sister, other times sympathizing more with the second. Each has experienced many misfortunes and they tug at me, never letting me pity one over the other, so I remain undecided. May it please you to help me escape this muddle by telling me who you believe endured the greater torment.

Al quale io risposi che non mi pareva che in niuno modo il suo dolore, ben che fosse grande, si potesse al mio agguagliare. E egli mi rispondea il contrario: e così in lunga quistione dimorammo, partendoci poi senza niuna diffinizione. Priegovi ne diciate quello che di questo voi terrestre (4.35).

To this I replied that there was no way that his pain, no matter how significant, could ever match mine. He responded to the contrary and so we continued to debate this for some time, never coming to an agreement. I beg you to inform us of your judgment on this matter.

Graziosa reina, io disidero di sapere se a ciascuno uomo, a bene essere di se medesimo, si dee innamorare o no (4.43).

Gracious queen, I wish to know if, for his own benefit, every man ought to fall in love or not.

Porrò questa: qual sia maggiore diletto all'amante, o vedere presenzialmente la sua donna, o, non vedendola, di lei amorosamente pensare (4.59).

I propose this question: which is more delightful to a lover, to see his beloved before his eyes, or to lovingly contemplate her when they are apart?

Boccaccio's fascination with the social elements of life in the Middle Ages is evident from even a cursory consideration of his literary corpus, and the *questioni d'amore* are no exception, as they all examine various social aspects of love connections, from selecting a lover to initiating and maintaining a relationship. Given the very concrete nature of the concerns that they address, one might struggle to contextualize the four *questioni* that are more abstract and theoretical in nature. At first blush these may seem out of place alongside the practical matters depicted within the others yet they, too, have their own role to play within the greater framework of the *questioni d'amore*. Indeed, Boccaccio uses them to explore issues both psychological and philosophical, in the process tracing the genesis of a romantic relationship from its conception to its realization. The four *questioni* discussed in this chapter—*questioni* 2, 5, 7, and 11—demonstrate Boccaccio's engagement with the philosophical ideals and literary tropes of the courtly love tradition yet, in spite of their relatively orthodox appearance, these *questioni* are notable innovations. They are Boccaccio's earliest meditations upon how abstract literary conventions can serve as vehicles for depicting the realities of lived experience. Boccaccio experiments with courtly tropes, tinkering with them and following them to their logical conclusions, ultimately using them as a means to develop a distinctive authorial style, one that privileges a nuanced psychosocial perspective over a conventional philosophical approach.

Let us briefly consider the *questioni* that will be analyzed in the chapter, *questioni* that I have labelled more abstract and philosophical. The second *questione* asks who has suffered more acutely: the woman whose lover is exiled, or the woman who has never successfully

consummated her affair with her lover. The fifth *questione* similarly wonders who has agonized more: the man who cannot attain the affections of the woman he desires, or the man who has reason to suspect his lover of infidelity. The seventh *questione* ventures into a different area of inquiry, questioning if love is worth pursuing. Finally, the eleventh *questione* ponders whether it is more pleasurable to be in the presence of one's lover or to contemplate the lover from afar. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to consider these *questioni* as a singular narrative unit that not only depicts the conventions of courtly love but also provides insight into Boccaccio's initial attempts at creating a uniquely psychosocial depiction of romantic relationships. To this end, I will demonstrate the major courtly themes that Boccaccio depicts and examine his deviations from these literary norms.

If we are to examine how Boccaccio simultaneously reproduces and rejects the tropes of courtly love literature, we should first clarify what is meant by the term "courtly love." While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to recapitulate the numerous hypotheses on the origins⁸ and the varied definitions of courtly love,⁹ there are some hallmarks one can identify. The courtly love affair would typically be an illegitimate and secretive relationship in which the woman would often be socially and even spiritually superior, and her lover would have to prove his affections through various demonstrations of bravery and loyalty; the relationship would follow a series of rules and restrictions set forth by the courtly code of ethics.¹⁰ Put plainly, courtly love

⁸ For the various theories on the origins of courtly love, see Roger Boase's comprehensive overview: *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

⁹ John C. Moore describes the vexing problem of nomenclature, outlining the many interpretations of the term "courtly love" in his essay, "'Courtly Love': A Problem of Terminology" (*Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1979, pp. 621–632).

¹⁰ These themes are laid out in Gaston Paris's seminal essay, "Études sur les romans de la table ronde: Lancelot du Lac," which described the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere as depicted by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Chevalier de la Charrette*. It was there that he coined the

literature was typified by certain tropes: the ladies were often haughty, unattainable and unavailable; the men were spiritually uplifted by their love for these ladies; their courtship was highly ritualized; and consummation was not necessarily the ultimate goal for the lovers. Of course, depictions of courtly love would not necessarily need to include all of these themes simultaneously – the courtly love tradition encapsulates a complex amalgam of principles represented in numerous texts within various European literary contexts.

Given its mutability, any attempt to distill a singular formula of courtly love may be counterproductive. Boccaccio was surely portraying a pastiche of courtly love ideals, so rather than seeking a preexisting definition that aligns with his depictions, it is appropriate to propose a classification that more suitably describes Boccaccio's particular representation of courtly love. There are a few major themes that these four *questioni* explore: the impact of jealousy on a love affair, the inevitable link between love, sight, and anguish, and the extent to which love holds intrinsic value. By observing Boccaccio's engagement with these issues, one finds that the *questioni d'amore* represent an authorial approach that borrows heavily from the courtly tradition, yet one that also ventures beyond the confines of the genre in order to expose the limitations of the abstract and lofty philosophical precepts of courtly love, instead focusing on the social and psychological underpinnings of erotic love.

1.1 Resolved: Jealousy Is a Necessary Component of a Love Affair

term *amour courtois*, which was then translated as “courtly love,” and soon became the catchall term used to describe medieval depictions and conceptions of love. It is certainly not a contemporaneous phrase – the closest one comes to finding a similar term used by medieval authors would be the Occitan *fin'amor*.

The theme of jealousy appears in the second *questione*, where it is mentioned merely in passing, and in the fifth *questione*, where it is more prominently staged. When considering the role of jealousy within the courtly love tradition, one invariably considers the troubadour lyric, which distilled the theme. The husband of the lady would suspiciously guard her (so central to his character was jealousy that he would typically be referred to as the *gelos*) while envious gossips (*lauzengiers*) greedily watched the lovers' every move in the hopes of exposing them. Discretion was the antidote against such ubiquitous jealousy, making it an essential component of the courtly love affair.

Yet attitudes toward jealousy in courtly love literature are not necessarily univocal. While the covetous husband was the object of derision, jealousy was not always considered an undesirable trait in a lover. In the thirteenth century Occitan *Roman de Flamenca*, which focuses on the perverse transformation of a husband driven mad by jealousy,¹¹ the narrator declares, for

¹¹ "A short synopsis may be in order for readers unfamiliar with the romance. At the beginning of the extant text (following a manuscript gap), the eponymous Flamenca is married off to Archimbaut, the Count of Bourbon. Originally a perfectly decent man, Archimbaut becomes literally insane with jealousy during their wedding festivities. In a short space of time, he is radically transformed into a *gilos*. While the figure of the *gilos* had long been a part of the traditional love triangle of courtly poetry, for an example of the type Archimbaut is endowed with a considerably enhanced depth of character. He paces incessantly and talks to himself; he stops trimming his hair and beard, growing ragged and bestial. Moreover, he withdraws from all social contact. As to his new wife, Archimbaut imprisons Flamenca in a tower with her ladies in waiting, allowing her to leave only for mass [...]. In the meantime, the eminently courtly Guilhem arrives on the scene, conspiring to liberate Flamenca from this jealous monster and to win her hand. Through erudition, charm and financial liberality, he manages to enlist those he meets to help him make his plan a success: in order to approach Flamenca at church, Guilhem will impersonate a minor cleric and patiently woo her. In this way, the two exchange only a few words every week for many months, until she finally agrees to consummate their relationship, touching off a passionate affair [...] In his metamorphosis, Archimbaut is the focal point of the romance's courtly intrigue; as villainous *gilos*, he precipitates the need for the heroism of the *amics* (the lover, Guilhem) and thus for Flamenca's adultery; he is also the perfect model for what *not* to do if one wants to be courtly" (see John Moreau, "The Perversion of Time: Jealousy and Lyric in 'The Romance of Flamenca.'" *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2009, pp. 41–54).

instance: “Per pauc le gelos non s’esfella” (“The jealous one almost becomes furious”); but for a contrasting point of view, one could consider the words of the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn, who claims instead that “Ben pauc ama druz, que non es gelos” (“Any lover who is not jealous does not love much”).¹² While Boccaccio would have been versed in the major tenets of the troubadour tradition, one would be hard-pressed to demonstrate conclusively that Boccaccio was familiar with, say, the *Roman de Flamenca*, yet we can be certain of his knowledge of the most famous and comprehensive overview of the components of courtly love: Andreas Capellanus’s *De amore*.¹³

In one of the dialogues contained in the first book, there is a discussion specifically concerning jealousy in which a man not only asserts that it is essential in a romantic relationship, but also makes it a point to underline the common misunderstandings of its nature and purpose:

Si plenius esset vobis amoris manifesta doctrina, et amoris vos unquam venabula tetigissent, re vera vestra sententia confirmasset sine zelotypia verum amorem non posse consistere, quia, ut plenius est vobis superius enarratum, zelotypia invenitur ab omni inter amantes amoris commendata perito et inter coniugatos in universis mundi partibus reprobata; quod quare contingat, zelotypiae descriptione percepta lucidissima vobis veritate constabit. Est igitur zelotypia vera animi passio, qua vehementer timemus propter amantis voluntatibus obsequendi defectum amoris attenuari substantiam, et inaequalitatis amoris trepidatio ac sine turpi cogitatione de amante concepta suspicio. [...] Multi tamen in hoc reperiuntur esse decepti, qui turpem suspicionem zelotypiam esse asserentes

¹² These two contrasting perspectives – from the anonymous author of the *Roman de Flamenca* and from Bernart de Ventadorn – are cited in William Paden’s essay, “The Troubadour’s Lady: Her Marital Status and Social Rank” (in *Studies in Philology*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1975, pp. 28-50).

¹³ In *Boccaccio Medievale*, Vittore Branca stresses the degree to which Boccaccio was indebted to Capellanus: “Un continuo omaggio al compendio di casistica erotico-sociale più famoso nel Medioevo sembra dunque levarsi dalle pagine del Boccaccio più diverse e più lontane cronologicamente, se pure è più scoperto e insistente nelle opere giovanili” (Firenze: Sansoni, 1976, p. 229). On Boccaccio’s literary debt to Capellanus, see also Howard Limoli: “Boccaccio’s Masetto (‘Decameron’ III, 1) and Andreas Capellanus” (in *Romanische Forschungen*, vol. 77, no. 3/4, 1965, pp. 281–292); Louise George Clubb: “Boccaccio and the Boundaries of Love” (in *Italica*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1960, pp. 188–196); and, perhaps most significantly, on the Italian translation of the *De amore* attributed to Boccaccio, see Beatrice Barbiellini Amidei: *Libro d’Amore: attribuibile a Giovanni Boccaccio* (Firenze: Accademia della Crusca, 2013).

falluntur. Sicut etiam saepe saepius quam plurimum optimum esse stagnum mentiuntur argentum. Unde non pauci zelotypiae originis et descriptionis ignari decipiuntur saepissime et in durissimum trahuntur errorem (I.VI.377-381).

If the theory of love were perfectly clear to you and Love's dart had ever touched you, your own feelings would have shown you that love cannot exist without jealousy, because, as I have already told you in more detail, jealousy between lovers is commended by every man who is experienced in love, while between husband and wife it is condemned throughout the world; the reason for this will be perfectly clear from a description of jealousy. Now jealousy is a true emotion whereby we greatly fear that the substance of our love may be weakened by some defect in serving the desires of our beloved, and it is an anxiety lest our love may not be returned [...] We find many, however, who are deceived in this matter and say falsely that a shameful suspicion is jealousy, just as many often make the mistake of saying that an alloy of silver and lead is the finest silver. Wherefore not a few being ignorant of the origin and description of jealousy, are often deceived and led into the gravest error.¹⁴

By distinguishing between the natural self-doubt lovers experience (which he calls jealousy) and misgivings about the fidelity of one's lover (which he refers to as suspicion), Capellanus attempts to clarify the issue: some insecurity is necessary for the success of a relationship, while distrust and possessiveness will surely damage it. Capellanus' distinction is an important one, as it presents one potential reading with which to reconcile the seeming ambivalence toward jealousy in the courtly love tradition and, more importantly, provides context that proves helpful in understanding Boccaccio's meditation on jealousy in the *questioni*.

Let us now turn to the *questioni* themselves, delving more deeply into the specific ways they depict jealousy; I will summarize them in some detail, since I will make frequent reference to them over the course of this chapter.

The second *questione* is posed by Longano. He tells his companions that he was recently alone in his chamber, ruminating on an infatuation that had, presumably, not yet been fulfilled (“involto negli affannosi pensieri porti dagli amorosi disii, i quali con aspra battaglia il cuore

¹⁴ All translations of the *De amore* are taken from the edition by John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1957).

assalito m'aveano" [4.23])¹⁵, when he heard two women weeping nearby. Determining that they were in the home right across from his, he began to eavesdrop on them, ultimately concluding that they were lamenting their respective love affairs. Out of concern for them (or perhaps out of nosiness), he decided to pay them a visit, and before long the two sisters had divulged all the details of their unhappiness. The elder sister claimed that both she and her sister had resisted Love's arrows for many years ("sappi che noi, più che altre donne mai, fummo crude e aspre resistenti agli aguti dardi di Cupido, il quale, lunga stagione saettandoci, mai ne' nostri cuori alcuno ne poté ficcare" [4.23]), until Eros finally triumphed, inspiring them to fall in love with two young noblemen ("ci ferì con sì gran forza ... e per lo piacere di due nobilissimi giovani alla sua signoria divenimmo suggette" [4.23]). She hoped that by taking her pleasure in her lover she could liberate herself from her servitude to love, yet she ultimately found that such behavior had the opposite effect:

Io ... amai, con ingegno maestrevolmente credendo il mio disio terminare, feci sì che io ebbi al mio piacere l'amato giovane, il quale io trovai altrettanto di me quanto io di lui essere innamorato. Ma certo già per tale effetto l'amorosa fiamma non mancò, né menomò il disio, ma ciascuno crebbe, e più che mai arsi e ardo (4.23).

I fell in love and thought with enough cunning and control I could find gratification. I made it so that I could take my pleasure in the man I desired, who was just as taken with me as I was with him. But, of course, love's flames are not dampened by such behavior, nor did it exhaust my desire, and more than ever I burned and am burning still.

Their affair had lasted not even a month before it was brought to an abrupt end; her lover, having inadvertently committed an offense for which the penalty is exile, departed the city under threat of execution ("Avvenne, non si rivide poi la luna tonda, che costui commise disavedutamente

¹⁵ All citations of the *questioni d'amore* are taken from the critical edition of Antonio Enzo Quaglio (*Il Filocolo*. Milano: Mondadori, 1967).

cosa, per la quale eterno essilio della presente città gli fu donato: ond'egli, dubitando la morte, di qui s'è partito, senza speranza di ritornare" [4.23]).

Her unhappy story concluded, she then explained her sister's predicament. She, too, had found a lover who returned her affections, yet had been unable to consummate their affair:

Questa similmente com'io innamorata d'un altro, e da lui similmente senza fine amata, acciò che i suoi disii non passassero senza parte d'alcun diletto, per gli amorosi sentieri più volte s'è ingegnata di volergli recare ad effetto, a' cui intendimenti *gelosia* ha sempre rotte le vie e occupate (4.23).

She fell in love just like I did, and the love between herself and this other man was similarly mutual. Hoping to make her fantasies a reality, she tried many times to follow the paths of love to their natural destination, but *jealousy* somehow always destroyed or barricaded these avenues (emphasis mine).

Overcome by her desires yet unable to fulfill them, the younger sister found herself in misery.

After hearing their accounts and empathizing with them both, Longano says that he cannot decide which of the sisters suffered more and asks the queen to resolve his *dubbio*.

The queen rules in favor of the sister whose lover was exiled, saying that she wept tears of pain while the other wept tears of desire ("l'una per dolore, l'altra per disio piangeva"[4.24]).

As is typical of the *questioni*, Longano objects on two accounts: firstly, that one who has previously fulfilled one's desires has already secured some degree of psychological comfort ("chi il suo disio ha d'una cosa desiderata avuto, molto si debbia più nell'animo contentare, che chi desidera e non può il suo disio adempiere" [4.25]). Secondly, he argues that there is no greater torment than to be faced directly with that which one cannot possess, citing the punishment of Tantalus:

ma quando gli animi si veggono davanti le disiderate cose, e a quelle pervenire non possono, allora s'accendono e dolgonsi più che se da loro i loro voleri stessero lontani. E chi tormenta Tantalò in inferno se non le pome e l'acque, che quanto più alla bocca gli si avvicinano tanto più fuggendosi poi moltiplicano la sua fame? (4.25).

but when souls find themselves before that which they desire and cannot attain them, they are consumed and suffer even more than if they were far away from their desires. And who tormented Tantalus in Hades if not for the apples and water that, fleeing from his mouth every time he drew near, multiplied his hunger?

The queen, however, is not persuaded, and she restates her original position; the woman who lost her lover can never expel him from her mind, and she has no hope of ever seeing him again (“giudicheremo che maggior dolore sentiva quella che il suo amante avea perduto senza speranza di riaverlo, ché, posto che agevole sia perdere cosa impossibile da riavere, nondimeno e’ si suol dire: ‘Chi bene ama mai non oblia’” [4.26]). The other sister could eventually forget the man whom she aspired to love or, alternatively, can continue to hope that they will eventually consummate their affair. The example of Penelope demonstrates that hope can indeed be a powerful prophylactic against grief (“ché l’altra [...] poteva sperare d’adempiere per inanzi quello che per adietro non avea potuto fornire. E gran mancamento di duoli è la speranza: ella ebbe forza di tenere casta e meno trista lungamente in vita Penolope” [4.26]).

The fifth *questione*, posed by Clonico, depicts jealousy far more overtly. He, too, had long resisted love, yet was ultimately conquered by Eros:

Ma però che io a quella forza alla quale Febo non poté resistere, non era forte a contrastare, avendosi Cupido pur posto in cuore di recarmi nel numero de’ suoi soggetti, fui preso, né quasi m’accorsi come (4.35).

So I, like Apollo, could not resist that power – was not strong enough to oppose it – by which Cupid lodged himself in my heart and counted me among his subjects; I was taken, almost without realizing how it happened.

He falls in love with a beautiful woman who, upon realizing his feelings for her, shows him nothing but disdain; acting as though she were his enemy, she refuses to meet his gaze and disparages him with cruel words (“mostrandosi ne’ sembianti a me crudelissima nimica, sempre gli occhi torcendo in altra parte a quella contraria dove me veduto avesse, e con non dovute parole continuo dispregiandomi” [4.35]). This continues for a while until one day, as he sits

alone in a garden ruminating on his misfortune, one of his good friends appears in the hopes of comforting him. When this friend finds that nothing he says is of any consolation, he changes tack and tells him that Clonico's suffering is trifling in comparison to the anguish he is experiencing. The friend explains that he had enjoyed the company of a certain woman for some time; the affair had given him great pleasure up until recently, when:

dimorando io un giorno soletto con lei in segreta parte, veggendo chi davanti a noi passava senza essere veduti, un giovane grazioso e di piacevole aspetto passò per quella parte, il quale io vidi ch'ella riguardò e poi un pietoso sospiro gittò (4.35).

reposing one day with her in a secret place where we could watch passersby without being seen by them, a graceful and comely young man walked past, whom I saw her gaze upon and then release a sad sigh.

This small, seemingly insignificant moment inspired a ferocious rage within him ("una ira sì ferocissima") that could not be mollified. Convinced that his lady was in love with another, he became paranoid, convinced that she had lied to him and that she was secretly involved with another man. Yet even after describing the excruciating pain this had caused ("dolore intollerabile"), he and Clonico could not agree as to who suffered more, and so the queen is called upon to settle the matter.

The queen rules in favor of the friend, saying that greater pain is felt by the jealous man than the one who loves without being loved in return ("secondo il nostro giudicio, ne pare maggiore doglia quella del geloso che quella di chi ama e non è amato" [4.36]). Clonico objects:

Come si potrebbe mostrare che gelosia porgesse maggiore pena che quella ch'io sento, con ciò sia cosa che colui la disiderata cosa possiede, e puote, quella tenendo, prendere in una ora più diletto di lei che in un lungo tempo sentirne pena, e nientemeno da sé per esperienza può cacciare tal gelosia, se avviene che truovi falso il suo parere? Ma io, di focoso disio acceso, quanto più mi truovo lontano ad adempierlo, tanto più ardo, e assalito da mille stimoli mi consumo [...] Per che la vostra risposta mi pare che alla verità sia contraria: che io non dubito che non sia molto meglio dubitando tenere, che piangendo disiare (4.37).

How might one demonstrate that jealousy causes greater pain than that which I am experiencing, given that he possesses the object of his desires and could take enough pleasure in her in one hour so as to cancel out the pain he feels over time? Not to mention that experience may quash this jealousy, if he ultimately discovers that he was wrong to ever doubt her? But I, engulfed by flames of yearning, find that the farther I am from fulfilling my desires, the more I smolder and am overcome by a thousand burns. Therefore your response seems to me contrary to the truth: I find that it is no worse to possess with doubts than it is to long with tears.

The queen refutes his claims, saying that the condition of Clonico's friend demonstrates how solicitude can become the greatest impediment to inner peace ("più la quiete dell'animo impedisce è la sollecitudine" [4.38]). Clonico may still have hope, she says, since women are unpredictable. Since women are fickle, his lady could suddenly change her mind and give him her love, or perhaps she is attracted to him but is feigning the opposite in order to test him and ensure that his feelings for her are true ("i cuori delle femine sieno mobili, che subitamente voi, non pensandoci, vi trovereste averlo acquistato: o forse che v'ama, ma, per provare se voi lei amate, dimostra il contrario, e mostrerà forse infino a quel tempo ch'ella fia bene del vostro amore accertata" [4.38]). His friend, on the other hand, has no hope for reprieve, as the queen outlines in excruciating detail the plight of the jealous man:

S'imagina che ogni parola sia doppia e piena d'inganno, e se egli mai alcuna detrazione commise, questo gli è mortal pensiero imaginando che per simile modo esso debba essere ingannato [...] e a questo levarli non ha luogo esperienza, però che se la fa e trovi che lealmente la donna si porti, egli pensa che aveduta si sia di ciò ch'egli ha fatto, e però guardatasene. S'e' trova quello che cerca e trovare non vorria, chi è più doloroso di lui? Se forse estimate che il tenerla in braccio gli sia tanto diletto che queste cose debbia mitigare, il parere vostro è falso, però che quello tenere gli porge noia, pensando che altri così l'abbia tenuta. E se la donna forse amorevolmente l'accoglie, credesi che per torlo da tal pensiero il faccia, e non per buono amore ch'ella gli porti. Se malinconica la trova, pensa che altrui ami e di lui non si contenti: e infiniti altri stimoli potremmo de' gelosi narrare. Dunque che diremo della costui vita, se non ch'ella sia la più dolente che alcun vivente possa avere? Egli vive credendo e non credendo, e sé e la donna stimolando e le più volte suole avvenire che di quella malattia di che i gelosi vivono paurosi, elli ne muoiono, e non senza ragione, però che con le loro riprensioni molte fiato mostrano a' loro danni la via (4.38).

He imagines that her every word is duplicitous and brimming with deception, and if he ever commits some small sin, it inspires in him fatal worry and he imagines that he is deserving of such betrayal [...] And experience cannot help him, for if he finds that his lady has comported herself faithfully he will think that she anticipated his concerns and took care to mislead him. If he finds what he has been looking for and yet does not wish to find, who suffers more than he? If you think that holding her in his arms might soothe these feelings, you are mistaken, since those very embraces wound him when he thinks that some other man has held her in the same way. And if the woman welcomes him with open arms, he believes she does so only in order to distract him from these thoughts and not out of any genuine love for him. If he finds her sad, he thinks that she is in love with someone else and is not content with him; and so we could list a million other things that provoke the jealous man. So what can we say about such a life, if not that it is the most agonizing existence one can have? He lives believing and not believing, perturbing himself and his lady. And it often happens that the jealous die of the very illness of which they live in constant fear, for their convictions ultimately lead the way to their ruin.

The queen's narration of the pathology of the possessive man provides insight into the psychological torment brought about by jealousy, and the breadth and length of this description indicate the seriousness of Boccaccio's engagement with the issue.

To recapitulate: Boccaccio presents jealousy in two instances and in very different ways. In the second *questione*, the sister is ultimately unable to find sexual gratification with her lover because jealousy will not permit it; the narrator does not elaborate, and her mention of jealousy is so offhanded that it is almost easy to miss. In the fifth *questione*, it is instead the subject of a lengthy description, with the queen examining in detail the intense emotional torment not only of Clonico's companion, but of anyone who experiences jealousy. When Capellanus defines two distinct kinds of jealousy – one as a fear of losing one's lover and one as a constant suspicion that one's lover has been unfaithful – he provides an essential rubric against which to read these *questioni*: Boccaccio seems to have set himself the task of bringing that distinction vividly to life.

In the case of the second *questione*, the woman is vague in describing what exactly prevents her sister from consummating her affair, simply saying that jealousy had become a

stumbling block for the lovers (“*gelosia* ha sempre rotte le vie e occupate”). Since she only mentions *gelosia* once and provides no real elaboration on the specific details of this jealousy, the reader is left to speculate. Yet what the narrator does not tell us may provide more information than what she does verbalize. The narrator does not specifically say that her sister fears that her lover is enamored with someone else and, moreover, she indicates that her sister still wants to be with him. Furthermore, the queen reiterates that hope can sustain the sister, since there is no reason to believe that she may not eventually attain her goal (“*poteva sperare d’adempire per inanzi quello che per adietro non avea potuto fornire*” [4.26]). This is in stark contrast to the fifth *questione*, as Clonico’s friend is trapped in a truly hopeless situation (“*il geloso ha l’animo pieno d’infinite sollecitudini, alle quali né speranza né altro diletto può porgere conforto, o alleviare la sua pena*” [4.38]). Boccaccio does not seem to be referring to the same kind of jealousy here, since the queen’s response to it is entirely different. The jealousy that the sister experiences (and which prevents her from finding satisfaction with her lover) may very well be an instance of the first kind of jealousy Capellanus describes; a nagging insecurity and a fear of not satisfying one’s lover (which are not uncommon and may even be healthy, according to Capellanus) are obstacles that – according to the queen – may ultimately be surpassed; this could indeed be what Boccaccio is staging in the case of the second *questione*. The fifth *questione*, on the other hand, depicts a very clear-cut case of the second kind of jealousy, in which an unshakeable suspicion that one’s lover has been unfaithful will prove fatal to a relationship.

If we are to read Boccaccio’s depictions of jealousy in the second and fifth *questioni* as *tableaux vivants* of Capellanus’s two definitions, we find him innovating in several ways. By

depicting the impact of jealousy upon romantic relationships, Boccaccio draws directly from the courtly tradition, yet he proceeds in a markedly different way.

The decision to depict jealousy from the perspectives of both sexes is noteworthy. Foundational to courtly love was the male/female binary in which men authored actions that women would passively receive. By extending jealousy to women as a possible emotional state,¹⁶ Boccaccio places them on the level of men, giving them equal agency – an authorial move in direct opposition to the courtly love tradition.¹⁷ Furthermore, Boccaccio does not present the jealous man or woman as medieval literary memes; they are not depicted in hyperbolic or pejorative terms, like the *gelos* of the troubadour lyric tradition. Rather, Boccaccio focuses on their psychological states, taking a far more nuanced approach than is typical of the courtly love tradition. Thus he does not present jealousy as a condition more prevalent in men or women but rather one that equally – and negatively – impacts both sexes.

Through his refusal to endorse any aspect of jealousy Boccaccio demonstrates his nonconformity with the courtly love tradition. While Capellanus explores the relative value of the kind of jealousy that causes a lover to fear the possible loss of the beloved, Boccaccio eschews this principle altogether – for him there is nothing inherently useful about it. For an

¹⁶ Indeed, the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* (written after the *Filocolo* but before the *Decameron*) is an extended depiction of pathological female jealousy in which the eponymous protagonist narrates her amatory neuroses. Critics have long considered Boccaccio's approach to crafting the *Elegia* particularly innovative, and it has been referred to as one of the first psychological novels of the Western literary tradition.

¹⁷ Teodolinda Barolini has done important work to highlight the innovations of Dante and Boccaccio in their depictions of women's agency, illustrating their defiance of the conventions of courtly love literature. Of particular note are: "Lifting the Veil? Notes Toward a Gendered History of Early Italian Literature" (in *Medieval Constructions in Gender and Identity: Essays in Honor of Joan M. Ferrante*, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005, pp. 169-188); and "*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi*: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the *Decameron* (*Decameron* 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)" (in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 281-303).

author who consistently asserts sex's potential for consolation¹⁸ and delight, any trait that would foil a sexual encounter (as in the case of the sister in the second *questione*) or, worse still, rob sex of its innate capacity to provide solace (as in the fifth *questione*), has no utility and should therefore be rejected.

In illustrating how jealousy is antithetical to the very nature and purpose of a romantic relationship, Boccaccio again casts a critical eye upon courtly conceptions, and even in his portrayal of the trope he once again displays his inventiveness. The courtly literary approach, so dependent upon poetic, highly embellished representations of love, is almost the opposite of what one finds in these *questioni*. The intense jealousy of Archimbaut, the *gelos* of the *Roman de Flamenca*, is depicted in an almost metaphorical fashion, as the narrator describes his transformation into mad bestiality – as the tale progresses his humanity is eroded, replaced with a repulsive animalism. The depiction of Archimbaut – a classic example of the kind of metaphorical approach prized by writers of the courtly tradition – is entirely different from Boccaccio's rendering of jealousy in these *questioni*. His approach diverges from his courtly contemporaries both in its close attention to the psychological repercussions of jealousy and its unwillingness to rely upon metaphorical or philosophical renderings of these repercussions.

Boccaccio focuses instead on interior workings: how jealousy can be borne of a seemingly innocuous moment, how it begins to gnaw at the mind and from there, how, like a virus replicating itself, it will grow exponentially until it has taken over one's psyche entirely. It barricades all avenues toward erotic fulfillment and destroys inner peace; it cannot be mitigated

¹⁸ Teodolinda Barolini examines the multivalent function and rhetorical import of *consolazione* in Boccaccio's works, underlining in particular its erotic potentialities; see "A Philosophy of Consolation: The Place of The Other in Life's Transactions ("se Dio m'avesse dato fratello o non me lo avesse dato") in *Boccaccio 1313-2013* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2015).

or remedied, and it influences both cognitions (in the case of Clonico's companion) and actions (in the case of the sister who cannot make the moves necessary to fulfill her desires). Boccaccio renders such psychological intensity without the use of poetic or philosophical language, relying instead upon detailed description of jealousy's cognitive and behavioral impact. The relatability of the plight of Clonico's friend is accomplished precisely through Boccaccio's uniquely psychological approach. Boccaccio's engagement with jealousy ultimately demonstrates his ability to employ a courtly trope that would have been familiar to his contemporaries while also exposing its inherent limitations. In so doing, he charts out a strikingly original approach, one that examines the concrete psychological ramifications of jealousy by privileging lived experience over poetic license.

1.2 Resolved: Sight of the Beloved Cures Suffering

In a delightfully meta fashion, Boccaccio evokes the theme of love's deleterious nature by depicting Longano caught in a moment of amorous anguish only to be interrupted by two women who are also suffering on account of love. The notion of love as a painful illness was, by Boccaccio's time, well established, and literary antecedents were numerous. If one wished to trace the genealogy of this topos back to antiquity, one would invariably find one's self considering Ovid's treatment of the theme, as love causes characters to suffer throughout the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides*, and the *Tristia*, to say nothing of the *Ars amatoria* and the *Remedia amoris*.¹⁹ And while medieval writers could theoretically become familiar with

¹⁹ While the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides*, and the *Tristia* offer poetic narratives of amorous relationships, the *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris* are, by contrast, didactic in their approach. Both works explicitly link pain to love; in the *Ars amatoria*, Ovid bluntly informs his readers that, "what delights a lover is little, what pains him more: many sufferings declare themselves to his heart," (2.14) yet nonetheless teaches his audience all the skills necessary to initiate a

Ovidian amatory concepts through a kind of literary osmosis (in other words, not by direct exposure to Ovid's texts but rather through reading contemporary literature that reproduced Ovidian tropes),²⁰ Boccaccio's familiarity with the Roman author would not have depended on intermediaries since he had firsthand knowledge of his works.²¹

Besides Ovid, Boccaccio would likely have had Capellanus's *De amore*²² in mind.

Capellanus's very definition of love ties it to suffering:

Amor est *passio* quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus, ob quam aliquis super Omnia cupit alterius potiri amplexibus et omnia det utriusque voluntate in ipsius amplexu amoris praecepta compleri.

Love is a certain inborn *suffering* derived from the sight of and immoderate thinking about an image of the opposite sex; so that a man desires above anything else to enjoy the embraces of the other sex, and by common wish, to carry out all the precepts of love in the other's embrace (1.1) (emphasis mine).²³

romantic affair. The *Remedia amoris* then promises to ease the suffering incurred precisely from following the instructions of the *Ars amatoria*: "Learn how to be cured, from him who taught you how to love: the one hand brings the wound and the relief" (1.43).

²⁰ Ovid's shadow indeed looms large over the courtly love tradition, and while the extent to which it borrowed directly from him is the subject of some debate, the notion that lovers must follow a specific code of rules and compartments is both essentially courtly and Ovidian. There are numerous sources that discuss the Ovidian impact on the courtly love tradition, among them are studies by James Paxson and Cynthia Gravlee: *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1998); Peter Allen: *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); and Edward Kennard Rand: *Ovid and His Influence* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963).

²¹ For Boccaccio's relationship to Ovid's literary corpus, see Robert Hollander: *Boccaccio's Dante and The Shaping Force of Satire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and Janet Smarr: "Ovid and Boccaccio: A Note on Self-Defense" in *Mediaevalia*, 13, 1989, pp. 247-255.

²² It should be noted that there is significant overlap here as well – the extent to which Capellanus was reproducing Ovidian themes has been a topic of extensive research. While Ovid is mentioned by name only once in the *De amore*, there are roughly fifteen verbatim quotations of his works, with dozens of other probable allusions to his texts. Both the translations of John Jay Parry and P.G. Walsh include a detailed overview of the Ovidian references in Capellanus's text. See *The Art of Courtly Love* (trans. John Jay Parry) and *On Love* (trans. By P.G. Walsh, London: Duckworth, 1982).

²³ Trans. Parry.

Like Ovid, Capellanus explicitly highlights the link between eros and agony, albeit with the rather different tactic of concentrating on its physiology.²⁴ Sight and contemplation, the two elements required to inspire love, are widely attested to in other amatory texts from the period and they are themes in which Boccaccio takes particular interest.

The woman of the second *questione* tells Longano that both she and her sister had taken every precaution to guard themselves against Cupid's sharp arrows; when Eros finally succeeds in piercing their hearts, they find themselves completely consumed with desire. She describes the futility of overcoming love, employing feudal imagery to illustrate its total command: "under his lordship we became subjects" ("alla sua signoria divenimmo suggette" [4.23]). In the fifth *questione*, Clonico also speaks of his longstanding resistance to love: "scorning rather than commending those who followed him [Eros], and though I had already been tempted many times, I resisted with a strong will" ("schernendo più tosto coloro che lui seguivano, che commendandoli e ben che io molte volte già fossi tentato, con forte animo resistetti" [4.35]). And when he is finally ensnared he, too, employs the same feudal imagery: "[Eros] counted me among his subjects" ("recarmi nel numero de' suoi suggetti"²⁵).

²⁴ Paolo Cherchi has, for this reason, argued against a strictly Ovidian reading, instead suggesting that Capellanus's definition more closely resembles medical writings on love by authors such as Constantinus Africanus and Avicenna. Cherchi cites Africanus's *Pantegni* ("more autem est animae sollicitudo in id quod amatur et cogitationis in ipsum perseverantia" [Moreover love is an anxiety of the soul for what is loved and a persistent meditating on the same]) and Avicenna's *Canon* ("Haec aegritudo est sollicitudo melancholia, similis melancholiae in qua homo sibi iam induxit incitationem cogitationis suae super pulchritudinem quarundam formarum et figurarum quae insunt ei [This disease {i.e., *kukjbut*, the Arabic word for the disease of love} is a melancholic disease in origin, similar to melancholy; it is produced when a man excites himself with an intense meditation upon the beauty of certain forms and figures which are in him])." See *Andreas and the Ambiguity of Courtly Love*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. pp. 28-29. For more on the complex medical conceptions of love in the Middle Ages, see Mary Frances Wack's *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Eros, the antagonist in search of victims to shoot with his arrows, is often depicted as taking a special interest in those who seek to evade him – the harder the prey is to catch, the greater the glory of the hunt. The trope goes back to antiquity, with Ovid introducing the mischievous love deity in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*:

Primus amor Phoebi Daphen Peneia, quem non
fors ignara dedit, sed saeva Cupidinis ira... (1.452-53).

Daphne, the daughter of the river god Peneus,
was the first love of Apollo;
this happened not by chance, but by the cruel
outrage of Cupid...²⁶

Cupid, angered by Apollo's insults, takes his harsh revenge by piercing the god with an arrow of love and the unwitting maiden with an arrow of repulsion, thus inspiring within Apollo an intense and unrequited passion:

Phoebus amat visaeque cupit conubia Daphnes
quodque cupit, sperat, suaque illum oracular fallunt [...] (1.490-91).
sic deus in flammas abiit, sic pectore toto
uritur et sterilem sperando nutrit amorem (1.495-96).

at first sight, Phoebus loves her and desires
to sleep with her; desire turns to hope,
and his own prophecy deceives the god [...]
the smitten god went up in flames
until his heart was utterly afire,
and his hope sustained his unrequited passion.

This is indeed the very scene to which Clonico alludes when he explains how he, like Apollo, was incapable of resisting love once Eros had made it his mission to entrap him. Like Apollo, whose affliction could not be cured by any medicine (which he himself had invented),²⁷ the lovers from the second and fifth *questioni* cannot ease the suffering brought on by love.

²⁶ Translated by Charles Martin: *Metamorphoses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

²⁷ Ovid does not miss the opportunity to underline the irony of Apollo's predicament: "Inventum medicina meum est, opiferque per orbem / dicor, et herbarum subiecta potential nobis: / ei mihi,

Eros's propensity to wound lovers thus becomes the primary literary iconography of amatory suffering, and one encounters the theme throughout medieval literature. Poets of the Sicilian school, echoing the troubadours, frequently depicted Cupid wounding lovers with his bow and arrow; the poetry of Giacomo da Lentini provides a notable example:

così l'Amore fere là ove spera
e mandavi lo dardo da sua parte:
fere in tal loco che l'omo non spera,
passa per gli ochi e lo core diparte.

Lo dardo de l'Amore là ove giunge,
da poi che dà feruta sì s'aprende
di foco c'arde dentro e fuor non pare.²⁸

thus Love wounds where he aims
and sends his arrow from his part:
he wounds where man does not expect
passing through the eyes and splitting the heart.

The arrow of Love, there where it reaches,
after it strikes, sparks
a fire that burns within and goes unseen without.

This *canzone* evokes the common tropes of courtly love literature: desire consuming the heart like flames engulfing wood, Eros wounding the lover with his arrows, and, most significantly, sight as the gateway to love. Sight was thought to provide a window of opportunity for Eros, whose arrows would travel through the eyes and into the heart of the afflicted. While this first visual contact with the beloved is almost exclusively portrayed as being quite painful, the lover's

quod nullis amor est sanabilis herbis, / nec prosunt domino, quae prosunt omnibus, artes!" (1.521-24). ("The art of medicine / is my invention, by the way, the source / of my worldwide fame as a practitioner / of healing through the natural strength of herbs. / Alas, there is no herbal remedy / for the love that I must suffer, and the arts / that heal others cannot heal their lord" (ibid.).

²⁸ From "Sì come il sol che manda la sua spera" in *Poesie di Giacomo da Lentini: Edizione di riferimento a cura di Roberto Antonelli* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1979). Translation mine.

response to later encounters with the beloved were somewhat variable in the courtly love tradition; at times these courtly writers describe how beholding the lady could cause pangs reminiscent of that first time the lover saw her, while at other times they illustrate lovers languishing until they see their lady once again.

The eleventh *questione*, posed by Graziosa, is dedicated entirely to the role of sight in romantic relationships, as she asks whether it is more pleasurable to be in the presence of one's lover or to lovingly contemplate them from afar ("qual sia maggiore diletto all'amante, o vedere presenzialmente la sua donna, o, non vedendola, di lei amorosamente pensare" [4.53]). The queen favors contemplation over sight, saying:

pensando alla cosa amata graziosamente, gli spiriti sensitivi tutti allora sentono mirabile festa, e quasi i loro accesi disii in quel pensiero con diletto contentano; ma nel riguardare, ciò non avviene, però che solo il visuale spirito sente bene, e gli altri accende di tanto disio che sostenere nol possono, e rimangono vinti (4.54).

in thinking adoringly about the beloved, all of the senses partake of a bountiful feast, so much so that those intense desires will almost be satiated with delight; but in looking upon the beloved that will not happen, since only the visual sense will be gratified while the other senses will be filled with such tremendous desire that they will not be able to stand it and they will be overcome.

Graziosa objects, asserting that pleasure depends wholly upon sight:

io credo che molto maggior diletto porga il riguardare che non fa il pensare, però che ogni bellezza prima per lo vederla piace, poi per lo continuato vedere nell'animo tale piacere si conferma, e generasene amore e quelli disii che da lui nascono. E niuna bellezza è tanto amata per alcuna altra cagione, quanto per piacere agli occhi, e contentare quelli; dunque, vedendola, si contentano, pensandone, loro di vederla s'accresce disio: e più diletto sente chi si contenta che chi di contentarsi desidera [...] d'allegrezza più nel vedere che nel pensare, con ciò sia cosa che per gli atti esteriori si possa quello che nel cuore si nasconde comprendere? (4.55).

I believe there is much more delight to be had in seeing than in thinking, since every beauty is first pleasing through sight, then for continued sight this pleasure is solidified in the spirit and from there it engenders love and those desires born from love. No beauty is loved for any other reason than for the pleasure and contentment it brings to the eyes; therefore, in seeing one is satisfied, while in contemplating one's desire to see the beloved increases. And he who is satisfied experiences greater pleasure than he who

longs to be satisfied [...] that there is greater joy in seeing than in contemplating, since one can comprehend from external acts what is buried within the heart?

The queen responds by arguing, in essence, that fantasy is much more pleasurable than reality:

Quelle cose, e dilettevoli e noiose, che più all'anima s'appressano, più noia e gioia porgono che le lontane. E chi dubita che il pensiero non dimori nell'anima medesima e l'occhio a quella si truovi assai lontano, ben che elli per particolare virtù di lei abbia la vista, e convengagli per molti mezzi le sue percezioni allo 'ntelletto animale rendere? Dunque, avendo nell'anima un dolce pensiero della cosa amata, in quell'atto che il pensiero gli porge, in quello con la cosa amata essere gli pare. Egli allora la vede con quelli occhi a cui niuna cosa per lunga distanza si può celare. Egli allora parla con lei e forse narra con pietoso stile le passate noie per l'amore di lei ricevute. Allora gli è lecito senza alcuna paura di abbracciarla. Allora mirabilmente, secondo il suo disio, festeggia con essa. Allora ad ogni suo piacere la tiene. Quello che del mirare non avviene [...] E come noi davanti dicemmo, amore, paurosa e timida cosa, tanto nel cuore gli trema riguardando, che né pensiero né spirito lascia in suo luogo. Molti già, le loro donne guardando, perderono le naturali forze e rimasero vinti, e molti non potendo muoversi si fissero [...] Noi confessiamo bene che, se possibile fosse senza tema il riguardare, che gran diletto saria, ma nulla senza il pensiero varria: ma il pensiero senza la corporale veduta piace assai. E che del pensiero possa avvenire ciò che dicemmo, è manifesto che sì, e molto più ancora: che noi troviamo già uomini col pensiero avere trapassati i cieli e gustata della eterna pace. Dunque, più il pensare che il vedere diletta (4.56).

Those things, delightful or dreadful, that come closest to the soul will provoke greater pain or joy than those which are farther from the soul. And who would deny that the faculty of thought dwells within the soul itself while the eyes are located far away from it (although the soul grants them the power of vision and, through various means, they render their perceptions unto the sensitive part of the soul)? So, by holding a sweet thought of the beloved in one's soul, one is able – through the act of thinking – to be with the beloved. Even long distances cannot conceal anything from mind's eyes with which he sees the beloved. And so he speaks with her, perhaps narrating to her in a doleful manner the wounds he has suffered because of his love for her, and then it is fitting for him to take her in his arms without fear or hesitation. Then, remarkably, he celebrates with her and takes his every pleasure with her. This cannot occur when looking upon her [...] And as we have already said, love, this fearful and timid thing, trembles in one's heart when one looks upon the beloved, such that neither thought nor spirit is left in its place. Many men, having looked upon their ladies, have lost their natural strength and been overwhelmed and unable to move or act [...] We acknowledge that if it were possible to look upon the beloved without fear there would be great delight, but without thought that delight would be worthless. Yet contemplation without sight is indeed quite pleasurable. And it is verifiable that all of this and more can happen through thought alone – we find men who, through contemplation, have gone higher than the heavens above and tasted eternal peace. There is, therefore, greater pleasure in thinking than in seeing.

The queen's rebuttal cleverly proceeds by first claiming that because thought resides within the soul, it must be capable of inspiring greater pleasure than the eyes, which bear only indirectly upon the soul. Yet if that were not convincing enough, she goes a step further, emphasizing the pleasure that can come from the creative faculties of the mind: in one's fantasies, one is completely uninhibited and can experience any scenario one creates. Real life is in stark contrast: one could lose one's nerve and all of one's boldness might crumble when confronted with the tangible reality of the beloved before one's eyes. While the first premise (of the relative distance between the soul and thoughts or eyes, respectively) treads into somewhat metaphysical territory, the bulk of the queen's response relies on the second premise, which is rooted in an appeal to universal lived experience. Who can deny that fantasies possess an intensity, an allure, that real life cannot rival?

In order to evaluate the creativity of Boccaccio's treatment of the role of sight within romantic relationships, it is first necessary to consider the typical courtly conceptions of the theme. Sight served an essential function in the courtly notion of love, so much so that Andreas Capellanus famously claimed that a blind man could never be capable of falling in love.²⁹ Yet even a cursory consideration of the courtly perspectives on sight exposes a degree of

²⁹ In *De amore* 1.5.6, he declares: "Caecitas impedit amorem, quia caecus videre non potest unde suus possit animus immoderatam suscipere cogitationem; ergo in eo amor non potest oriri, sicut plenarie supra constat esse probatum. Sed hoc verum esse in amore acquirendo profiteor; nam amorem ante caecitatem hominis acquisitum non nego in caeco posse durare." ("Blindness is a bar to love, because a blind man cannot see anything upon which his mind can reflect immoderately, and so love cannot arise in him, as I have already fully shown. But I admit that this is true only of the acquiring of love, for I do not deny that a love which a man acquires before his blindness may last after he becomes blind"), trans. John Jay Parry. It is interesting to note that Capellanus says blindness will prevent someone from falling in love but not from remaining in love if one had first laid eyes upon the beloved before going blind; he ultimately determines that love does not depend upon continued sight of the beloved but simply upon one initial visual encounter.

inconsistency, as one finds seemingly opposing perspectives; the numerous love lyrics that stress the necessity of prolonged sight of the beloved seem to diverge from the classic troubadour trope of *amor de lonh*.

The topos of *amor de lonh*, most memorably depicted in poetry of the troubadour Jaufré Rudel, was the supreme form of courtly love: upon hearing of the winsome traits of a faraway figure (beauty, military prowess, poetic skill, and the like), a person would fall madly in love with this individual they had never actually met. Needless to say, these lovers would generally not realize their desires, thus epitomizing the perpetually unsatisfied desire typically at the core of courtly relationships.³⁰ While the motif was indeed prevalent in the troubadour lyric, Italian poets of the fourteenth century distanced themselves from it:

For the medieval Italian writers who inherited poetic themes from the troubadours, however, the notion of loving a woman one had never seen was also quite problematic. If, on one hand, it represented perfect courtly love, on the other, it contradicted the dominant understanding of love as a reaction to a visual stimulus, supported by a long philosophical and medical tradition that could be traced back to classical texts. One writer, however, embraced the problem of *amor de lonh* with enthusiasm... Giovanni Boccaccio, who chose to include love by hearsay in four of the one hundred tales in his *Decameron*. Boccaccio, in fact, privileges love by hearsay precisely because it represents an alternative to the mainstream theory of sight-based love upheld by poets and philosophers alike in fourteenth-century Italy. At the same time, Boccaccio does not idealize this topos, but parodies it in a myriad of ways.³¹

Boccaccio's engagement with *amor de lonh* in the *Decameron* is prefigured in the eleventh *questione*, where he seems to weigh several courtly precepts against one another. If the troubadours invented a type of love that not only depended entirely upon contemplation but also

³⁰ Leo Spitzer addresses this particular component of courtly love in "L'amour lointain de Jaufré Rudel et le sens de la poésie des troubadours" in *Studies in the Romance Languages and Literature*, vol. 5 (1944) pp. 1-74.

³¹ Brittany Asaro explores Boccaccio's depictions of *amor de lonh* and the degree to which he rejects courtly amatory prescriptions in her essay, "Unmasking the Truth about *Amor de Lonh*: Giovanni Boccaccio's Rebellion Against Literary Conventions in *Decameron* I.5 and IV.4" (pp. 95-96) in *Comitatus*, vol. 44 (2013) pp. 95-120.

specifically precluded sight in such infatuations, the perspective of Boccaccio's poetic contemporaries was diametrically opposed.

The Italian lyrics dealing with the role of sight in love are too numerous to recount exhaustively, yet we can turn once again to Giacomo da Lentini, who treated the theme in his lyrics. In "Amor è un desio che ven da core," he addresses the notion of *amor de lonh* in all but name:

Ben è alcuna fiata om amatore
senza vedere so 'namoramento,
ma quell'amor che stringe con furore
da la vista de li occhi ha nascimento... (v. 5-8)³²

There are truly times when a man is a lover
without seeing his beloved
but that love which holds fast
is born from beholding with the eyes...

While he does grant that *amor de lonh* is possible, he nonetheless asserts that it will never match in intensity the kind of love that comes from seeing the beloved. In another instance he emphasizes the terrible pain a lover suffers when he cannot regularly look upon his beloved:

S'io doglio no è meraviglia
e s'io sospiro e lamento:
amor lontano mi piglia
dogliosa pena ch'eo sento,
membrando c'eo sia diviso
di vedere lo bel viso
per cui peno e sto 'n tormento (v. 1-7).³³

If I suffer it is no wonder,
likewise if I sigh and wail:
a faraway love has taken me
sorrowful pain is all that I feel,
remembering that I am separated
from the sight of that beautiful face

³²*Poesie di Giacomo da Lentini: Edizione di riferimento a cura di Roberto Antonelli* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1979). Translation mine.

³³ *Ibid.*

for which I suffer and am tormented.

Giacomo da Lentini was just one medieval Italian lyricist among many³⁴ who underlined the necessity of sight in order to create and sustain a romantic relationship and, in so doing, critiqued the courtly notion of *amor de lonh* codified by their troubadour predecessors.

Given these opposing poetic ideologies, Boccaccio would have had two major courtly elements with which to experiment in his literary laboratory: *amor de lonh* on the one hand, and what we might call visual love on the other. We have discussed the lyric depictions of the issue but let us not forget the prose treatment by Capellanus, whose very definition of love states that it is a type of suffering (“passio”) which directly results from sight (“visione”) and excessive thought (“immoderata cogitatione”). The various formulae that emerge – sight as the only necessary element or thought as the only necessary element; sight as the obligatory attendant to thought; sight as the root of suffering or sight as the cure for suffering – can all be reduced to a single emulsion: sight and contemplation, and this is exactly the compound that Boccaccio is determined to study.

Boccaccio sifts through these various constituents, selecting the components that will serve as the basis for his own unique experiment. Unlike Capellanus, who presents sight and contemplation as two sides of the same coin, Boccaccio elects to separate them and examine their individual merits, ultimately having the queen rule in favor of contemplation; the choice is perhaps a surprising one, given the preference his fellow Italian writers had consistently given to sight and their repudiation of the courtly notion of love by hearsay. Nonetheless, the queen’s

³⁴ For a comprehensive overview of the connection between sight and love in medieval literature (particularly in the French and Italian traditions), see Dana Stewart: *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003).

response to Graziosa provides Boccaccio the space not only to tease these components apart, but to probe the psychology of fantasy.

While the troubadours employed the concept of love by hearsay as the embodiment of eternally unfulfilled desires, Boccaccio's attraction to the motif was likely not the result of any reverence for such courtly precepts. Throughout his literary career he shows interest in courtly tropes, ultimately using them as a means to critique the literary and social mores of his time, and his engagement with the love/sight connection is no exception. Stripped of its courtly accoutrements, *amor de lonh* is fundamentally an exploration of how the human mind constructs fantasies and how far these fantasies can transport us. The idea of falling in love with a stranger based solely on what one has heard of them seems less outlandish if it is read as an exaggerated representation of the erotic potentialities of human imagination. This is not to say that Boccaccio endorses *amor de lonh* – the eleventh *questione* does not ask, after all, whether one can fall in love without ever having seen the beloved – but rather that he extracts from *amor de lonh* a latent concern with erotic imagination and makes that the object his examination. The queen's discourse builds upon this, rejecting the primacy of sight and promoting instead the merits of fantasy.

In the realm of fantasy, one can experience the exhilaration of doing or saying anything, of living without consequence, of scripting the words and deeds of others: these are the unique potentialities of erotic imagination. By meditating on the gratification that comes from the total control that only fantasy can provide, Boccaccio moves past the superficiality of courtly precepts, exposing a common and deeply relatable aspect of lived experience. The human inclination to explore private desires and life's possibilities (or, even, impossibilities) through imagination is at the heart of the eleventh *questione*. Ultimately, Boccaccio's innovation lies in

his ability to push past the tired iterations of sight, thought, and suffering – staples of the courtly love tradition – and to instead repurpose them as tools with which to meditate upon the pleasures of fantasy.

1.3 Resolved: Love Is Inherently Good

In contrast to the second and fifth *questioni*, which are couched in narratives that yield problems to be discussed and resolved, the seventh and eleventh *questioni* are presented in a largely theoretical fashion. The seventh *questione* is nonetheless singular in its formulation; while it ultimately treats a broad and abstract issue, it is rooted in the very real and specific dilemma of Caleon's infatuation with the queen. While every other *questione* begins either with an anecdote or a hypothetical, the seventh *questione* is the only one of the thirteen that directly results from a problem occurring within the cohort. In a not-so-subtle declaration of his feelings for the queen, Caleon asks if a man should or should not fall in love. Her response moves the conversation away from this sudden interpersonal conflict and toward a philosophical discourse on the nature of love. Boccaccio uses this space to juxtapose two prevailing ideologies: one that asserts love's ennobling power and the other that warns of its destructive potential. He evaluates and problematizes these conceptions of love, ultimately using them to mount a generalized critique of courtly love.

When it is his turn to pose a question, Caleon sits in silence for a long while until the queen prompts him to speak. He explains that he was so enraptured by her beauty that he was left speechless; then, after singing a brief *canzone* in her honor, he poses a loaded question: “io disidero di sapere se a ciascuno uomo, a bene essere di se medesimo, si dee innamorare o no” (“I wish to know if, for his own benefit, every man ought to fall in love or not” [4.43]). Finding

herself in the fraught position of having to rebuff Caleon's advances while still upholding the established rules of the game, the queen is disquieted by the question. After some hesitation, she responds:

Parlare ci conviene contra quello che noi con disiderio seguiamo. E certo a te dovria bene essere manifesto ciò che tu in dubbio domandando proponi. Serverassi, rispondendo a te, lo 'ncominciato ordine, e colui a cui soggetta siamo, le parole, le quali, costretta dalla forza del giuoco, diciamo contra la sua deità, più tosto che volontarie, le ci perdoni (4.44).

It is best for us to speak against that which we wish to follow. And, in asking your question, that which you claim to have doubts about must certainly be evident to you. The rules we have followed up to now will serve us well in responding to you, and I pray that the one who governs us all will forgive me for the words I am about to speak against his sovereignty (words not said willingly, but rather because I am constrained by the power of this game)...

She admits that her response will digress from the initial question ("alquanto fuori della materia ci stenderemo"), but nonetheless promises to return to the main issue shortly ("a quella quanto più brevemente potremo tornando"). There are three kinds of love, she says: honorable love ("amore onesto"), love of delight ("amore per diletto"), and love of utility ("amore per utilità"), and she defines each in turn. Honorable love is:

il buono e il diritto e il leale amore, il quale da tutti abitualmente dee esser preso. Questo il sommo e primo creatore tiene lui alle sue creature congiunto, e loro a lui congiunge. Per questo i cieli, il mondo, i reami, le province e le città permangono in istato. Per questo meritiamo noi di divenire eterni possessori de' celestiali regni. Senza questo è perduto ciò che noi abbiamo in potenza di ben fare (4.44).

a good, just, and loyal love, the kind that everyone ought to practice consistently. This is the love that binds the sovereign and first creator to all of his creation, and in turn binds them to Him. As a result, the heavens, the earth, all realms, provinces, and cities remain fixed in their place, and because of this we have been named the eternal heirs to the heavenly kingdom. Without this kind of love we lose all potential to do good.

Of the love of delight she says:

questo è quello al quale noi siamo soggetti. Questo è il nostro iddio: costui adoriamo, costui preghiamo, in costui speriamo che sia il nostro contentamento, e che egli

interamente possa i nostri disii fornire. Di costui è posta la quistione se bene è a sommetterlisi: a che debitamente risponderemo (4.44).

we are subjects of this kind of love. It is our idol: we adore it, we pray to it, we hope that it will be our comfort and that it will fulfill all of our desires. The question posed asks if it is good to submit to this kind of love, and we will rightly respond to it.

Lastly, she addresses the love of utility:

di questo è il mondo più che d'altro ripieno. Questo insieme con la fortuna è congiunto: mentre ella dimora, e egli similmente dimora; quando si parte, e elli. Elli è guastatore di molti beni: e più tosto, ragionevolmente parlando, si dovia chiamare odio che amore (4.44).

with this love the world is overflowing. It is joined to Fortune, dwelling wherever she dwells, going wherever she goes. It is the destroyer of many goods and, if we were to speak of it in any sensible way, we would say that it should be called hate rather than love.

Having delineated the three types of love, she returns to the love of delight in order to deliver her judgment:

Ma però che alla proposta quistione né del primo né dell'ultimo è bisogno di parlare, del secondo diremo, cioè amore per diletto: al quale, veramente, niuno, che virtuosa vita disideri di seguire, si dovia sommettere, però che egli è d'onore privato, adducitore d'affanni, destatore di vizii, copioso donatore di vane sollecitudini, indegno occupatore dell'altrui libertà, più ch'altra cosa da tenere cara. Chi, dunque, per bene di sé, se sarà savio, non fuggirà tale signore? Viva chi può libero, seguendo quelle cose che in ogni atto aumentano libertà, e lascinsi i viziosi signori a' viziosi vassalli seguire (4.44).

But since the proposed question does not require us to speak of the first or third kind of love, we must say of the second kind that no one who truly wishes to lead a virtuous life should submit himself to it. This kind of love strips away honor, attracts misfortune, arouses vice, provokes endless anxieties, unjustly encroaches upon the liberty of the other – which more than anything else is to be prized and protected. Therefore, what wise man would not flee from this kind of master? Whoever can live free from this love should, pursuing only those things that increase liberty and leaving depraved vassals to follow their depraved lords.

The queen's reply, which opens with a broad philosophical overview of love and closes with a galvanizing indictment of erotic love, sets the stage for a debate over the intrinsic value of

romantic love. But before we examine Caleon's objection and the queen's subsequent rejoinder, let us consider the significance of her discourse on the three kinds of love.

Even though she goes out of her way to define them, the queen never returns to "amore onesto" or "amore per utilità," which makes their presence in the discourse somewhat perplexing; what's more, Boccaccio confirms the intentionality of this textual detour by having the queen acknowledge that her response will stray from main concern of the *questione*. But why engage in such a digression in the first place? While the delineation of the three types of love does not ostensibly contribute to the debate that unfolds in response to Caleon's *questione*, it nevertheless plays a significant role: it serves as evidence of Boccaccio's knowledge of and engagement with a larger philosophical tradition.

In his commentary of the *Filocolo*, Quaglio noted the similarities between the queen's discourse and Dante's treatment of the three parts of the human soul in the *De vulgari eloquentia*:³⁵

Ad quorum evidentiam sciendum est, quod sicut homo *tripliciter* spirituatus est, videlicet vegetabili, animali et rationali, *triplex* iter perambulat. Nam secundum quod vegetabile quid est, *utile* querit, in quo cum plantis comunicat; secundum quod animale, *delectabile*, in quo cum brutis; secundum quod rationale, *honestum* querit, in quo solus est, vel angelice sociatur [natura]...

Sed disserendum est que maxima sint. Et primo in eo quod est *utile*: in quo, si callide consideremus intentum omnium querentium *utilitatem*, nil aliud quam salutem inuenimus. Secundo in eo quod est *delectabile*: in quo dicimus illud esse maxime delectabile quod per pretiosissimum obiectum appetitus delectat: hoc autem venus est. Tertio in eo quod est *honestum*: in quo nemo dubitat esse virtutem (II, II 6-7).

In order to define them accurately, it is necessary to know that, just as human beings possess a soul with three aspects – vegetative, animal, and rational – so they follow a threefold path. For in so far as they are vegetable beings, they seek the useful, and they have this in common with plants; in so far as they are animal, they seek pleasure, and this

³⁵ Quaglio refers to "la tradizionale dottrina dell'amore, diviso in tre categorie, a seconda dell'onesto, del diletto e dell'utile, secondo la scolastica dottrina medievale esposta anche da Dante (*De vulgari eloquentia*, II, II 8)" (p. 372).

they share with beasts; and in so far as they are rational, they seek the good, and in this they stand alone, or may be related to the nature of angels...

But we must discuss what these things of great importance may be. To begin with what is useful: here, if we carefully ponder the goal of all those who seek what is useful, we will find that it is nothing other than their own well-being. Secondly, what is pleasurable: here I say that what is most pleasurable is what is the most highly valued object of our desires; and this is love. Thirdly, what is good: and here no-one will doubt that the most important thing is virtue.³⁶

The vegetative, animal and rational components of the soul translate into three distinct paths, which Dante characterizes as the desire to provide for one's own well-being, the desire to find pleasure through love, and the desire to pursue what is good through virtue. Boccaccio's choice of words is certainly no accident, as the descriptors "onesto," "per diletto," and "per utilità" are Italian equivalents to Dante's "honestum," "delectabile," and "utile." Dante would certainly not have been Boccaccio's only inspiration for a triune taxonomy, however, as scholars have also pointed to Aristotle as a likely source.³⁷ In Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle differentiates between three kinds of friendship, and this tripartite categorization was echoed and reprised in countless medieval texts; some of the more famous examples of such re-elaborations include Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the *Ethics*, the *Roman de la Rose*, and various *canzoni* by Guittone d'Arezzo.³⁸ In crafting a discourse on the three types of love, Boccaccio was demonstrating his engagement with a larger literary and philosophical tradition.

The rhetorical parenthesis closed, it is Caleon's turn to respond. He objects to the queen's answer, saying that "amore per diletto" is not something to be avoided but rather

³⁶ *Dante: De vulgari eloquentia* (trans. Stephen Botterill, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁷ It should be noted that Boccaccio had firsthand knowledge of the *Ethics*, and certainly would not have needed to depend on such intermediaries when fashioning his three categories of love.

³⁸ For the Thomistic and Aristotelian influences on this particular *questione*, see Francesco Bruni: *Boccaccio. L'invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990), esp. pp. 110-135; and Alessia Ronchetti: "Between *Filocolo* and *Filostrato*: Boccaccio's Authorial Doubles and the Question of 'amore per diletto'" (*The Italianist*, 35:3, 2015), pp. 318-333.

something that ought to be pursued if one wishes to meet a glorious end and increase one's virtue ("tengo che da seguire sia da chi glorioso fine desidera, sì come aumentatrice di virtù").³⁹ He proceeds by reciting a veritable laundry list of courtly tropes: "amore per diletto" humbles the proud heart ("d'ogni superbia spoglia il cuore... faccendolo umile in ciascun atto"); it makes the avaricious liberal and courtly ("fa i cupidi e gli avari, liberali e cortesi"); it inspires bravery and strength in the hearts of men ("fa gli uomini audaci e forti"); it clothes its subjects in the rich vestments of elegant manners, ornate speech, munificence, and graciousness ("Questi adorna di belli costumi, d'ornato parlare, di magnificenza, di graziosa piacevolezza tutti coloro che di lui si vestono"); it grants cheer and gentility to those who dedicate themselves to it ("Questi di leggiadria e di gentilezza a tutti i suoi soggetti fa dono"); its greatness is manifest in the celebrated verses of Vergil and Ovid and countless other poets ("Chi mosse Virgilio, chi Ovidio, chi gli altri poeti a lasciare di loro eterna fama ne' santi versi"); and one must marvel at the many goods that flow from this kind of love ("Oh quanti sono i beni che da costui procedono!"). Therefore, he concludes, anyone who is not already a servant of "amore per diletto" must dedicate all of his focus and effort to attaining the graces that come from vassalage to such a lord, since this is the path to virtue ("con ogni sollecitudine dovrebbe ciascuno, che di lui non è conto e servidore, procacciare e affannare d'avere la grazia di tanto signore e essergli soggetto, poi che per lui si diviene virtuoso").

Caleon's response is a defense of the courtly conception of love – it evokes all of the established conventions of the courtly love tradition. Boccaccio once again shows himself to be very intentional in his lexicon, as Caleon's rebuttal imitates a particular passage from the *De amore*:

³⁹ *Filocolo* 4.45; all subsequent citations of Caleon's speech are from this chapter.

Effectus autem amoris hic est, quia verus amator nulla posset avaritia offusari... infimos natu etiam morum novit nobilitate ditare, superbos quoque solet humilitate beare; obsequia cunctis amorusus multa consuevit decenter parare. O, quam mira res est amor, qui tantis facit hominem fulgere virtutibus, tantisque docet quemlibet bonis moribus abundare! (I.IV.1).

Now it is the effect of love that a true lover cannot be degraded with any avarice... It can endow a man even of the humblest birth with nobility of character; it blesses the proud with humility; and the man in love becomes accustomed to performing many services gracefully for everyone. O what a wonderful thing is love, which makes a man shine with so many virtues and teaches everyone, no matter who he is, so many good traits of character!⁴⁰

Capellanus's descriptions of love's ability to transform avarice into liberality, elevate the lowly to the heights of nobility, and inspire great deeds are all echoed in Caleon's discourse. Yet Caleon goes even further, claiming that "amore per diletto" – typified by the courtly trappings of liberality ("magnificenza"), ornate speech ("ornato parlare"), elegant manners ("belli costumi"), and refined liveliness ("leggiadria") – is a conduit to virtue ("per lui si diviene virtuoso"). By having Caleon equate courtly love with virtue, Boccaccio sets the stage for an even more contentious debate; such a claim contradicts the queen's taxonomy of love, which specifically states that only "amore onesto" can grant virtue since it is the only impetus for right action ("sanza questo è perduto ciò che noi abbiamo in potenza di ben fare").

The queen responds in a sardonic tone: she says Caleon is deceived in his thinking, but that it is no wonder since he is more enamored than anyone, and the judgement of a person in love is flawed because the eyes of his mind have been blinded⁴¹ and he has banished reason as though it were a mortal enemy ("Molto t'inganna il parer tuo [...] e di ciò non è maraviglia, però che tu se', secondo il nostro conoscimento, più ch'altro innamorato, e sanza dubbio il giudizio

⁴⁰ Trans. Parry.

⁴¹ The reference to the powers of the so-called eyes of the mind recalls the discourse in the eleventh *questione*.

degli innamorati è falso, però che il lume degli occhi della mente hanno perduto, e da loro la ragione come nimica hanno cacciata”⁴²). Echoing Capellanus, the queen firstly defines love as an irrational will that originates from a passion within the heart; this passion is the result of a licentious pleasure begotten by the eyes and nourished by idleness, which allows for excessive recollection and rumination (“una irrazionabile volontà, nata da una passione venuta nel cuore per libidinoso piacere che agli occhi è apparito, nutricato per ozio da memoria e da pensieri nelle folli menti”). She then goes on to refute each of Caleon’s claims, asserting that this kind of love is not based in humility but in arrogance and inappropriate presumption (“Non è atto d’umiltà [...] ma è arroganza e sconvenevole presunzione”); it does not render the avaricious liberal but, by depriving them of their intellectual capacity for discernment, makes them prodigals that foolishly throw away precious goods without measure or thought (“Né fa questo amore i cupidi liberali ma [...] abonda ne’ cuori, quelli del mentale vedere priva, e delle cose, per adietro debitamente avute care, stoltamente diventa prodigo, non quelle con misura donando, ma disutilmente gittando”); it does not inspire acts of bravery and strength but rather encourages recklessness and ostentatious attempts to impress women (“mettonvisi, non amore, ma poco senno a ciò li tira, per avere poi vanagloria nel cospetto delle sue donne”); the ornate speech and elegant manners it is said to grant are merely cheap blandishments and hollow flattery (“amore empie le lingue de’ suoi soggetti di tanta dolcezza e di tante lusinghe [...] di vile uomo è atto il lusingare!”); it does not ensure fame, but rather ruins reputations (“Non fa costui similmente a’ suoi sudditi dimenticare e dispregiare la loro fama buona, la quale dee da tutti, come eterna erede della nostra memoria”); ultimately this love does not lead its followers to abundant goods, but instead lures them into endless evils (“Egli, brevemente, ad ogni male mena chi ’l segue”).

⁴² *Filocolo* 4.46; all subsequent citations of Flammetta’s discourse are from this chapter.

After painstakingly responding to each of Caleon's claims, the queen concludes with a final summation of the evils of "amore per diletto":

se forse alcune virtuose opere fanno i suoi seguaci, che avviene rado, con vizioso principio le incominciano, desiderando per quelle più tosto venire al disiderato fine del laido lor volere. Le quali non virtù ma vizio più tosto si possono dire, con ciò sia cosa che non sia da riguardare ciò che l'uomo fa, ma con che animo, e quello vizio o virtù riputare, secondo la volontà dell'operante: però che già mai cattiva radice non fece buono arbore, né cattivo arbore buon frutto. Adunque questo amore è reo, e se egli è reo, è da fuggire: e chi le malvage cose fugge, per conseguente segue le buone, e così è buono e virtuoso. Il principio di costui niuna altra cosa è che paura, il suo mezzo peccato e il suo fine dolore e noia [...] però che egli è impetuosa cosa, né in niuno suo atto sa aver modo, e è senza ragione [...] Dunque chi loderà che questi sia da seguire, se non gli stolti? Certo, se licito ne fosse, volontieri senza lui viveremmo, ma tardi di tal danno ci accorgiamo...

if it happens that its followers perform some virtuous act (which rarely occurs), these acts are the results of unscrupulous principles, since they are undertaken simply to obtain the object of their obscene desires. So these actions should be called wicked and not virtuous, since it is not what man does but rather the intent behind his actions that should be judged; an action can be considered a vice or a virtue depending on the objective of its doer. After all, no bad root ever grew into a good tree, and no bad tree ever yielded good fruit. So this love is evil, and if it is evil it must be avoided, and he who flees from evil things consequently pursues good things, and so he is good and virtuous. The beginning of this love is fear, its middle is sin, and its end is grief and suffering [...] It is an impetuous thing which knows no moderation and is without reason [...] Therefore, who would laud this as a path to follow if not foolish people? Of course, if it were possible, we would gladly live without it, yet we only come to learn of its evils once it is too late...

There are a few significant issues to unpack in these final lines of her argument. The most perplexing problem lies in the circuitry of the queen's reasoning – her entire argument rests upon the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*. She claims that actions undertaken out of "amore per diletto" are characterized by their evil intentions, which means that these actions are inherently evil; since it provokes evil actions, this love is evil. While she asserts that actions ought to be judged by the intent behind them, the basis of her premise that love is evil relies solely upon her claim that these actions are evil; she does not even attempt to explain why or how love's intentions are in and of themselves evil.

After begging the question, the queen abruptly changes course, abandoning logical fallacy and focusing instead on the other vices intrinsic to “amore per diletto.” She stresses that this love is deprived of moderation and reason, terms undoubtedly chosen for their courtly and philosophical pedigree.⁴³ Moderation (*mezura* appears frequently in Occitan poetry, with *misura* as its Italian equivalent), which would go hand in hand with reason, was a concept not only central to Aristotle’s philosophy, but was also “a key element of the troubadours’ courtly ethos as a whole,” characterized by “self-discipline, the ability to moderate one’s passions with rational control, to avoid extremes or anything that contravenes courtly behavior.”⁴⁴ These courtly and philosophical valences then give way to a final, succinct condemnation of “amore per diletto” reminiscent of Dante’s meditation on the illusory nature of desire in the first book of the *Convivio*.⁴⁵

⁴³ In her examination of *Le dolci rime*, Teodolinda Barolini highlights the overlap between the courtly and Aristotelian conceptions of moderation, bringing to light Dante’s bold conflation of courtly and Aristotelian ethics; see “Aristotle’s *Mezzo*, Courtly *Misura*, and Dante’s Canzone *Le dolci rime*: Humanism, Ethics, and Social Anxiety” (in *Dante and the Greeks*, edited by Jan Ziolkowski, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 163-179).

⁴⁴ See Linda Paterson: “Fin’amor and the development of the courtly *canço*” in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, edited by Sarah Kay and Simon Gaunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 35. For the role of *mezura* in troubadour poetry and in the *De amore*, see Paolo Cherchi: *Andreas and the Ambiguity of Courtly Love* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ “E perché la sua conoscenza prima è imperfetta, per non essere esperta né dottrinata, piccioli beni le paiono grandi, e però da quelli comincia prima a desiderare. Onde vedemo li parvuli desiderare massimamente un pomo; e poi, più procedendo, desiderare uno augellino; e poi, più oltre, desiderare bel vestimento; e poi lo cavallo; e poi una donna; e poi ricchezza non grande, e poi grande, e poi più. E questo incontra perché in nulla di queste cose truova quella che va cercando, e credela trovare più oltre.” (“And because the soul’s first perception is imperfect – since it is neither experienced nor educated – small goods appear much grander, and from there the soul begins to desire. So we see children greatly desiring an apple, then, as they grow, desiring a bird, then, elaborate clothing, then a horse, then a woman, then small riches, then greater ones, and so on. And this happens because in none of these things does the soul find what it is seeking, believing it is to be found somewhere further along.”) (*Convivio*, I.XII.16). The futility of pursuing earthly desires appears also in *Purg.* 16: “Di picciol bene in pria sente

The seventh *questione* has an almost vertiginous quality to it: opening with a social dilemma that threatens to disrupt the dynamic of the cohort, it attempts to avert crisis by posing an incredibly complex question, which it then addresses by cycling through a series of courtly and philosophical tropes at breakneck speed. I argue that this *questione*, which may initially appear overly ambitious and sloppy in its process, is actually a carefully constructed critique of courtly love; Boccaccio cleverly stages an interpersonal predicament in order to expose the endemic flaws of the courtly system.

Caleon plays the role of the quintessential courtly lover: he sings a *canzone* in Fiammetta's honor, praises her beauty with honeyed words and, rather than using his turn to propose a *questione* that would entertain and engage his companions (in accordance with the rules of the game), he selfishly squanders it on a thinly veiled profession of his feelings for the queen. While he does not overtly break the rules – he does technically pose a question for the queen to resolve – his transgression is only flimsily disguised under a veneer of courtliness. The queen's response constitutes a scathing rebuke not only of his advances but, more significantly, of the conventions of courtly love. Boccaccio thus uses the respective speeches of Caleon and the queen as a space to catalogue the major literary and philosophical themes of courtly love. The loaded terms and concepts strewn throughout the *questione* demonstrate Boccaccio's command of a kind of courtly lexis and, as such, they would not have needed any elaboration in order for his contemporaries to understand their significance.

The hyperbolic and, at times, outright illogical arguments employed by both Caleon and Fiammetta serve to illuminate the stakes of the *questione* – subtlety would not suit Boccaccio's

sapore; / quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre" ("At first it [the soul] savors small goods; / thus it is deceived and will chase after them") (v. 91-92).

needs in this particular case. He depicts the core values of courtly love in the most obvious terms possible and then loudly decries them in order to expose their fundamental shortcomings. The *questione* ostensibly asks whether or not one should fall in love, but Boccaccio really uses it to explore whether or not one should engage in courtly love or, put another way, whether courtly love has any actual utility. Those of us familiar with Boccaccio's corpus and his general endorsement of erotic love should not be surprised by the queen's denunciation of "amore per diletto", nor should we be puzzled by the overt fallaciousness of her argumentation. Boccaccio has no real interest in demonizing erotic love or in constructing logically sound arguments against it but is rather determined to explore the defects of courtly love. Ultimately, his true aim is not to construct a philosophical treatise on love – erotic, spiritual, or otherwise – but rather to distill the key tenets of courtly love and critically assess them.

Boccaccio once again uses courtly literary conventions to explore the flaws of the courtly social system, a system that falsely claims to grant graces both social and spiritual. When the queen employs circular reasoning to argue that "amore per diletto" cannot inspire virtuous actions, she is in fact mirroring the inherent circuitry of courtly love's *raison d'être*, providing perhaps the most compelling repudiation of it. To engage in courtly love, one must abide by a precise code of behavior (by practicing moderation, liberality, valor, and so on) and, in so doing, one gains the virtues associated with courtliness (moderation, liberality, valor, and so on). He illustrates the feedback loop that is courtly love, thus invalidating its supposedly ennobling potential. Furthermore, Boccaccio uses the queen's rebuttal to illustrate the latent excesses of courtly love: how liberality veers into prodigality, brave deeds break down into flamboyant displays, and refined speech morphs into empty flattery. The seventh *questione*, which he uses

to depict the hallmarks of courtly love and, in turn, to reveal its inherent inadequacies, thus serves as the capstone of Boccaccio's critique of courtly love.

Plato's instructions on how to skillfully craft an argument, which I cited at the beginning of the chapter, beautifully complement Boccaccio's approach in these four *questioni*. He demonstrates knowledge of the particulars of the courtly love tradition, exploring some of its vital themes: the role of jealousy on a love affair, the connection between love, sight, and anguish, and the extent to which love is inherently worthy. He defines these issues, probes and partitions them, and uses his familiarity with the courtly love tradition to explore the psychological and sociological aspects of erotic love. By evoking courtly tropes, Boccaccio creates a space within which to test the limitations of these courtly ideals, ultimately demonstrating his interest in the psychosocial issues at play within these conceptions. He adapts his message to his audience, speaking a courtly language in order to unveil a novel authorial approach that privileges lived experience over abstract courtly precepts; in this way Boccaccio shows just how adeptly he can craft arguments according to the rules of art.

Chapter 2: How Do We Choose Whom to Love?

“How much better to get wisdom than gold, to get insight rather than silver!” (Proverbs 16.16).⁴⁶

“A sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied” (Proverbs 3.4).

“She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her” (Proverbs 3.15).

Ho scelti tre, che igualmente ciascuno per sé mi piace: de' quali tre, l'uno di corporale forza credo che avanzerebbe il buono Ettore, tanto è ad ogni pruova vigoroso e forte; la cortesia e la liberalità del secondo è tanta, che la sua fama per ciascun polo credo che suoni: il terzo è di sapienza pieno tanto, che gli altri savi avanza oltre misura [...] Consigliatemi, adunque, a quale io più tosto, per meno biasimo e per più sicurtà, io mi deggia di costoro donare (4.27)

I have chosen three whom I like equally; one is of such physical strength that I believe he would best even Hector, such is his vigor and power; the courtesy and liberality of the second is so great that I imagine his fame resounds in every corner of the world; the third is brimming with such wisdom that he surpasses all other sages [...] Recommend, then, one worthy of me, to whom I can give myself with the least risk and greatest security.

Voglio da voi sapere quale di due donne deggia più tosto da un giovane essere amata, piacendo igualmente a lui amendune, o quella di loro che è di nobile sangue, e di parenti possente, e copiosa d'aver molto più che il giovane, o l'altra la quale né è nobile né ricca né di parenti abondevole quanto il giovane (4.47).

I wish to know from you which of two women should be loved by a young man who likes them both equally: a woman of noble lineage, powerful family and riches greater than the young man, or the other one, who is neither noble nor rich nor blessed with a family as established as the young man's.

Ma con ciò sia cosa che ancora delle gentili donne siano alcune diverse maniere [...] le quali, per quello che si crede, diversamente amano, qual più qual meno, qual più fervente qual più tiepidamente, disidero di sapere da voi, di cui più tosto un giovane, per più felicemente il suo disio ad effetto condurre, si dee innamorare di queste tre, o di pulcella o di maritata o di vedova (4.50).

⁴⁶ All citations of Scripture are taken from the New International Version.

But since ladies may be of different manners [...] one imagines that they love differently, some more and some less, some more fervently and others more tepidly; I wish to know from you which kind of woman a young man should love so as to bring his desires to a happy end: a maiden, a married woman, or a widow.

The *questioni d'amore* are inherently concerned with proposing choices: is it better to behave this way or that way, is this one or that one more unhappy, is this action or that one more pleasant? While all thirteen *questioni* follow this either-or formula, three of them are uniquely focused on defining certain categories of lovers: widows, married women, or virgins (in the case of the ninth *questione*), wise men, liberal men, or strong men (in the case of the third *questione*), and noble women or lowborn women (in the case of the eighth *questione*). We now move away from the philosophical realm – exemplified in the *questioni* of the previous chapter – to the practical, as Boccaccio addresses the challenge of selecting the ideal lover.

Boccaccio's choice to distinguish potential lovers on the basis of gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual experience is not entirely unique. Scholars of the Middle Ages will be familiar with the amatory debates between the knight and the scholar, one particularly commonplace example of the impulse to draw distinctions between lovers based upon social class. He is nonetheless innovative in his approach, as he once again uses a device of courtly love literature as a vehicle through which to conduct a deeper analysis of social issues. I argue that Boccaccio is less interested in staging these amatory debates simply to reproduce the tropes of courtly love literature, but rather that he uses them to evaluate concrete social hierarchies. A historical reading of these *questioni* thus provides invaluable insight into the ways in which he not only sketches out the social realities of wealth, rank, gender, and sexuality, but, more interestingly, the ways in which he creatively transgresses the boundaries of these same realities. This chapter will

thus address each of these three *questioni* individually, underlining the social issues that were of interest to our author and utilizing social history to assess his thinking on them.

2.1 Resolved: If a Lady Had Her Druthers, She Wouldn't Love a Wise Man

In the third *questione*, Cara asks Fiammetta to help her choose a lover from among three candidates – a strong man, a courteous and liberal man, and a wise man – with the queen ultimately ruling in favor of the wise man. The discourse between the two women is relatively brief, yet it contains a diverse range of issues whose depth and range belie the *questione's* apparent simplicity. To more fully appreciate the complexity of the *questione* and its resolution, we must consider what is truly intended by the question itself and, in turn, more closely examine the identities of these three categories of men.

Amatory debates attempted to assign superlatives and, as such, could often be reduced to some formulation or other of: who is the best lover? If one looks more closely at the *questione*, one finds that Cara does not ask for the queen to designate the most attractive man, the most tender lover, or the one with the greatest sexual prowess. She does not ask which man is a superior paramour, but rather she says: “Consigliatemi, adunque, a quale io più tosto, per meno biasimo e per più sicurtà, io mi deggia di costoro donare” (“Recommend, then, one worthy of me, to whom I can give myself with the least risk and greatest security” [4.27]). Cara's question signals what she considers to be the most important characteristic in a lover: discretion.

Attending to this distinction is the key to comprehending Fiammetta's response, as she will not focus on the amatory merits of these men, but will instead judge their respective social virtues.

Cara, who must decide between a man stronger than Hector (“l'uno di corporale fortezza credo che avanzerebbe il buono Ettore”), a man famous for his courtesy and liberality (“la cortesia e la liberalità del secondo è tanta, che la sua fama per ciascun polo credo che suoni”) and

a man wiser than every other sage (“è di sapienza pieno tanto, che gli altri savi avanza oltra misura”), is surprised by Fiammetta’s initial ruling in favor of the wise man, and objects:

Oh, quanto è il mio parere dal vostro diverso! [...] A me pareva che qualunque l’uno degli altri fosse più tosto da prendere che il savio e la ragione mi par questa. Amore, sì come noi veggiamo, ha sì fatta natura, che, moltiplicando in un cuore la sua forza, ogni altra cosa ne caccia fuori, quello per suo luogo ritenendo, movendolo poi secondo i suoi pareri: né niuno avvenimento può a quelli resistere, che pur non si convengano quelli seguire da chi è, com’io ho detto, signoreggiato [...] Dunque, se egli ha potenza di levare il conoscimento a’ conoscenti, levando al savio il senno, niuna cosa gli rimarrà; ma se al forte o al cortese il loro poco senno leverà, egli li aumenterà nelle loro virtù, e così costoro varranno più che il savio, innamorati. Appresso, ha amore questa proprietà: egli è cosa che non si può lungamente celare, e nel suo palesarsi suole spesso recare gravosi pericoli: a’ quali che rimedio darà il savio che avrà già il senno perduto? Niuno ne darà! Ma il forte con la sua forza sé e altrui potrà in un pericolo atare; il cortese potrà per la sua cortesia avere l’animo di molti preso con cara benivolenza, per la quale atato e riguardato potrà essere, e egli e altri per amore di lui (4.28).

Oh, how different your view is from mine! It would seem to me that either of the other two would be a more fitting choice than the wise man, and the reason is this: love, as we see, has such a nature that, multiplying in strength in the heart it will cast out everything else. Making the heart its dwelling place, love will direct the heart according to its wishes; nor can any event resist these wishes, but they must be followed by anyone who has been made subject to love [...] Therefore, if love has the power to take discernment from the discerning, it will take wisdom from the wise, leaving nothing else behind, but if love takes from the strong or courteous what little wisdom they have, it will augment their other virtues and they will be of greater value than the wise man once they are in love. Furthermore, love has this property: it is a thing that cannot be hidden for long, and with its uncovering often come grave dangers: against these perils what defense will the wise man stripped of his wisdom have? None! But the strong man can defend himself and his lover from any threat by virtue of his strength and, because of his courtesy and benevolence, the courteous man has won many over; for this reason he and those who love him will be protected and respected.

As I will demonstrate, “strong,” “wise,” and “courteous” are not simply adjectives that Cara uses to describe her suitors; rather, they indicate three specific classes of men who would have existed at court: knights, clerics, and aristocrats. The mention of the “gravosi pericoli” indicates Boccaccio’s true purpose for the *questione*: to compare the relative social virtues of these men, and to evaluate how useful these social virtues would have been in the context of a secret romantic relationship. The court was fraught with social perils, and the reputation of any woman

caught in a sexual relationship would have been irrevocably tarnished. It would therefore have been of the utmost importance to select a lover who was discreet and skilled at averting suspicion. Historical considerations grant insight not only into the identities of these three classes of men, but also allow us to more fully appreciate Fiammetta's assertion that the wise man is the only one capable of the social maneuvering necessary for a safe and secure love affair at court.

Let us begin with the strong man, whom Boccaccio intends his audience to understand as the knight. Anyone familiar with courtly literature will recognize the knight as a common fixture; pledged to serve his lord and lady, he was the symbol of bravery, physical fortitude, and an ethic of service. Yet beyond the confines of the medieval literary imagination, the knight occupied a real and complex position within the social system of the Middle Ages. Contextualizing the knight's historical identity, along with that of the liberal man and the wise man, is crucial to understanding what would have been the true social merits of these suitors whom Boccaccio evokes.

When considering the overarching history of the feudal system in Europe, we find that knighthood was a relatively late development. While the class of the *milites* had been recognized as early as the tenth century, the conception of knighthood – with its unique status and prestige – did not reach its apex until the twelfth century, by which time the once neat threads of knighthood and nobility had become tangled. While nobles and knights were indeed within separate social categories (the former relying on an inheritance of power through lineage, the latter requiring demonstrated military prowess and ritualized investiture), the lines separating

them had begun to blur by the twelfth century.⁴⁷ While knighthood's evolution was not homogenous across Europe,⁴⁸ it did ultimately possess several characteristics that proved to be consistent across countries and cultures, namely a conflation with nobility, a code of chivalry, and a ritualized process of investiture.

The amalgam of social duties, displays, and rituals in which the knight participated are threads in a larger tapestry populated by various players. While many participated in (or at least emulated) courtly culture – knights, nobles, clerics, writers, entertainers, poets, and even merchants – the knight was indeed a protagonist, from both a historical and literary perspective. The system of ethics to which the knight adhered was not necessarily an obvious or intrinsic one – how did qualities like civility, moderation, mercy, proper speech, and genteel manners benefit a warrior on the battlefield? –, but was instead learned and refined over a period of time. Indeed, the knight was no ordinary warrior:

The knight enjoyed the mystique of power, both civil and military; this might have been the limit of his cultural ambition [...] The evolution of knighthood into chivalry is remarkable in that it brings together unexpected elements, and transforms the rude warrior into an idealistic figure.

⁴⁷ Aldo Scaglione clarifies early on in *Knights at Court* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) the complex blending of the classes of knights and nobles: “The *milites* were recognized since A.D. 980 as a separate “class” or *ordo*, distinct from the *rustici* and immediately below the *nobiles*, until they eventually became part of the nobility. Feudal power and privilege were the prerogatives of a class of noblemen whose rights and status soon became hereditary. So was the status of knight once this too became a recognized order. Nobility and knighthood must nevertheless be kept distinct even after they started to undergo a broad though partial process of merging around 1150 [...] True enough, in the thirteenth century descendants of knights generally started to inherit the title, yet they were not considered full knights unless formally dubbed” (17-18).

⁴⁸ The social makeup of the knight naturally varied from society to society. In Germany, for instance, knighthood was marked by a great degree of uniformity, as knights were generally dependent upon and at the service of one lord only. In France, the situation was much more variable; knights typically enjoyed more autonomy, and could even serve multiple lords simultaneously. In Italy, where cities were not enfeoffed, men who served in the state militia on horseback were defined as knights. See again *Knights at Court* (p. 19, p. 34).

If the knight had only belonged to a military context, this civilizing process would not have happened. But his civil ambitions and status brought him into contact with the very different world of government, administered by well-educated clerics whose norms, even in secular circumstances, were shaped by their religious background and literary education. The meeting-place of knight and cleric was the royal or princely court, where both had their place in the prince's service.⁴⁹

In the ecosystem of the court, clerics were the ones to distill the precepts of courtliness and knights were in turn eager to consume and reproduce the courtly ideals modelled by clerics.

These values were not of vital importance to knights alone; they were of similar relevance to nobles as well. This brings an issue of some historical debate to the fore: what was the difference between the knight and the noble? A noble was one whose status was dependent upon lineage, while the knight's status relied upon his military deeds and social recognition through knighting. However, by the late Middle Ages the knight's social and legal standing increasingly resembled that of the noble. Prosperous knights hoping to pass on their successes to their progeny looked to the example of the nobility, and so by the mid twelfth century lineage had become a prerequisite for entrance into knighthood.⁵⁰ The case of Florence provides a unique example of the link between nobles and knights, as nobles readily coopted knighthood:

La dignità di cavaliere è il primo gradino della gerarchia feudale: tutti, prima di andare innanzi ad esser conti, marchesi, duchi, capitani passano necessariamente per esso; ma

⁴⁹ Richard Barber: *The Knight and Chivalry*, Rochester: Boydell Press, 1995, p. 67.

⁵⁰ Franco Cardini comments upon the confusion surrounding knighthood and the moves made to concretize it: "Dal punto di vista propriamente sociale, quello cavalleresco è uno 'strato' che fino a gran parte del XII secolo resta piuttosto confuso e incerto [...] Molte sono le condizioni socioeconomiche e financo giuridiche che possono costituire la base d'una concreta esperienza cavalleresca: la cavalleria, alla quale si accede per cooptazione, è una società 'aperta.' Ma nella seconda età del XII secolo si andò affermando... il principio che fossero solo i discendenti di cavalieri ad avere il diritto di cingere a loro volta cintura e sproni dorati [...] E del resto non doveva mai essere stato troppo facile distinguere chi veramente era *chevalier*, *Ritter*, chi aveva cioè ricevuto l'addobbamento, da chi tale non era. La cavalleria non era mai stata né un ceto sociale né una classe giuridica; era semmai una *fraternitas* iniziatico-rituale di compartecipi d'una medesima etica, d'una medesima mentalità, di aspiranti a un commune genere di vita" (*Quell'antica festa crudele: Guerra e cultura della guerra dall'età feudale alla grande rivoluzione*, Firenze: Sansoni: 1982, p. 20).

non tutti vanno al di là della prima stazione: ogni barone è cavaliere, ma non ogni cavaliere è barone, in quello il grado di cavaliere è assorbito in quello maggiore di barone e scompare; in questo rimane semplice, solo.⁵¹

The fact that every noble was a knight signifies a special interest in (or perhaps a certain identification with) knighthood. Such was the relationship between knighthood and nobility that, in Florence, houses were considered magnate if they had had a knight in the past twenty years.⁵² Indeed, the rising nobles of Florence, in contrast to ancient noble clans, were in a position to make deliberate choices of self-fashioning. As such, many Florentine knights were “titled merchants or bankers, men who might have country estates but earned their living through commerce”; for them, “knighthood was a combination of military training and courtly and chivalric manners and style.”⁵³ As the social landscape of Florence changed, so too did the conceptions of nobility and knighthood, as urban nobles sought to carve out their own important place in the community.⁵⁴ The development of the knight – how he was distinguished from others, the culture to which he belonged, the special recognition he enjoyed – illustrates the figure’s complexity. With some contextualization of his historical identity, we see that the template of the strong man distilled into the word “cavaliere” is not at all straightforward taxonomically, but is rather dense and complex. I would like to touch upon some historical considerations that help to illustrate the defining characteristics of nobility in medieval Italy.

⁵¹ Gaetano Salvemini: *La dignità cavalleresca nel Comune di Firenze e altri scritti*, Feltrinelli Editore, 1972, p.107.

⁵² See Carol Lansing: *The Florentine Magnates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 155

⁵⁴ Lansing neatly summarizes: “For Italian urban nobles, chivalry and knighthood were a means of self-definition. A man spent lavishly to have his son dubbed a knight not to justify the young man’s status but rather to define it. Expensive gear, elaborate ceremonial, and courtly style could set them apart from the *popolo*, and link them with the courts of Europe and the upper reaches of the nobility [...] Patricians defined themselves through knightly behavior; social mobility was a matter of style as well as wealth” (*ibid.*, p. 160).

In the broader European context, feudal power was the foundation of the nobility, whose status and entitlement were made hereditary. Nonetheless, the notion that lineage could *ipso facto* guarantee nobility was only part of the equation, as many other factors could be attributed to the noble class. Giovanni Villani's *Cronica* provides clear insight into several important factors:

If we go through Villani's list of noble Guelph and Ghibelline families in the early thirteenth century, we find not only families such as the Uberti and the Giandonati, which had been represented in the consulate before it was abolished at the end of the twelfth century, owned towers in the city, and counted knights among their members, but also families such as the Buondelmonti, which descended from the feudal nobility of the *contado*. Lineage and a tradition of high office holding were no doubt determining factors in identifying noble families; knighthood could serve to distinguish nobles from commoners; and the possession of towers and palaces, though not confined to the nobility, could be used as an additional distinguishing mark. So could landed property in the Florentine territory, especially when rights of feudal jurisdiction were attached to it. Again, wealth, whether or not invested in land, was not by itself a criterion of nobility, although it was an important contributory element. There were great *popolani* families which were wealthier than noble families, and like these owned towers in the city. The relationship between nobility and wealth was a major theme in the discussions on the notions of nobility [...] In an increasingly prosperous trading and industrial community such as Florence, the effect of wealth on social status was also a major political problem.⁵⁵

Ultimately, a combination of some or all of these factors – land or tower ownership, wealth, knighthood, lineage – were common to nobles, yet they did not necessarily guarantee noble status. Furthermore, while there were indeed families that could boast eminent ancestors, the fact remained that there were those who were able to elevate their status without such claims of elite lineage. In the case of Florence, the merchant class – with its increasing wealth and influence – infiltrated the previously impenetrable nobility;⁵⁶ the tensions that resulted from this

⁵⁵ Nicolai Rubinstein: *Studies in Italian History in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Edited by Giovanni Ciappelli, *Edizioni di storia e letteratura*, vol. 1, 2004, p. 170.

⁵⁶ Historian John Larner underlines the example of the Bardi family as illustrative of the ennobling of the merchant class: "There is some dispute among students of Italian society as to how far in this period the aristocracy has, in the great capitalist centres, merged with the upper

intermingling were reflected in various literature from the period, perhaps most biting in *Inf.* XVI when Dante laments about “La gente nuova e i sùbiti guadagni / orgoglio e dismisura han generata, / Fiorenza, in te, sì che tu già ten piagni” (v. 73-75).⁵⁷

Outside of Florence, a case study from the Kingdom of Naples provides a fascinating variation of the issue. In July of 1347, Queen Joanna I approved a request to carry out a fiscal census; *nobili* and *popolari* were traditionally placed in different tax brackets. Twenty-two citizens of Bitonto appealed to the queen, saying that even though they had been placed in the *popolare* bracket, they were indeed nobles. To support their claim, they stated that some had been noble for a long time, while others had recently risen in rank; they testified that none of them performed any manual work or trade. Joanna ruled in their favor and granted that “noble customs were worth more than noble blood.”⁵⁸ Thus it was not inconceivable for those without noble lineage to join the ranks of the *nobili*, provided that they did not practice any kind of mechanical trade and lived according to a certain lifestyle. Historical anecdotes such as these serve not only to illustrate the variable and perplexing conceptions of nobility in this period, but also to problematize the notion of the nobility as a stable and invariable social class.

While these conceptions of how nobility might be achieved were not rigid, there were established social virtues that all nobles were expected to practice, namely courtesy and liberality

bourgeoisie into an urban patriciate with common cultural ideals. Most probably, despite any economic differences, the sentiments and intellectual background of the two classes were the same. There was frequent intermarriage between them, and often a considerable aping of aristocratic modes of life by the bourgeoisie. Great merchant houses, such as the Bardi, bought up the lands and castles of impoverished noblemen, acquired coats of arms, and sought to live a life of feudal splendor.” See *Culture and Society in Italy, 1290-1420* (New York: Scribner, 1971, p. 27).

⁵⁷ *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Mondadori, 2009.

⁵⁸ See Francesco Senatore and Pierluigi Terenzi, “Aspects of Social Mobility in the Towns of the Kingdom of Naples,” in *Social Mobility in Medieval Italy: (1100-1500)*, edited by Isabella Lazzarini and Sandro Carocci, Viella, 2018, p. 251.

(“cortesia” and “liberalità”). Courtesy is a concept whose complexity is reflected in the conflation of terms frequently used to describe it. Chivalry, courtliness, courtesy, and *curialitas* – how does one distinguish these terms, if they are in fact distinct from one another? Both lexically and conceptually, courtesy’s ancestor is *curialitas*, a code of conduct fashioned by clerics operating within the court, who were known as *curiales*:

*Courtoisie... and cortesia are the vernacular code words for a type of conduct that the medieval cleric/courtier fashioned for himself on the basis of ancient ideals of the Greek asteios anér (urban) ... and the Roman urbanus, endowed with urbanitas, as opposed to rusticus.*⁵⁹

The defining characteristics of courtesy were *elegantia morum* (elegance of manners), which called for “*disciplina* (self-restraint), *urbanitas* (entailing eloquence), *kalokagathia* (harmony of inner and outer man), and [...] *decorum, facetia, hilaritas/jocunditas*.”⁶⁰ It was perhaps inevitable that these ideals would merge with other esteemed traits of the knight and the noble, given their shared impetus to provide a unifying set of social conventions to inhabitants of the court:

Thanks to what they had in common, the ethos of curiality eventually merged with that of courtliness, and so did their respective nomenclatures, the latter being conspicuously characterized by a more marked reliance on noble qualities of liberality (Prov. *largueza*, Fr. *Largesse*) and frankness (Fr. *franchise*, “frank bearing”)[...] There was a logical as well as factual connection among curiality/courtliness, courtesy (including courtly love), and speculation on civilized manners – all the qualities, that is, of the knightly character and chivalric gentleman, later to be generalized into the civilized gentleman. It has been observed that the most famous treatise on courtly love, Andreas Capellanus’s *De amore* (ca. 1180?), frequently uses *curialitas* to mean courtesy, and that one early manuscript of it bears the title “*Liber amoris et curtesie*.” Kenelm Foster declared this a fitting title, since “Andreas’s principal theme is love as the way to acquire the qualities which should distinguish a gentleman.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Aldo Scaglione: *Knights at Court*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ Scaglione, *Knights at Court*, p. 50. See also C. Stephen Jaeger’s *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); chapter eight, “The Language of Courtesy,” deals in particular with these terms.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

One thus observes an evolution and amalgamation of ideals, beginning with the *curialitas* of the clerics at court, then merging with knightly and noble qualities under their respective rubrics of chivalry and courtesy.

In conjunction with courtesy, liberality was another defining characteristic of the aristocracy which enjoyed a complex and ancient pedigree:

When writing about or engaging in [liberality]... aristocrats of the central Middle Ages were engaging not just with popular traditions and scriptural injunctions to charity, but also with a highly moralized, literary tradition inherited from Greek and Roman antiquity.⁶²

The imperative to share one's wealth generously and conspicuously can be traced back to the writings of Aristotle and the Stoics; the fascination with the ethics of magnanimity continued in subsequent centuries, most notably in Cicero's *De officiis* and in Seneca the Younger's *De beneficiis*. These works were particularly influential in the Middle Ages, as they were not only copied and commented upon in monasteries and cathedral schools but were also quoted extensively in *florilegia* and courtesy books.⁶³ Aristocrats certainly stood to benefit politically and socially from the practice of largesse, but they had to be ever mindful: the degradation of liberality into prodigality could swiftly destroy all of the social and political capital they had so carefully cultivated.⁶⁴ Through a consideration of these attributes, the vague notion of the courteous and liberal man becomes the specific figure of the aristocrat.

⁶² Lars Kjær: *The Medieval Gift and the Classical Tradition: Ideals and the Performance of Generosity in Medieval England, 1100–1300*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Cicero insists that liberality is defined by moderation in one's giving, while prodigality is characterized by reckless and excessive throwing away of precious resources.

As we have done for the strong man and the courteous man, let us turn to the wise man, understood to be the cleric. Broadly speaking, the status of the cleric was rather ill-defined, as he existed somewhere between the realm of laity and clergy.⁶⁵ Technically speaking, men who had been tonsured and received some degree of schooling were considered clerics and could therefore easily progress into a full-fledged ecclesiastical career. A cleric could be an educated priest; he could be a secular scholar; he could be a mix of a scholar and a courtier (with or without priestly ordination). Within the context of Cara's question, it is safe to assume she is not referring to the educated priest breed of cleric,⁶⁶ so let us consider some aspects of the secular cleric and the courtier-cleric.

When considering the figure of the cleric in the context of amatory debates, it may come as little surprise that the cleric typically wins the debate: these clerical authors would be motivated to "[buttress] their own social status."⁶⁷ In this genre, the cleric is famous for seducing women while their lovers, usually knights, are away, and they are depicted as enjoying a privileged social status and relative wealth (which naturally enables them to engage in displays

⁶⁵ "The secular clergy, in fact represent a kind of blank space on our conceptual map of the Middle Ages. We take them for granted, but we do not have a working model that explains their activities and ideals. We all seem to know what secular clerics were not: they were neither monks nor laymen, though they were accused of acting too much like the latter. In fact, the construction of clerical identity seems to have been effected, by twelfth-century writers and modern historians alike, through moral criticism, satire, and simple opposition with the cloistered orders. The secular clergy... bore the brunt of a large proportion of contemporary social criticism." See John Cotts, *The Clerical Dilemma: Peter of Blois and Literate Culture in the Twelfth Century* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 11-12.

⁶⁶ This is not to say that Boccaccio shies away from depicting men of the cloth engaging in sexual relationships with women. I would argue that he is not referring to an ordained cleric here: while he generally clarifies the identity of such men by referring to their ecclesiastic titles (*monaco, prete, abate, frate*, etc.), he does not use any of these words.

⁶⁷ Aptly put by Teodolinda Barolini, citing Charles Oulmount, in her essay, "The Scholar and the Widow (*Decameron* VIII.7): Corrupt Appetite and Moral Failure in Society's Intellectual Elite" (in *The Decameron Eighth Day in Perspective*, edited by William Robins. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, p. 157).

of liberality),⁶⁸ while the knight is shown to be poor and overworked. One of the more famous instances of such amatory debates, the *Altercatio Phyllidis et Florae* in the *Carmina Burana*, goes as far as to say that, without clerics, knights would not know how to love at all:

My cleric is preeminent in knowledge
And instruction on the power of Venus
And the god of love.
It is through the cleric
That the knight has become a follower of Venus (92.41).⁶⁹

Transitioning from the literary to the historical, the position of the cleric at court was one of considerable influence. The earliest medieval courts were conceived of as formational centers staffed by teaching clerics whose main objective was to form “good candidates for positions at court”⁷⁰; from there emerged cathedral schools and, ultimately, universities. It was the duty of clerics to provide a well-rounded liberal arts education in ethics, rhetoric, literature, science, and civilized manners, yet as their role matured and evolved within the court, so too did their reputation. Owing to their erudition and didactic role, court clerics were often the natural choice as governmental advisors and, as such, the roles of the cleric and courtier began to meld. Such proximity to power inevitably generated strong reactions from others at court, and there are numerous examples of literature from the period that view the figure of the cleric-courtier with suspicion at best, utter disdain at worst. Peter of Blois, a secular cleric who served in both the courts of Henry II and William II of Sicily, wrote one of the most well-known invectives against

⁶⁸ Ibid. Barolini notes the traditional association in the debates of liberality with the cleric, and underlines Boccaccio’s unwillingness to replicate such depictions; rather, clerical avarice is a recurring theme in his works.

⁶⁹ *Love Lyrics from the Carmina Burana*, trans. Patrick Gerard Walsh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1993).

⁷⁰ *Knights at Court*, 47.

court clerics⁷¹ yet, in the majority of his writings, he demonstrated a relatively favorable view of the cleric at court. In one of his poems he stages a debate between a man who decries the court for its immorality and a cleric; when his opponent urges him to abandon the court, the cleric replies:

What binds us to the court
is more delicate clothing,
food more exquisite
and more refined,
and there I'm feared, not afraid,
and can increase
the estate my parents left me,
and thunder out great words;
I'm tied there by the counsels
of the rich, the chances
of dignities,
which the friendship
of magnates can bestow.⁷²

Beyond the superficial seductions of fine clothing and refined food, the cleric is tantalized by the influence he now exerts, as his scholastic training had earned him a privileged place at court. His words are heeded by the rich and powerful, he enjoys respect, and he is given a rare chance at upward social mobility.

⁷¹ Epistle 14, which made quite the splash in courtly circles, excoriates the court for its avarice and jealousy; he notably coined the term *miseriae curialium*, which was later picked up by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) in his own anti-court treatise *De curialium miseriis epistola*. In any case, after much pushback, Peter of Blois recanted his original criticisms in a later text (cf. Epistle 150), granting that he understood and respected the importance of the cleric as a royal advisor. On Epistle 14 see Aldo Scaglione, *Knights at Court*, Peter Dronke, "Peter of Blois and Poetry at the Court of Henry II," in *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976), and C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210*, p. 58.

⁷² See Ralph Turner, "Toward a Definition of the *Curialis*: Educated Court Cleric, Courtier, Administrator, or 'New Man'", in *Medieval Prosopography*, Western Michigan University, 1994, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 8-9.

The cleric – much like his amatory opponent, the knight – engaged in a great deal of self-fashioning as he sought to carve out a place for himself at court. While the definition of the cleric was relatively variable, the function he served in developing and disseminating the courtly-chivalric-courteous principles was consistent. In this sense, he played a crucial role in the creation of the ideals that ultimately defined the Middle Ages. Thus our vision of the wise man comes into sharp focus, and we can more fully appreciate the figure of the cleric.

Historical contextualization illuminates not only the defining traits of these three categories of men, but also demonstrates the cleric's incredible influence; indeed, the cleric was responsible for fashioning and modelling the courtly virtues the knight and the aristocrat sought to embody. These considerations bring us back to the *questione*, as the queen argues that the wise man is the only sensible choice for a woman seeking a discreet lover:

Ma noi non negheremo però che i savi non conoscano il male, e pur lo fanno; ma diremo che essi per quello non perdono il senno, con ciò sia cosa che, qualora essi vorranno, con la ragione ch'elli hanno, la volontà raffrenare, elli nell'usato senno si rimarranno, guidando i loro movimenti con debito e diritto stile. E in questa maniera o sempre o lungamente fieno i loro amori celati, e così senza alcuna dubbiosa sollecitudine quello che d'uno poco savio, non tanto sia forte o cortese, non avverrà: e se forse avviene che pure tale amore si palesi, con cento avvedimenti o riturerà il savio gli occhi e gl'intendimenti de' parlanti, o provvederà al salvamento dell'onore della donna amata e del suo. E se mestieri fia alla salute, l'aiuto del savio non può fallire. Quello del forte viene meno con l'aiutante, e gli amici per liberalità acquistati sogliono nelle avversità ritornare nulli. E chi sarà quella con sì poca discrezione che a tal partito si rechi, che si manifesto aiuto le bisogni, o che se il suo amore si scuopre, domandi fama d'aver amato un uomo forte overo liberale? Niuna credo ne fosse. Amisi adunque il più savio, sperando lui dovere essere in ciascuno caso più utile ché alcuno degli altri (4.28).

Yet we will not deny that the wise man knows good from evil and does evil anyway, but this does not mean that he loses his ability to reason. Thus his reason enables him to use his will to control his desires, and his wisdom will remain, guiding his actions with necessary and correct style. In this way their love will be kept secret for great lengths of time (forever, even); but that, barring some doubtful attentiveness, will not happen with a man of little intelligence, even if he is strong or courteous. But if perhaps such an affair were to be exposed, the wise man with a hundred clever maneuvers will either obstruct the eyes and the understanding of those who would speak of it, or would equip himself to defend the honor of his lover and himself. If there is a need for security, the wise man

cannot fail. The aid of the strong man is of little help, and friends bought through largesse often flee in times of adversity. And what kind of woman is she who, through lack of discretion, finds herself in a position of exposing her need for help so openly? Or if her love is discovered, what kind of woman hopes to become famous for having loved a strong man or a liberal man? I don't believe such a woman exists. Love, then, the wisest man, in the hopes that he will, in every situation, be the most useful of them all.

Fiammetta's response again underlines the risks associated with a secret love affair, and her statements about the cleric reflect the realities of his professional formation and position. Of the three men, the cleric is the only one who, by virtue of his education, possesses both the wisdom to discern right from wrong⁷³ and the ability to reason. Reason, in turn, enables him to moderate his desires, to behave with "debito e diritto stile" (which calls to mind the civilized codes of conduct that the clerical class was so influential in formulating), and to keep his affairs secret for long periods of time. Furthermore, she says, the cleric is equipped to both preempt and dismantle the attacks of those who would seek to dishonor him and his lover. Given his erudition and important role, it is not surprising that the cleric at court would have the reputation of one who handles himself adroitly in complex social situations, and one imagines that his "cento avvedimenti" could effectively protect his lover from the jealous rumormongers of the court.

Fiammetta wastes few words in explaining why the knight can do little to protect his lover, as physical strength and bravery in combat would have no utility in social situations like these. The aristocrat is similarly unequipped, as his acts of liberality essentially purchase

⁷³ Fiammetta makes a point to say that, in spite of this, the cleric still can behave immorally. The connection between learning and virtue is thus ruptured, as Boccaccio implies that scholarly pursuits and an education in ethics do not in and of themselves render the cleric a more moral man. Boccaccio, writing from among the ranks of the cleric class, is interested in exploring the ethical shortcomings of his own tribe, and does so quite notably in the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*. Barolini's essay on *Dec. 8.7* is dedicated entirely to this issue, as she closely examines the *Decameron's* longest (and arguably most unsettling) tale to highlight the ways in which Boccaccio uncovers the corruption of clerics.

friends; it is worth noting that she specifically uses the word “acquistati” to signal the superficial and transactional nature of these relationships.⁷⁴ This depiction of the aristocrat sheds light on yet another social danger, namely these shallow, *quid pro quo* kinds of relationships, which were no doubt common in a courtly setting where displays of largesse, the incessant desire for social advancement, and the currying of favor were standard, albeit precarious, pursuits.

In the final lines of her rebuttal, the queen returns to the issue of discretion, in order to pass harsh judgment on women who hope to win some kind of public recognition for engaging in dalliances with knights or aristocrats. It is worth noting that she does not include clerics here, perhaps implying that a woman might be more inclined to pursue an affair with a flashy knight or aristocrat than with the understated cleric.⁷⁵ By stating that she is certain that no woman would ever engage in such injudicious behaviors, Fiammetta reiterates how a disregard for secrecy poses a serious social risk: a woman’s reputation was directly tied to her lover’s capacity for discretion.

In light of the cleric’s adaptability and social intelligence, the queen concludes that the cleric is the most useful (“utile”). The *questione* evokes a courtly world full of social perils that

⁷⁴ This exact sentiment was echoed in numerous other medieval texts; Alan de Lille notably wrote in *De planctu naturae*: “Even if the rich man scattered all his wealth, if he poured out gifts, if he longed for fame and if he tried to win favor by gifts, yet unless good judgment is the originator, guide and charioteer of these gifts, there will be no fruit from them, since gifts, unless made with propriety and discretion, do not earn praise but rather buy it. In return for a gift there is often tendered a hypocritical accolade, a deceptive pretense of fame, a false aping of praise, a shadowy honor, the shade of favor” (trans. James Sheridan, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980, Prose VI, meter 7). This is also the fundamental position of Dante in his *canzone*, *Poscia ch’Amor*.

⁷⁵ The *Altercatio Phyllide et Florae* yields an unflattering portrait of clerics, as Phyllis derides their general physical appearance: “I grant no elegance to the cleric, with his fat bulk bulging all around him! [...] When the hour of a feast day brings joy to the world, the cleric then makes his quite disreputable appearance. His hair is tonsured, and his clothes are black, and he bears the traces of his gloomy presence.” *Love Lyrics from the Carmina Burana*, trans. Patrick Gerard Walsh, strophes 16 and 29, respectively.

could only be navigated through the careful cultivation of particular social virtues. The ills and the antidotes are clearly delineated: education and reason could temper immoderate or immoral behavior, discretion and privacy could be prophylactics against reputation-ruining gossip, and social intelligence and thoughtfulness would provide greater protection than physical strength or materialistic alliances. The educated cleric, who had helped shape the culture of the court, would have had the cunning necessary to endure its social perils; the knight and the aristocrat, while they tried to emulate him, would never match his erudition and influence. By comparing the knight, the cleric, and the aristocrat, Boccaccio demonstrates the cleric's amatory merits and, more significantly, underscores his unique advantage at court.

2.2 Resolved: The Marquis of Saluzzo Chose Correctly

On the most superficial level, the final tale of the *Decameron* is a character study either of an abusive husband or of a preternaturally patient wife. In recent decades, scholars have revisited the tale and, through the lens of historicism, have gained new insights into the ways in which Boccaccio used the novella to depict the social and legal systems that enabled Gualtieri to so cruelly oppress Griselda.⁷⁶ The eighth *questione* shows a young Boccaccio meditating on these systems – social class, family, and marriage – as he has Pola pose the following question to the queen:

⁷⁶ Teodolinda Barolini's analysis of *Dec.* 10.10 has provided crucial insights into its central issues of family, dowry, and class: "The Marquis of Saluzzo, or the Griselda Story Before It Was Hijacked: Calculating Matrimonial Odds in *Decameron* 10.10." *Mediaevalia*, vol. 34, 2013, p. 23-55. Barolini cites other useful historicized considerations of the novella, namely: Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "The Griselda Complex: Dowry and Marriage Gifts in the Quattrocento" in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 213-246; and Carlo Evasio Patrucco, "La storia nella leggenda di Griselda" in *Piccolo archivio storico dell'antico marchesato di Saluzzo*, Anno I (Saluzzo: Bovo e Baccolo, 1901), pp. 279-305.

voglio da voi sapere quale di due donne deggia più tosto da un giovane essere amata, piacendo igualmente a lui amendune, o quella di loro che è di nobile sangue, e di parenti possente, e copiosa d'averne molto più che il giovane, o l'altra la quale né è nobile né ricca né di parenti abondevole quanto il giovane (4.47).

I wish to know from you which of two women should be loved by a young man who likes them both equally: a woman of noble lineage, powerful family and riches greater than the young man, or the other one, who is neither noble nor rich nor blessed with a family as established as the young man's.

Dec. 10.10 focuses precisely on this issue of unions between members of two distinct social classes, and it demonstrates the potentially devastating consequences of pursuing such relationships. By weighing the relative merits of women from disparate social classes, the eighth *questione* effectively lays the foundation for the *Decameron*'s ultimate tale. My examination will thus place this *questione* and *Dec.* 10.10 in dialogue, historicizing the social issues Boccaccio evokes in both, and concluding with a consideration of the anti-courtly underpinnings of the *questione*.

The *questione* is fundamentally an exploration of what men stood to gain from marriage, how social rank and family could protect women from exploitative men, and, most significantly, how these concerns were ultimately symptoms of an oppressive and dysfunctional sociolegal system. To this end, I wish to begin by clarifying two points: first, why it is appropriate to consider both marriage and illicit sexual relationships when reading the *questione* and, second, why it is important to highlight the commonalities between the *questione* and *Dec.* 10.10.

While there is no explicit reference to marriage in the question or in its response, the key metrics Pola uses to measure the two women, namely nobility, wealth, and kin, situate the *questione* at the intersection of the societal systems governing marriage. As we will see, the concerns Boccaccio raises (how a woman's male relatives can prevent the young man from courting her, how he must rely upon an arsenal of status symbols to win a noble woman over,

and how the love of a socially superior woman can garner great prestige) are just as applicable to marriage as to an illicit affair, if not more so. The consideration of marriage brings us back to *Dec.* 10.10. While the *questione* focuses on themes that are central to the *Decameron*'s final *novella*, no one has ever linked the two; the comparison of *Dec.* 10.10 to the eighth *questione* will undoubtedly nuance Day 10 criticism. Drawing attention to the ways in which the *questione* foreshadows *Dec.* 10.10 not only enhances our understanding of Boccaccio's authorial agenda, but also provides another compelling example of how history can enrich our comprehension of the social systems with which our author was so concerned.

Let us return to the *questione*. The queen argues that the young man ought to pursue the woman of higher status, couching her answer in philosophical and courtly ideals:

Noi giudicheremmo che quantunque la donna sia ricca, grande e nobile più che il giovane, in qualunque grado o dignità si sia, ch'ella deggia più tosto dal giovane essere amata che quella che alcuna cosa è meno di lui, però che l'animo dell'uomo a seguire l'alte cose fu creato, dunque avanzarsi e non avvilirsi dee. Appresso ne dice un volgare proverbio: "Egli è meglio ben desiare che mal tenere." Però amisi la più nobile donna, e la meno nobile con giusta ragione si rifiuti per nostro giudizio (4.48).

We argue that however rich, exalted and noble the woman may be, in any status or rank, she is more deserving of the young man's love than any woman who is below him; since man's soul was created to pursue higher things, he must better himself rather than debase himself. So goes the saying: "It is better to desire well than to obtain poorly." Therefore, in accordance with our judgment, let him love the nobler woman and rightly reject the lesser one.

The notion of love as an inherently ennobling enterprise was central to the courtly love tradition, as I discussed with regards to the seventh *questione*. Since the eighth *questione* comes directly after a debate between Fiammetta and Caleon concerning love's transformative potentialities, the queen's response to Pola signals that she will continue to base her responses in abstract courtly precepts. Pola's rebuttal, however, yanks the discourse away from the queen's philosophical musings and insists that she deal with the question in more concrete terms:

Noi naturalmente tutti più i brevi che i lunghi affanni desideriamo: e che minore e più breve affanno sia ad acquistare l'amore della meno nobile che quello della più, è manifesto [...] Appresso, amando un uomo una donna di maggiore condizione che egli non è, molti pericoli ne gli possono seguire: né però ultimamente n'ha maggior diletto che d'una minore. Noi veggiamo ad una gran donna avere molti parenti, molta famiglia, e tutti riguardare ad essa sì come solleciti guardatori del suo onore, de' quali se alcuno di questo amore s'avvedesse, com'io già dissi, all'amante grave pericolo ne può seguire: quello che della meno nobile non potrebbe così di leggieri avvenire. I quali pericoli ciascuno a suo potere dee fuggire, con ciò sia cosa che chi riceve s'ha il danno, e chi 'l sa se ne ride, dicendo: "Ben gli sta; dove si metteva egli ad amare?" [...] E ancora è credibile cosa che la gentil donna poco il prezzerà, però che essa medesima desidererà d'amare sì alto uomo o maggiore com'ella è donna, e non minore di sé: e così costui tardi o non mai al suo disio perverrà. E della minore gli avverrà il contrario, però ch'ella si gloriierà d'essere amata da tanto amante, e ingegnerassi di piacergli per nutrire l'amore. E dove questo non fosse, la potenza dell'amante potrà senza paura fare il suo disio adempiere: però io terrei che amare si dovesse la minore più tosto che l'altra (4.49).

We all wish for trials to be short rather than long, and it is clear that winning the love of the less woman is a shorter and easier task [...] When a man loves a woman of higher status than himself, many dangers may arise, yet he will enjoy no greater pleasure with her than he would with the lesser woman. For we see that a great woman will have many kinsmen and a large family, and they will all serve as guardians of her honor; if any of them were to become aware of this love, as I have already said, it would put the lover in great danger. This would be far less likely to happen with the less noble woman. A man should do everything in his power to avoid such perils, not only because he would have to suffer the consequences but also because those who come to learn of it will laugh at him and mockingly say: "He got what he deserved; what gave him the right to love such a woman?" [...]. Furthermore, it is probable that the noble woman will love him but little, since she would rather love a man of greater – not lesser – station than herself. And so this man will have to wait quite a while to achieve his desire, if he ever achieves it. The opposite will happen with the lesser woman, since she will delight in the love of such a man and will work to please him and nurture their love. And if this were not to be the case, the man can, by virtue of his supremacy, fulfill his desires without any trepidation. Therefore, I maintain that he ought to love the lesser woman instead of the greater one.

Pola opens with a broad claim about human nature, but she immediately uses it to pivot into a narrower, more specific discourse on the logistical issues a man would face when loving a woman of higher status. The first problem she underlines is family, namely that a woman of great nobility will be surrounded by a network of watchful relatives who will guard her honor. That families would have made every effort to preserve the virginity of their unmarried women

is not remarkable, yet a historicized consideration of this fact brings to light larger considerations of family and honor in medieval Florence.

The fixation with women's virginity was rooted in misogynistic traditions perpetuated by Christianity, yet it was also a result of the larger societal imperative to establish well-defined lineages; women who had children outside of marriage posed a major threat to such systems. Furthermore, an unmarried woman no longer in possession of her virginity would be both socially and financially devastating to her family, as such women were considered totally undesirable within the context of the marriage market. The damage to a family's reputation, compounded by the monetary losses they would suffer if they could not marry off their daughter, thus made it crucial for them to scrupulously guard the chastity of unmarried female kin.

In considering the ways in which family exerted control over the sexual and marital opportunities available to their female kin, other questions arise: to what degree, if any, were women able to choose the men they would marry? What calculations did families make as they selected partners for their daughters, and how did they proceed in brokering these unions? The answers to such questions help paint a more vivid portrait of women and family in medieval Italy, and they provide insight into Boccaccio's unique response to these social realities.

Women's role in choosing their own partners seems to have been relatively limited. As Julius Kirshner notes: "The Florentine prenuptial scenario was premised on the primacy of the family – on the cultural conviction that marriages are generated by families, in contrast to today's prevailing conviction ... that families are generated by marriages."⁷⁷ It was the responsibility of a woman's father (or, if he was no longer alive, her mother or another male

⁷⁷ *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2015, p. 21.

relative) to seek the services of a *sensale* (marriage broker), who would set about finding a husband whose “social worth approximated that of [the woman’s] family.”⁷⁸ Once the *sensale* had identified a potential match and the families had initiated preliminary negotiations, a meeting would be arranged between the two families in which they would formally approve the marriage and establish the amount of the dowry. A public betrothal would take place in a church shortly thereafter, during which the legal protector of the bride (her father, usually) would pledge her future consent to marry; the bride-to-be was notably absent from these *giuramenti*. Kirshner explains:

Florentine merchant families intent on preserving their honor were successful in keeping contact between *sponsai/sponsi de futuro* to a minimum. The constraints on the sexuality of upper-class unmarried women, on the other hand, contrast with the lack of constraints on low-status rural and urban youth, for whom “premarital intercourse was evidently accepted and widespread, as long as relations were initiated with an intent to marry, or at least create a stable bond.” High-status male predators, however, habitually seduced gullible low-status girls and women with promises to marry at a future time, which they had no intentions of keeping.⁷⁹

In contrast to the higher-status women, lower-status women were, presumably, guarded less diligently; we can infer this since it was not uncommon for them to engage in premarital sex. Furthermore, we might consider the prevalence of high-status men’s seductions of lower-class women a tangible manifestation of Pola’s assertion that wooing the lesser woman would be a simple task. The events of *Dec. 10.10* strikingly depict this same notion, as Gualtieri does not have to go to any great lengths to court Griselda or to convince her family to allow him to marry her. Griselda’s impoverished existence is reflected in her pitiable family structure, as the only relative who might protect her honor is her father, a lowly shepherd. Even though he readily

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. Kirshner quotes Michael Roche’s essay, “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy” in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, edited by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998, pp. 150-170.

gave her to Gualtieri in marriage, he fully expected the marquis to cast her off, so much so that he had kept her tattered clothes in expectation of the day when she would return home in humiliation:

Giannucolo, che creder non avea mai potuto questo esser ver che Gualtieri la figliuola dovesse tener moglie, e ogni dí questo caso aspettando, guardati l'aveva i panni che spogliati s'avea quella mattina che Gualtier la sposò (10.10.48).

Giannùcolo, who had never thought it possible that Gualtieri would keep his daughter as his wife, and was daily expecting this to happen, had preserved the clothes she discarded on the morning Gualtieri had married her.⁸⁰

Boccaccio thus uses the figure of Giannucolo to underscore the inability of lower-class families to effectively defend the honor of their female kin against predatory higher-status men.⁸¹ The plight of Griselda thus dramatically illustrates Pola's claim: women of greater status would be surrounded by relatives diligently protecting her honor, while the woman of lesser status could be more easily exploited. The connection between the *questione* and the *novella* is not seamless – Gualtieri does not exploit Griselda by raping her, but rather takes her as his wife – yet the *questione* provides invaluable insight into Boccaccio's *raison d'être* for *Dec.* 10.10. Boccaccio revisits these issues of class and control in the *Decameron*, inventing the novel figure of Gualtieri: he is not a typical high-class predator who uses sex for control, but instead weaponizes inter-class marriage, using it as a means of exploitation.

⁸⁰ All translations of the *Decameron* are taken from G.H. McWilliam: *The Decameron*, London: Penguin, 1972.

⁸¹ Barolini notes the striking contrast between Griselda and other women within the *Decameron*: “Griselda’s lowliness means that she lacks the network of kin that serves to protect a woman from marital abuse. While in Day 7 Boccaccio shows us adulteresses who turn to their natal families for support, so that their husbands have to keep them in spite of their infidelity, Griselda’s father meekly takes back his faithful daughter after she has born the Marquis two children. Giannucolo seems worse than no kin at all, as though constructed within the economy of the tale to throw Griselda’s full powerlessness into relief.” *Ibid.*, 37.

The relatives of the more noble woman can make it hard for the man to bring his desires to fruition and, if he is caught, they can cause him quite a bit of trouble, Pola says. Interestingly, she makes it a point to emphasize not only the social dangers the family presents, but also the public ridicule a man would be forced to endure if he was discovered. Others would surely learn of his misfortune and would mock him for his foolishness; this blow to his reputation mirrored, in a sense, the public shame a noble woman and her family would face if she were caught in a premarital dalliance. The stakes were certainly much higher for the woman, given the social and financial penalties the loss of her virginity would incur for herself and her family, but one senses Boccaccio trying to suggest – with more than a little irony – that there would be some public shame for the man as well.

Pola goes on to argue that the more noble woman would not want to involve herself with a man of inferior social status, but that she would hope instead to attract the attention of a man above her station. She contends that the man's efforts will ultimately be futile but, if he were to direct his affections away from the cold and fickle noble woman, he would receive a much warmer response from the lesser woman. This woman, Pola says, would take great pride in being loved by a socially superior man and would do everything in her power to please him (“glorierà d'essere amata da tanto amante, e ingegnerassi di piacergli”), echoing the language of *Dec.* 10.10. On the day of the wedding, Gualtieri makes it a point to ask Griselda several pointed questions in the presence of her father:

domandola se ella sempre, togliendola egli per moglie, *s'ingnerebbe di compiacergli e di niuna cosa che egli dicesse o facesse non turbari, e se ella sarebbe obediante e simili altre cose assai, delle quali ella a tutte rispose del sí* (10.10.18) (emphasis mine).

He then asked her whether, if he were to marry her, she would always try to please him and never be upset by anything he said or did, whether she would obey him, and many questions of this sort, to all of which she answered that she would.

It should be noted that these questions were not a necessary component of the marriage ritual or even a form of vow exchange. The narrator states that, after Griselda's satisfactorily answers Gualtieri's questions, they exchange consent before a group of witnesses:

“Signori, costei è colei la quale io intendo che mia moglie sia, dove ella me voglia per marito”; e poi a lei rivolto, che di sé medesima vergognosa e sospesa stava, le disse: “Griselda, vuoi tu per tuo marito?” A cui ella rispose: “Signor mio, sí” (10.10.20-21).

“Gentlemen, this is the woman I intend to marry, provided she will have me as her husband.” Then, turning to Griselda, who was so embarrassed that she hardly knew where to look, he said, “Griselda, will you have me as your wedded husband?” To which she replied: “I will, my lord.”

Setting aside dowries and interfamilial negotiations, the exchange of consent before a witness, or witnesses, was what ultimately rendered a marriage official.⁸² All of this is to say that Gualtieri's questions would not have been a standard component of a legal marriage ceremony but rather they presage the torments he will eventually inflict upon his wife. Gualtieri is confident that, by taking the socially inferior Griselda as his spouse, she will do everything necessary to please him and will acquiesce to his every demand.

To return to Pola's rebuttal: the lack of relatives to protect her and the possibility of elevating her own social standing would render the less noble woman more pliable and more eager to please than her competitor. She chillingly concludes that if the lesser woman does not prove as agreeable as expected, the man's superior status guarantees that he can take what he wishes from the woman without fear of recrimination (“la potenza dell'amante potrà senza paura fare il suo disio adempiere”). There are a couple of ways one might interpret Pola's statement. The more sinister reading implies that the man could rape the less noble woman without penalty,

⁸² The exchange of consent presumed consummation and would be rendered meaningless if this requirement was not fulfilled; so crucial was this component that a failure to consummate was grounds for annulment.

which raises some questions about the legal status of rape. Put succinctly, our modern perspectives on rape, both legally and conceptually, are far removed from those of the Middle

Ages:

Rape was dealt with less straightforwardly by many statutes. Often it appears in catch-all clauses, misleadingly headed 'de adulteriis', regarding a variety of sexual offenses with virgins, wives, and widows. The words in these statutes do not always mean 'rape' in the modern sense: the Latin word *raptus* meant abduction or theft (property too was 'raped'); while *stuprum* cannot securely be translated as rape either, meaning violent sex without consent, given that some statutes talk of *stuprum* with consent [...] 'Rape is a crime of many dimensions', and city statutes on 'rape' usually comprise a number of elements – abduction, the use of force, sexual violation, the possibility of consent – which were considered in various combinations, with distinct penalties [...] Laws on rape/abduction followed the same path towards severity taken by other sex-crimes. The earlier laws provided only financial penalties (often much lighter if the woman was a lower-class woman or a prostitute); those after the mid-fourteenth century provided a much graver penalty (death).⁸³

Even though the legal conceptions of rape were far less clear-cut (and, as a result, rape would not have been prosecuted as extensively as it is today), there were indeed consequences for sexual violence. The fact that the severity of these punishments was correlated with the relative social status of the victim may bolster Pola's assertion that the man could force the lesser woman into sex without fear of punishment.

The other interpretation of Pola's claim is only slightly less disturbing. Perhaps she is not referring specifically to rape but rather to the general ability of the man to use his status to manipulate and control the lesser woman. Perhaps the socially inferior woman willingly enters a relationship with the man but is ultimately not as obedient and eager to please as he would like. In this case, if we apply Pola's reasoning, the man can use whatever tools necessary to manipulate or bully her without fear of recrimination. In other words, the man can behave like

⁸³ See Trevor Dean: "Fathers and Daughters, Marriage Laws and Marriage Disputes in Bologna and Italy, 1200-1500" in *Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650*, edited by Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 87-88.

Gualtieri. Regardless of how we choose to construe her comment, the essence is clear: men who pursue women of lower social status can abuse and exploit them with impunity.

The queen responds to Pola's assertions before advancing her own claims about the superior merits of the nobler woman:

Ben che i piccoli affanni si cerchino da' pigri, da savi sono le cose, che con più affanno s'acquistano, più graziose e dilettevoli tenute: però la minore donna amare ad acquistarla saria, come voi dite, poco affanno, e però poco cara, e brieve l'amore [...] Ma della grande, che con affanno s'acquista, avviene il contrario [...] Ma se volete dire che il dubbio de' parenti ci sia, noi nol neghiamo, e questa è una delle cagioni perch'elli è affanno ad avere l'amore d'una gran donna: ma i discreti con occulta via procedono in tali bisogne, ché non è dubbio che delle grandi e delle piccole donne, ciascuna secondo il suo potere, è amato e guardato l'onore da' parenti [...] Dite ancora mai costui di maggior donna di sé potere venire a fine del suo disio amandola: dicendo che la donna maggiore di sé disidererà d'amare e lui niente pregerà, mostra che ignoto vi sia che il più picciolo uomo, quanto alla naturale virtù, sia di maggiore condizione e di migliore che la maggiore donna del mondo. Dunque, qualunque uomo ella disidererà, di maggiore condizione di sé il disidererà. Fa bene però il virtuoso vivere e 'l vizioso i piccioli grandi, e' grandi piccioli molte volte: non per tanto qualunque donna sarà da qualunque uomo con debito stile sollecitata, senza dubbio a disiderato fine se ne perviene [...] Tanto di bene seguirà a chi maggiore donna di sé amerà, che egli s'ingegnerà, per piacerle, belli costumi avere, di nobili uomini compagnia, ornato e dolce parlare, ardito alle 'mprese e splendido di vestire. E se l'acquisterà, più gloria nell'animo n'avrà e più diletto: e similmente nel parlare della gente sarà essaltato, se non ne gli misviene. Seguasi adunque la più nobile, come avanti dicemmo (4.50).

Lazy men seek short labors, but those goods acquired through hard work are delightful and precious to wise men. Since loving the lesser woman would require less effort, as you say, it will therefore be a love of short duration and little worth [...] But the opposite will occur with the greater woman who must be won over with some determination [...] But if you wish to argue that the man will have to contend with her family, we will not deny it, and this is one of the reasons why gaining her love will require so much effort on the part of the man. Yet discreet men obtain their desires through hidden paths, and there is no doubt that the honor of both privileged and lowly women is guarded by their families according to their status [...] You also claim that the man may never fulfill his desires if he chooses to love the greater woman since she will rebuff him in favor of a man superior to her own station. Here you show yourself to be ignorant, since nature has made it so that even the lowest man will be superior to even the most noble woman in the world. Therefore, any man that a woman may desire will be inherently superior to her. Yet it often happens that a life of virtue or vice can elevate the lowly or humble the great, and any man who courts any woman with proper style will certainly satisfy his desires [...] So much good will come to any man who loves a greater woman since, in order to win her affections, he will possess excellent manners, seek out the company of noble

men, utter sweet and ornate words, undertake great deeds and clothe himself in splendid garments. And if he wins her without any ill fortune, his spirit will revel in even greater glory and delight, and the people will speak highly of him. Therefore, as we said before, let him love the more noble woman.

While a lazy man might prefer to court the lesser woman, a wise man will happily invest time and energy into wooing the more noble woman since, the queen claims, a hard-won affair will last longer and bring greater pleasure. The queen then addresses Pola's more concrete arguments, starting with the issue of family. She grants that the nobler woman will indeed be harder to pursue because of her kinsmen, but she qualifies this statement by saying that families will endeavor to protect their daughters' virginity, regardless of their social class. She admits, however, that their capacity to effectively safeguard the honor of their women is determined by their status ("delle grandi e delle piccole donne, ciascuna secondo il suo potere, è amato e guardato l'onore da' parenti"). The importance of discretion is again emphasized, as Fiammetta declares that a discreet man will always find a way to fulfill his desires. She goes on to refute Pola's claim that a more noble woman will prefer a man who is above her social station by arguing for the universal superiority of men to women. Even as she insists upon men's intrinsic supremacy, she alludes to the mutability of status, saying that over the *longue durée* of life the lowly may be uplifted and the mighty may be humbled, calling to mind the wheel of Fortune. Nobility – inner or outward – is not necessarily a static trait, as Dioneo states at the end of *Dec.*

10.10:

Che si potrà dir qui? se non che anche nelle povere case piovono dal cielo de' divini spiriti, come nelle reali di queglii che sarien piú degni di guardar porci che d'aver sopra uomini signoria (10.10.68).

What more needs to be said, except that celestial spirits may sometimes descend even into the houses of the poor, while there are those in royal palaces who would be better employed as swineherds than as rulers of men?

Indeed, Griselda's virtue remains constant even as her social station fluctuates, ultimately demonstrating the disconnect between inner and outward nobility.

Fiammetta's conclusion, namely that the man will reap many rewards from courting the nobler woman, may come as something of a surprise, as she glowingly enumerates the same courtly accoutrements that she so vehemently decried in the previous *questione*. When Caleon listed the many ennobling traits of love (refined manners, elegant speech, valorous deeds, handsome attire, and so on), the queen refuted every single one and denounced them as superficial displays which served only to mask the inherent worthlessness of love. This is the first of two glaring contradictions in her concluding remarks. The second incongruity lies in her statement that the man who wins the love of the nobler woman will be praised by the people ("nel parlare della gente sar  essaltato"); how can he be publicly praised if he is conducting his affairs with discretion?

I argue that there are two ways we might reconcile these paradoxes. The first is to consider them as a metaphor for the historical realities of courtship. If we consider the rituals and customs surrounding marriage, we find that men would assume significant financial burdens in preparation for a wedding. While the bride's family was responsible for the dowry, the groom was expected to furnish the nuptial chamber and prepare a lavish wardrobe for his bride-to-be.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ This is yet another instance in which history enables us to appreciate Boccaccio's attention to detail. Clothing is a key motif of *Dec.* 10.10, most notably in Gualtieri's public dressing and undressing of Griselda. Setting aside these visceral scenes, Boccaccio also depicts Gualtieri's meticulous preparations for the wedding: "fece tagliare e far pi  robe belle e ricche al dosso d'una giovane la quale della persona gli pareva che la giovinetta la quale avea proposto di sposare; e oltre a questo apparecchi  cinture e anella e una ricca e bella corona e tutto ci  che a novella sposa si richiedea" ("he caused a quantity of fine, rich robes to be tailored to fit a girl whose figure appeared to match that of the young woman he intended to marry; and lastly he laid in a number of rings and ornamental belts, along with a precious and beautiful crown, and everything else that a bride could possibly need"). Indeed, all of these accessories have historical relevance: the ring was the symbol *par excellence* of marriage, the crown signified

Contemporaneous figures from across the social spectrum confirm the magnitude of such expenses:

Paulus de Castro, who taught and practiced law in early-fifteenth-century Florence, emphasized that in both Florence and Bologna the outfitting of the bride and expenses for the wedding consumed the whole dowry even before the couple had exchanged marriage vows and rings [...] Planning for the marriage of her sons, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi despaired that “the world is in a sorry state, and never has so much expense been loaded on the backs of women as now. No dowry is so big that when the girl goes out she does not have the whole of it on her back, between silks and jewels.” With righteous indignation, San Bernardino of Siena reproved wives with small dowries who demanded from their husbands a precious woolen cloth (*rosado*) in return. He also reproved brides with large dowries (*le grandi dote*) who sought parity by cravenly demanding from their husbands expensive clothing, adornments, and jewels.⁸⁵

Courtly virtues, much like the betrothal process, with its interfamilial negotiations, expensive exchanges of dowries and nuptial gifts, and numerous ceremonial customs, were enacted through conspicuous displays. In order to progress from betrothal to marriage, men were expected to prominently exhibit their wealth and, in so doing, “signal[ed] family rank.”⁸⁶ Indeed, the requisite preparations for marriage would require men to be “ardito alle ’mprese e splendido di vestire.” Furthermore, families endeavored to broker matches that would both advance their own interests and bolster their standing within the community. In this sense, a man who secured a woman from a wealthy and reputable family could certainly be “essaltato” and earn recognition within the community at large.

sovereign rank, and the belt embodied the bride’s virginity. Kirshner notes that, “Among the talismanic gifts traditionally given by the bridegroom, none carried more meaning than the erotically charged nuptial belt (*cingulum, zona*) or girdle molding the bride’s breasts [...] Known as the girdle of Venus (*cesto*), the nuptial belt was believed to endow the bride with the graces of beauty and love. It was also a symbol of the bride’s virginity, which she preserved for her husband and which remained intact until the consummation of the marriage. Boccaccio informed readers of his *Genealogy of the Gods* that ‘some have asserted the girdle which binds the bride affirms the marriage’s legitimacy’” (*Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, p. 60).

⁸⁵ Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, p. 55.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

The other way of resolving the queen's conflicting statements is to consider them as emblematic of Boccaccio's anti-courtly agenda. Fiammetta, far from being Boccaccio's mouthpiece, is a figure imbued with irony, as she sometimes perpetuates courtly tropes and at other times critiques those same tropes. A historicized consideration of the *questione* reveals that intermarriage between disparate social classes in Boccaccio's Florence was relatively sparse,⁸⁷ but the literary notion of love as a force that could neutralize class distinctions was nonetheless widespread. Capellanus, to whom Boccaccio owed a literary debt, had focused much of *De amore* on the very issue of love affairs between men and women of varying social classes and repeatedly put forth a decidedly egalitarian perspective on love.⁸⁸ In light of the stark contrast between the courtly ideal of love as an ennobling enterprise that existed beyond the confines of class divisions and the harsh social reality that interclass relationships were exceedingly difficult to realize, we may liken the paradoxes of Fiammetta's conclusion in this *questione* to her concluding remarks in the seventh *questione*. In other words, I argue that we

⁸⁷ In his detailed examination of the prevalence of endogamy in late medieval and early Renaissance Florence, Anthony Molho presents compelling evidence (drawn from the *catasto* and other relevant records) that demonstrates the rarity of intermarriage between disparate social classes. See *Marriage Alliance in Medieval Florence*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁸⁸ Don Alfred Monson notes this egalitarian thread running through the various dialogues in *De amore*: "A related argument frequently invoked by the men is that Love or Nature compels them to love, with no regard to social class. The man of the Second Dialogue argues that, just as Love, imitating Nature, makes no class distinctions but forces everyone to love, so also the woman should not consider the class of a suitor but only whether he has been wounded by Love (*DA* 1.6.71-72 [60]). In the Third Dialogue the man claims that it is Nature's impulse that pushes him to go beyond the bounds of his class, and he reproaches the woman for trying to impose limits not recognized by Nature (*DA* 1.6.134 [76]). The man of the Fourth Dialogue chides the woman for not knowing that it is Love alone that makes men love, with no consideration for nobility or beauty (*DA* 1.6.180-82 [90-92]). According to the man of the Sixth Dialogue, it is Love's command that one should not make class distinctions in matters of love, for Love seeks to adorn his palace from all social ranks and to have all serve him on equal terms (*DA* 1.6.288-89 [122], 298 [124-26])." *Andreas Capellanus, Scholasticism, and the Courtly Tradition*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005, p. 242.

may again interpret the queen's flawed and contradictory arguments as representative of Boccaccio's critique of courtly love. Fiammetta first praises the courtly virtues that she had just moments before derided, then claims that a discreet lover who wins the love of a noble woman will earn the admiration of the public; I contend that Boccaccio stages these abrupt volte-faces to once again expose the intrinsic superficiality, circuitry, and inconsistency of courtly love. As I underlined in my analysis of the seventh *questione*, the feedback loop of courtly love would simultaneously require certain virtues as the cost of entry but then would promise to bestow those same virtues only after one had been admitted to the club, so to speak. By the same token, courtly love would require discretion but would at the same time promise to enhance the lover's reputation. Once again we see Boccaccio using Fiammetta to expose the absurdities of courtly love, and a historicized investigation of courtship sheds even greater light on the yawning gap between social realities and courtly tropes. It is not surprising, then, that Boccaccio, with his keen interest in depicting and probing the concrete social realities of his time, is skeptical of the impracticalities of courtly love.

2.3 Resolved: Inexperienced Women Make the Best Lovers

The ninth *questione*, much like the third *questione*, presents three distinct categories of potential lovers but, while the men of the third *questione* are defined by their professional and social status, the women of the ninth *questione* are distinguished solely by their relationships to men. Ferramonte wishes to know which kind of woman will bring a young man the greatest satisfaction:

Ma con ciò sia cosa che ancora delle gentili donne siano alcune diverse maniere [...] le quali, per quello che si crede, diversamente amano, qual più qual meno, qual più fervente qual più tiepidamente, disidero di sapere da voi, di cui più tosto un giovane, per più

felicamente il suo disio ad effetto conducere, si dee innamorare di queste tre, o di pulcella o di maritata o di vedova (4.51).

But since ladies may be of different manners [...] one imagines that they love differently, some more and some less, some more fervently and others more tepidly; I wish to know from you which kind of woman a young man should love so as to bring his desires to a happy end: a maiden, a married woman, or a widow.

The third *questione* presented a knight, an aristocrat, and a cleric – men who were characterized by their professional actions and social status – while the ninth *questione* classifies women according to their sexual actions and erotic status. This disparity calls to mind the Proem of the *Decameron*, which compares the many activities available to men (“andare a torno, udire e veder molte cose, uccellare, cacciare, pescare, cavalcare, giocare o mercatar” [“walk abroad, see and hear many things, go fowling, fishing, riding, gambling or attend to their business affairs”]) (10) to the many restrictions placed upon women (“ristrette da' voleri, da' piaceri, da' comandamenti de' padri, delle madri, de' fratelli e de' mariti, il piú del tempo nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse dimorano e quasi oziose sedendosi” [“forced to follow the whims, fancies, and dictates of their fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, so that they spend most of their time cooped up within the narrow confines of their rooms, where they sit in apparent idleness”]) (12). In her reading of the gendered language of the *Decameron*, Barolini draws a blunt comparison: “Men can do many things – ‘essi nascon buoni a mille cose,’ says the old woman of 5.10 – while women can only do one thing: ‘ma le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono, e per questo son tenute care.’”⁸⁹ The divergence between the third and ninth *questioni* is clear: a man’s value is determined by the function he serves in society, a woman’s by her relationship to men.

⁸⁹ “*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron (Decameron 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)*” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, p. 301.

Boccaccio was certainly not the first to classify women according to their connubial status; St. Jerome had notably ranked women's holiness according to their degrees of sexual experience, and this taxonomy persisted into the Middle Ages and beyond.⁹⁰ These three classes of women populate his texts, but his approach to understanding and depicting them is nonetheless singular in the ninth *questione*. Here we see Boccaccio using the conventional categorizations of virgin, wife, and widow as a springboard to meditate on feminine passion; in doing so, he ultimately seeks to identify the ways in which women could have deviated from the legal and social restrictions placed upon their sexuality.

The queen's response to Ferramonte's *questione* begins by setting certain parameters for their discussion, namely that they will not consider married women as a viable option for a young man in search of a lover:

Delle tre l'una, cioè la maritata, in niun modo è da desiderare, però ch'ella non è sua, né sta in sua libertà il potersi donare o concedersi ad alcuno: e il volerla o prenderla è commettere contra le divine leggi, e eziandio contra le naturali e positive (4.52).

Of the three, one of them is not to be desired, and that is the married woman. This is because she is no longer her own, and so she is not free to give or yield herself to anyone. To desire or to possess her is to violate not only divine laws but natural and positive laws as well.

But before she can truly dispense with the wife, Fiammetta feels the need to speak about the nature of female desire more generally and to explain why the wife would, in theory, be the best choice for a young man:

Manifesto è che quanto più nel fuoco si soffia più s'accende, e senza soffiarvi s'amorta; e quasi tutte l'altre cose usandole mancano: la libidine quanto più s'usa più cresce. La vedova per essere lungamente stata senza tale effetto, quasi come se non fosse il sente, e più con la memoria che con la concupiscenza si riscalda. La zita che ciò si sia ancora non conosce, se non con imaginazione: però tiepidamente disia. E però la maritata, sovente in

⁹⁰ See Anne E. Bailey: "Wives, Mothers and Widows on Pilgrimage: Categories of 'Woman' Recorded at English Healing Shrines in the High Middle Ages" in *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2013, pp. 197-219.

tali cose raccesa più ch'altra, tali effetti desidera; e tal volta le maritate sogliono da' mariti oltraggiose parole e fatti ricevere, delle quali volentieri prenderieno vendetta se potessero, e niuna via più presta è loro rimasa che donare il suo amore a chi le stimola di volerlo, in dispetto del marito. E avvegna che in tale maniera la vendetta sia e convenga essere molto occulta per non crescere l'onta, nondimeno elle sono nell'animo contente. Poi il sempre usare un cibo è tedioso, e sovente abbiamo veduto i delicati per li grossi cibi lasciare, tornando poi a quelli quando l'appetito degli altri è contentato. Ma però che, come dicemmo, licito non è l'altrui cose con ingiusta cagione desiderare, le maritate lasceremo a' loro mariti (4.52).

It is clear that the more one blows on a fire the more it blazes and, if it is not blown upon, it will die out. Most things are lessened the more they are used, but lust increases the more it is used. Since she has been without for so long, the widow almost feels as though those flames were not there, and she becomes reignited by memory more than by concupiscence. The virgin does not yet know lust, except perhaps in her imagination, so she desires tepidly. Yet the married woman, who has more occasion to be ignited than the others, longs for its effects. Sometimes married women are likely to bear the brunt of offensive words or deeds from their husbands, which they would gladly avenge if they could. The most expedient way to take such revenge is to give their love to a man who is trying to seduce them, in order to spite their husbands. Although their vengeance must remain secret (so as not to increase their dishonor), they are nonetheless inwardly pleased. It is also boring to partake of the same foods over and over again, and we have many times seen women leave aside delicacies for slop only to return to those delicacies once their craving for the other has been slaked. But, as we said, since it is not permissible to unjustly covet the goods of another, we shall leave the married women to their husbands.

Fiammetta thus makes her first claim about the nature of feminine desire, arguing that married women are the most lustful because they have more sex than widows or virgins. It is worth noting that, while Boccaccio removes married women from consideration in order to focus the debate on virgins and widows, he nonetheless has the queen address the sexual activities of married women; for an author who stages so many instances of adultery in his works, it is perhaps unsurprising that he dedicates some textual space to wives' affairs. Fiammetta identifies three factors that would, in concert, inspire married women to be unfaithful: excessive desire, revenge, and boredom.⁹¹ Even as she grants that married women are at times unfaithful, she

⁹¹ These motives are all reprised elsewhere in Boccaccio's works; the protagonist of the *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* has an affair simply because she is bored with her husband. An excess of

reiterates that these affairs violate both the spiritual and secular laws governing marriage and should therefore not be considered a viable option. From a historical perspective, adultery would certainly not have been an appealing avenue since, by Boccaccio's time, the consequences had become quite grave:

Thirteenth-century statutes are largely silent on adultery, but in the early fourteenth-century they move quickly, first to impose financial penalties on the man, then to impose them on the woman also (fine and loss of dowry). From the mid-fourteenth century, more severe corporal penalties were introduced for the woman, ranging from shaving and whipping, or imprisonment, to death. Boccaccio's story in the *Decameron* (VI.7), in which the city of Prato abolished the death penalty for a wife's adultery in response to one adulteress's clever pleading, runs entirely counter to the historical trend, but may, of course, have been intended as a fictional discussion of the appropriateness of this penalty. Conversely, for a husband keeping a mistress the financial penalty was set much lower, and corporal punishment was rarer. The double standard of these laws is immediately obvious: the contrast is one between increasing severity towards the extra-marital affairs of the married woman and stable penalty for those of the married man. The view that women were more at fault than men in adultery was, of course, a common one, shared by late medieval preachers.⁹²

Fiammetta thus limits the debate to sexual relationships that she considers to be more socially permissible. This narrative choice is not without irony since, as we shall see, even virgins and widows were not, in the strictest sense, free to pursue relationships with men of their choosing.

Since married women are out of the question, the queen must choose between virgins and widows:

Prenderemo dell'altre, delle quali copiosa quantità ci para davanti agli occhi la nostra città, e più tosto le vedove seguiremo amando che le pulcelle, però che le pulcelle, rozze

desire forces Madonna Filippa of *Dec.* 6.7 to take a lover lest she surrender the surplus to the dogs ("che doveva fare o debbo di quel che gli avanza? debbolo io gittare a' cani?"). Dioneo, at the end of *Dec.* 10.10 argues that Griselda should have punished Gualtieri by taking a lover ("Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d'essersi abbattuto a una che quando, fuor di casa, l'avesse in camiscia cacciata, s'avesse sí a un altro fatto scuotere il pilliccione che riuscito ne fosse una bella roba"). These are just a few examples, as Boccaccio's depictions of women whose boredom, vengefulness, and lust motivate them to have extramarital affairs are too numerous to list exhaustively.

⁹² Dean, "Fathers and Daughters, Marriage Laws and Marriage Disputes in Bologna and Italy, 1200-1500," pp. 86-87.

e grosse a tale mestiere, non senza molto affanno si recano abili a' desiderii dell'uomo: quello che nelle vedove non bisogna. Appresso, se le pulcelle amano, esse non sanno che si desiderare, e però con intero animo non seguono i vestigii dell'amante come le vedove, in cui già l'antico fuoco riprende forze, e falle desiderare quello che per lungo abuso aveano obliato, e è loro tardi di venire a tale effetto, piangendo il perduto tempo, e le solinghe e lunghe notti che hanno trapassate ne' vedovi letti: però queste siano amate più tosto, secondo il nostro parere (4.52).

We shall consider the others, of whom there are copious amounts in our city, arguing that widows are to be chosen over virgins. Virgins, since they are unpracticed and gauche in these matters, must strive at length to become proficient at satisfying men's desires; this is not the case with widows. Furthermore, if virgins do love they do not know what is desired and therefore will not follow the instructions of their lovers in the passionate and uninhibited way that widows do. Widows, after all, will have that old flame rekindled and will long for that which they had long forgotten. For them it is already late, and they lament the lost time and the long, lonely nights they spent in their widow beds. Therefore, according to our judgment, these are the women that should be loved.

Fiammetta's reference to the "copiosa quantità" of virgins and widows may cause the reader to wonder: why would there be copious amounts of virgins and widows but not married women?

This is not a trivial question, as the queen's comment makes direct reference to two idiosyncratic issues of Boccaccio's time, namely dowry inflation and the staggering rate at which wives outlived their husbands.

The issue of dowry inflation was so significant that Dante included it in Cacciaguida's diatribe on the decline of Florentine society.⁹³ The astonishing increases in dowry amounts in the fourteenth century were endemic in Italy; in Venice, for instance, the average dowry in the period from 1314-1350 had more than quadrupled by the close of the century.⁹⁴ In Florence, the fiscal and social crisis created by dowry inflation became so grave that the city established a public fund (called the *Monte delle doti*) in 1425 which, though it promised to ease the financial

⁹³ *Divina Commedia, Paradiso* 15, v. 103-105: "Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura / la figlia al padre, ché 'l tempo e la dote / non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura."

⁹⁴ Guzzetti, Linda. "Dowries in Fourteenth-Century Venice." *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2002, pp. 430-473.

burdens of fathers unable to provide adequate dowries upfront, ultimately worsened the already calamitous state of affairs.⁹⁵ Legal statutes in various cities across the Italian peninsula sought to regulate young men who, tempted by the prospects of a “good, fat patrimony,” contracted secret marriages or even abducted women.⁹⁶ Since families struggling to furnish sufficient dowries would inevitably have had to delay their daughter’s marriages, there may very well have been an abundance of virgins. As for the supposed sea of widows, even a cursory glance at the historical data concerning marriage in this period renders this unexpected image much more comprehensible. The average age difference between husbands and wives made widowhood a virtual inevitability for the vast majority of women. The age gap between couples was significant; in the case of Florence, wives were anywhere from eight to fifteen years younger than their husbands, and records indicate that roughly 25 percent of the city’s population were

⁹⁵ The *Monte delle doti* functioned not unlike a college fund: “In 1425 fathers were invited to provide dowries for their daughters by making cash deposits in the new fund which would mature as larger sums after terms of 7½ or 15 years. When the term of investment expired if a marriage had been consummated, the dowry would be paid to the daughter’s husband [...] By the 1440s, funds were insufficient to pay the dowries as they came due. The government announced that henceforth dowries due husbands would be paid in installments. Worse yet, in 1475, husbands learned that they would be paid only one-fifth of their dowries in cash and the remainder in Monte credits” (Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, p. 115).

⁹⁶ Trevor Dean cites statutes from Bologna and various other cities: “At Camerino, ‘avarice and inordinate appetite to possess’ led men into marriages ‘which cannot be thought equal and suitable’; in the March of Ancona, men, ‘impelled by lust or drawn by cupidity for property,’ harassed single women, ‘under the pretext of matrimony,’ and provoked parents into violent revenge; at Trent, young girls with expectations of a ‘good, fat patrimony,’ were abducted and married by men acting ‘not out of heat for their persons or *parentelle*, but for their patrimonies, in contempt of *parentelle* and of superiority” (“Fathers and Daughters, Marriage Laws and Marriage Disputes in Bologna and Italy, 1200-1500”, p. 96).

widows.⁹⁷ Given these statistics, Fiammetta's mention of the "copiosa quantità" of widows is far from hyperbolic.

Ferramonte agrees with the queen that married women ought to be taken out of consideration, yet he is of the opposite opinion in regard to widows:

La vedova ha [...] amato e ha vedute e sentite molte cose d'amore, e i suoi dubbi, e quanta vergogna e onore seguiti di quello; e però, queste cose meglio che la pulcella conoscendo, o ama lentamente e dubitando, o, non amando fermo, desidera ora questo ora quello, e non sapendo a quale per più diletto e onore di lei s'aggiunga, talora né l'uno né l'altro vuole, e così per la mente di lei la deliberazione vacilla, né vi può amorosa passione prendere fermezza. Ma queste cose alla pulcella sono ignote, e però, come a lei è avviso che ella molto piaccia a uno de' molti giovani, così senza più essaminazione quello per amante elegge [...] Appresso, di quelle cose che mai alcuno non ha vedute, udite o provate, con più efficacia l'aspetta, e le disidera di vedere, udire o provare, che chi molte fiato vedute, udite o provate l'ha [...] La pulcella mai quel diletto congiungimento per lo quale noi vegnamo nel mondo non conobbe, e naturale cosa è d'ogni creatura a quello essere dal disio tirato. Appresso, ella molte fiato, da quelle che sanno quello che è, ha udito quanta dolcezza in quello consista, le quali parole hanno aggiunto fuoco al disio, e però, tiratavi dalla natura e dal disio di provare cosa da lei non provata dalle parole udite, ardentemente e con acceso cuore questo congiungimento disidera (4.53).

The widow has [...] loved and has seen and felt many aspects of love, and has had her doubts, and has come to know how much shame or pride follow these aspects of love; therefore, even though she knows these things better than the virgin, she loves slowly and doubtfully, or, not rooted firmly in her desire, she longs now for this and now for that, and not knowing which will give her greater delight and pride she sometimes feels she wants neither this nor that, and so she deliberates and vacillates in her mind, and amorous passion cannot take hold of her. But these things are unknown to the virgin, therefore when she discovers that she is liked by one young man among many, she deliberates no further and takes him as her lover [...] Furthermore, she more eagerly awaits those things she never seen, heard, nor experienced than one who has already seen, heard, or experienced those things many times [...] The virgin has never known that pleasurable coupling by which we come into this world, and it is only natural for every creature to be moved by their yearning for it. What's more, she has heard many times from those who have firsthand experience how sweet it is, and those words have kindled a fire of longing in her. So, driven by nature and by the desire to experience that which she has heard of but never tried, the virgin longs for this coupling with an ardent and inflamed heart.

⁹⁷ See Klapisch-Zuber: "State and Family in a Renaissance Society: The Florentine *Catasto* of 1427-1430" and "The Cruel Mother: Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries" in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.

According to Ferramonte, the virgin's lack of experience will render her more decisive and passionate, thus making her the ideal lover. Such a description presents virginity not as a condition of unyielding chastity, but rather as a titillating state of anticipation. The idea that virgins would make the best lovers may seem odd since, as we have already discussed, virginity was an extremely valuable status both socially and religiously. Why, then, would the *questione* present them as potential lovers at all? The question of loss of virginity before marriage in the Middle Ages is more complex than one might imagine. While we have already highlighted the lengths aristocratic families went to in order to preserve the chastity of their daughters, it is worth noting that premarital sex, while generally frowned upon, was relatively common in most levels of medieval society.⁹⁸ Furthermore, it is difficult to truly verify how often women came into marriage with their virginity intact – it may be reasonable to expect some divergence between the expectations and the realities surrounding virginity.⁹⁹

As is typical of the *questioni*, Fiammetta rebuts Ferramonte's claim and defends her original position. Before elaborating on the amatory merits of the widow, she spends some time addressing the knotty issue of the virgin lover:

E' non è dubbio che tra l'altre cose che la femina ha sopra tutte cara è la sua virginità: e ciò è ragione, però che in quella tutto l'onore della seguente sua vita vi consiste, e senza dubbio ella non sarà mai tanto da amore stimolata che ella volontieri ne sia cortese, se non a cui ella per matrimoniale legge si crederà per isposo congiungere. E questo noi non l'andiamo cercando, ché non è dubbio che chi vuole amare per isposa avere, che egli più tosto pulcella che vedova dee amare: dunque tarda e negligente sarà a donarsi a chi per tale effetto non l'amerà, e ella il sappia. Appresso, le pulcelle al generale sono timide, né sono astute a trovare le vie e' modi per le quali i furtivi dilette si possono prendere: di queste cose la vedova non dubita, però che ella già donò onorevolmente quello che

⁹⁸ See Ruth Mazo Karras: *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 131.

⁹⁹ This is precisely the assertion of Licisca, who quarrels with a fellow servant, Tindaro, at the beginning of Day Six. She insists that he is incorrect in his assumption that women remain chaste until marriage, arguing that men are foolish to believe that women will remain virgins until their wedding night.

costei aspetta di donare, e è senza, e però non dubita che, se se medesima dona ad altrui, quel segnale l'accusi. Poi ella, come più arrischiante, perché, come è detto, la maggiore cagione che porge dubbio non è con lei, conosce meglio le occulte vie, e così le mette in effetto. Vero è che voi dite che la pulcella, sì come disiderosa di cosa che mai non provò, a questo più fia sollicita che la vedova, che quello che è conosce: ma egli è di ciò che voi dite il contrario. Le pulcelle a tale effetto per diletto non corrono le prime volte, però che egli è loro più noia che piacere, avvegna che a quella cosa che diletta quante più fiate si vede o ode o sente, più piace [...] Però la vedova, con ciò sia cosa che ella doni meno, e più le sia il donare agevole, più sarà liberale e più tosto che la pulcella, che donare dee la più cara cosa ch'essa ha. E ancora sarà più la vedova tirata, come mostrato avemo a tale effetto che la pulcella: per le quali cagioni amisi più tosto la vedova che la pulcella (4.54).

Without a doubt, a woman's virginity is the most precious good she has at her disposal. This is reasonable, since all of her life's honor is tied to it, and there is no doubt that she will never be so moved by love that she would willingly be so liberal with it (unless it is with a man she believes will take her as his lawfully wedded wife). But this is not what we are considering, since a man looking for a wife ought to pursue the virgin rather than the widow. So the virgin will be slow and hesitant to give herself to a man unless he is loving her for this purpose, and to her absolute certainty. Furthermore, virgins are timid and are not astute enough to discover the paths by which secret delights may be taken; in such matters the widow acts without delay since she has already honorably parted with that which the virgin is still waiting to sacrifice. She is without her virginity, and so she does not have to worry that if she gives herself to someone she will be accused because of that fact. Then she is more reckless because, as we have said, she no longer has any concern for her virginity, and so she knows better than anyone else the secret paths to pleasure and puts them to use. It is true what you say, that the virgin, desirous of that which she does not know, is more solicitous than the widow, who already knows what it is she craves; but it is actually contrary to what you say. Virgins do not rush into sex for pleasure on the first try since it is more uncomfortable than enjoyable; it is something that becomes more pleasurable the more it is seen or heard or felt [...] The widow, on the other hand, since she gives less and more easily, will be more liberal than the virgin, who must give away the most precious thing she has. And, as we have shown, the widow will be even more eager for the act than the virgin; for these reasons the widow ought to be loved more than the virgin.

Fiammetta's comments about virginity and "matrimoniale legge" are illuminated by the historical realities surrounding virginity, namely that it was considered the most important trait a woman could possess and would therefore have been diligently guarded by herself and her family. Her remark about women who might part with their virginity prematurely if they believed the man would marry them indicates another historical reality, as it was not uncommon

for men to persuade women to part with their virginity by making disingenuous promises of marriage.¹⁰⁰ This discussion causes Fiammetta to briefly digress, saying that, if a man were in search of a wife, the best choice would indeed be the virgin rather than the widow. Historical facts once again validate this claim, as it would certainly have been much easier for men to marry virgins instead of widows. Widows came with a host of problems: what would happen to the children from her first marriage, would she have a suitable dowry, was she still at an attractive age to remarry, and so on.¹⁰¹

Having dispensed with the more concrete considerations surrounding the virgin, Fiammetta addresses the erotic potentialities of both women. The unpracticed virgin pales in comparison to the sexually adept widow, whose prior experiences ensure that she will capably satisfy a man. While the queen's discourse does not paint widows in a negative light – she speaks of them approvingly – it does inevitably reproduce the misogynistic tropes surrounding widowhood. The stereotype of the libidinous widow can be traced to antiquity; the tale of the Widow of Ephesus was, for instance, translated and emulated widely during the Middle Ages.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Numerous sources attest to this fact, among them Julius Kirshner: *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, p. 23; Ruth Mazo Karras: *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, pp. 165-208; and James Brundage: *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 436-437.

¹⁰¹ These are all questions Christiane Klapish-Zuber addresses in “The Cruel Mother: Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries” (in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*). The abridged answers are as follows: many women were forced to leave their children in the care of their deceased husband's kin before remarrying; families would try to marry off their young, widowed daughters, but the dowry nonetheless remained an issue since it would have most likely been spent over the course of a woman's first marriage, at least in part if not in its entirety; women's chances of remarrying decreased precipitously with age, so much so that by the age of 40 women had very little chance of finding a new husband.

¹⁰² The tale, from Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*, depicts a woman from Ephesus who, having recently lost her husband, spends her days and nights weeping over his grave. Nearby is a soldier guarding the crucified corpses of some thieves; if any of the bodies disappear, he will be

The trope of the lustful widow is rooted in her ambiguous status in medieval society. Even though she was thought to possess a special kind of grace since she was no longer obligated to perform the sexual activities required by marriage and was considered a protected class (*miserabiles personae*) by the Church, the widow's supposed freedom posed a threat:

“Widowhood was regarded as a state that freed women to act on the wanton, whorish, and unprincipled tendencies ascribed to women in general... Widows would be sexually voracious once deprived of their husbands' company in bed.”¹⁰³ Boccaccio's depictions of women are not so easily reduced to a single category, as we find varied portrayals in his texts, ranging from the vain widow who cruelly tricks her suitor in *Dec.* 8.7, to the widow who eloquently defends her right to find love again in *Dec.* 4.1, to the lascivious widow of the *Corbaccio* who shamelessly surrounds herself with a coterie of lovers.

The notion of widows' freedom did not, in fact, correspond to the historical realities of widowhood. Independent, wealthy widows appear with some frequency in the *Decameron*, for instance, yet such women were a rarity in this period: “among wealthy Florentines the probability of a widow's living alone collapses: 2 percent of the 472 wealthiest households (which represent less than 5 percent of all Florentine households) were headed by a woman (an even lower percentage than in the country), and rich widows who lived really autonomously

put to death. The soldier eventually investigates the source of the wailing he has been hearing daily and, finding the beautiful widow, he seduces her. After they have made love on the husband's grave, he returns to his post to find that one of the bodies has been stolen and, in desperation, tells the widow of his plight. In order to save her new lover, she insists that they exhume her husband's body and hang it upon the cross. This deeply misogynistic story was reproduced widely during the Middle Ages; for an overview of some of its more prominent medieval translations, see Edward Wheatley: “Rereading the Story of the Widow of Ephesus in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2014, pp. 627–643.

¹⁰³ Louise Mirrer, *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 1.

were the exception at the upper echelons of urban society.”¹⁰⁴ The choices available to widows were anything but liberating: young widows were typically pressured to remarry by their natal families; other widows might remain in the home of their deceased husbands and care for their children; other widows, who were neither permitted to remain in the home of their deceased husbands (his surviving heirs could, in theory, eject her from his household) nor young enough to remarry, would be forced to return to their natal families. Generally speaking, the widow who chose never to remarry and to live in her own household was uncommon and, if she were living under the supervision of her natal or agnatic family, it would naturally be quite difficult, if not impossible, for her to seek a lover. In spite of the very real limitations that governed the widow’s life, the ninth *questione* nevertheless depicts her as a superior lover and highlights two defining traits that would be a boon to her lover: her sexual experience and her freedom from concerns surrounding virginity.

The ninth *questione* is paradoxical in that it stages a fictive debate that nonetheless goes out of its way to make reference to legal and social realities. In contrast to men, who were rarely punished (or, at the very least, not punished as severely) for engaging in premarital or extramarital sex, women’s sexuality was restricted at every stage of life. Virgins were not permitted to have sex, married women were not permitted to enjoy sex¹⁰⁵ (neither within nor beyond the bounds of marriage), and widows were not permitted to pursue sex after the death of their husbands. Given the fictitious nature of the *questione*, why does Boccaccio allude to these

¹⁰⁴ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Penitentials, following the guidance of the church fathers, gave specific counsel as to acceptable sexual behavior and, while it was considered a necessary component of marriage, couples were cautioned against taking too much pleasure in sex. James Brundage brilliantly presents the numerous restrictions on sex between spouses in a flowchart entitled “The sexual decision-making process according to the penitentials” in *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 162.

concrete limitations on women's sexuality? Why not simply stay within the realm of fiction, focusing the discourse on the variations of feminine desire?

The solution to this problem lies Fiammetta's remarks, as they indicate Boccaccio's agenda in this *questione*. The queen essentially removes the virgin and the married woman from consideration by underlining the tangible social and legal restrictions placed upon them. To have sex with a married woman would be to steal another man's property since she does not truly own herself ("ella non è sua, né sta in sua libertà il potersi donare o concedersi ad alcuno") and, as such, adultery is in violation of both secular and spiritual laws ("il volerla o prenderla è commettere contra le divine leggi, e eziandio contra le naturali e positive"). The virgin is similarly constricted, as parting with her chastity is tantamount to sacrificing her whole life's honor ("non è dubbio che tra l'altre cose che la femina ha sopra tutte cara è la sua virginità: e ciò è ragione, però che in quella tutto l'onore della seguente sua vita vi consiste") and, because of this, she would only yield herself to a man intent on marrying her ("non sarà mai tanto da amore stimolata che ella volontieri ne sia cortese, se non a cui ella per matrimoniale legge si crederà per isposo congiungere"). Boccaccio thus makes specific reference to the constraints placed upon the sexual activities of virgins and wives but is silent on the restrictions that widows would have faced.

Boccaccio's reticence on the subjugation of widows certainly does not mean they were free to do as they pleased, as I have already indicated that these women were not as liberated as literature of the period might have us believe. I argue that, while Boccaccio uses the ninth *questione* to identify the social and legal restrictions on women's sexuality (and the ways in which women could have flouted these regulations), it is chiefly a meditation on which class of woman would have been the most justified to pursue sex outside of marriage. In Boccaccio's

calculation, the widow would have been the natural choice; unlike the virgin, she had already parted with her chastity (and had done so in a religiously and socially permissible way), so her honor was no longer an issue. Unlike the married woman, she no longer belonged to her husband so, in the most practical sense, she would not be in violation of any secular or religious laws by giving herself to another man. Even though various social imperatives would have made it difficult for the widow to freely choose a sexual partner, Boccaccio demonstrates that, from a legal or social perspective, there really was no solid justification for the prohibition of widow's sexual activities. Boccaccio may have also been reflecting on the extent to which social and legal conventions granted widows an option that was not available to virgins or wives, namely to enjoy sexual relationships with more than one partner. In other words, because the widow could remarry and would consequently have conjugal obligations to her new husband, she was the only class of woman who, technically speaking, was legally and socially permitted to have a sexual relationship with more than man one over the course of her life. The ninth *questione* ultimately takes an artificial debate about the sexual proclivities of three kinds of women and infuses it with concrete social and legal considerations. By following these sociolegal considerations to their logical conclusions, Boccaccio highlights a flaw that, taken in its most literal terms, would grant widows the privilege of total sexual autonomy.

The third, eighth, and ninth *questioni* constitute a move away from theoretical musings on the nature of love and focus instead on how to choose from among various classes of potential lovers. In accordance with the social realities of his time, men are differentiated according to their social position, while women are distinguished based on their social status and on their level of sexual experience. The attention to verifiable social and legal facts is indeed the thread that runs through all three *questioni*, as Boccaccio uses them to probe these sociolegal realities.

Amatory debates were a staple of courtly love literature, and Boccaccio once again uses these literary conventions to suit his own particular purpose. The *questioni d'amore* serve not only as a vehicle to critique the courtly love tradition, but also as a means to evaluate the predominant social hierarchies of the period. In this way, the *questioni* I have examined in this chapter are consistent with Boccaccio's overarching authorial agenda, which is characterized by dual aims: to demonstrate the intrinsic flaws of the courtly love tradition and to stage literary experiments that explore the shortcomings of medieval society as Boccaccio knew it. In the third *questione*, Boccaccio depicts the perils of life at court, ultimately demonstrating how the cleric's singular role in shaping courtly culture would render him a superior lover. The eighth *questione* exposes the structures of family, social class, and marriage, ultimately highlighting the ways in which these systems oppressed women. The ninth *questione* similarly illustrates the restrictions placed upon women in order to demonstrate the ways in which women could contravene these societal strictures. Ultimately, the apparent superficiality of Boccaccio's amatory debates belies the complexity of the social issues they address and the sophistication of our young author's first foray into the subversion of literary and social hierarchies.

Chapter 3: How Do We Demonstrate Love?

*“It’s appropriate for an inconstant woman
to make someone plead with her a long time
to enhance her worth; that way he won’t think
she’s used to such sport.
But a woman of good character,
sensible as well as virtuous,
if she finds a man to her liking,
oughtn’t to treat him too disdainfully.”*
Guigemar (515-522).¹⁰⁶

Ma l’una di loro ancora assai lontana, vergognosa quasi piangendo ristette, l’altra infino a lui corse e l’abbracciò e baciollo e poseglisi a sedere allato raccomandandoglisi. Ma poi che l’ammirazione che costui ebbe dell’ardire di colei fu alquanto cessata, egli la pregò che per quello amore ch’ella gli portava, ella gli dovesse di questa cosa dire intera la verità. Essa niente ne gli celò: la qual cosa questi udendo, e dentro nella mente esaminando ciò che l’una e l’altra avea fatto, fra sé conoscere non sapea qual più l’amasse, né qual più egli dovesse amare. Ma venuto accidente che di queste parole il convenne partire, di questo a più amici domandò consiglio, né mai alcuno il sodisfece al suo piacere di tal dimanda: per la qual cosa io priego voi, da cui veramente credo la vera diffinizione avere, che mi diciate quale di queste due dee essere più dal giovane amata (4.39).

One of them was still far away, embarrassed almost to the point of tears, while the other ran up to him, kissed and embraced him and sat beside him, offering herself to him. Once his amazement at her ardor had subsided somewhat, he asked her (by the love she had for him) to tell him the whole truth of this matter. She hid nothing from him and, hearing of all this and turning over in his mind what she and the other woman had done, he could not determine who loved him more nor who was more deserving of his love. Since this debate had to be cut short, he asked his friends their opinion, but none were able to provide a satisfying answer. Therefore I ask you, from whom I believe I will receive a solution: which of these two women should be loved more by the young man?

I giovani rimasi così, nel primo quistionare ritornarono, ciascuno dicendo che più da lei era amato; e quelli la cui ghirlanda la giovane prese e posela sopra la sua testa, diceva: "Fermamente ella ama più me, però che a niuno altro fine ha ella la mia ghirlanda presa, se non perché le mie cose le piacciono, e per avere cagione d’essermi tenuta; ma a te ha ella la sua donata quasi in luogo d’ultimo congedo, non volendo, come villana, che l’amore che tu l’hai portato sia senza alcuno merito" [...] L’altro dicendo il contrario, così rispondeva: "Veramente la giovane le tue cose ama più che te, e ciò si può vedere, ché ella ne prese; ma ella ama più me che le mie cose, in quanto ella delle sue mi donò: e non è segno d’ultimo merito il donare, come tu di’ ma è

¹⁰⁶ *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante, Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1978.

principio d'amistà e d'amore. E fa il dono colui che 'l riceve soggetto al donatore: però costei, forse di me incerta, acciò che più certa di me avere per soggetto fosse, con dono mi volle alla sua signoria legare, se io legato forse non vi fossi. Ma tu, come puoi comprendere che se ella dal principio ti leva, ch'ella mai ti debbia donare?". E così quistionando dimorarono per grande spazio, e senza alcuna diffinizione si partirono. Ora, dico io, grandissima reina, se a voi fosse l'ultima sentenza in tale questione domandata, che giudichereste voi? (4.19)

The young men remained this way, returning to their original questioning, each saying he was better loved by the woman. The one whose garland was taken by the lady and placed upon her own head said: "Certainly she loves me more, since she took my garland for no other reason than that she likes my things and so that she will have a reason to be linked to me. But to you she gave her own garland as a final farewell and, so as not to be callous, she did not want the love that you bore for her to be without any reward" [...]. The other said the opposite, responding: "Obviously the lady loves your possessions more than she loves you, and this is evident in her taking your garland. But she loves me more than my possessions in that she gave me something that belonged to her; giving is not a sign of a final reward, as you have said, but is rather a source of friendship and love. A gift makes its recipient subject to its giver so she, perhaps uncertain of me and wanting to be confident that I would be her subject, wished to place me under her vassalage with a gift. But you, how can you believe that if she took from you at the start she will ever come to give to you?" And so they debated this for some time without ever resolving the issue. Now I ask you, great queen, if you were to give the final ruling in this matter, what would be your judgment?

Liberata adunque la donna, dopo alquanti giorni, il primo cavaliere andò a lei, e sé umilmente le raccomandò, ricordandole come egli per lei campare da morte a mortale pericolo pochi giorni davanti s'era posto, e, mercé degl'iddii e della sua forza, lei e sé da tale accidente avea campato: onde per questo le piacesse, in luogo di merito, il suo amore, il quale sopra tutte sempre desiderato avea, donare. E appresso con simile preghiera venne il secondo cavaliere, dicendo che a rischio di morire per lei s'era messo: "e ultimamente perché voi non moriste, sostenni di lasciarmi vincere, onde eterna infamia me ne seguirà, dov'io avrei vittorioso onore potuto acquistare, volendo incontro la vostra salute avere le mie forze operate". La donna ciascuno ringraziò benignamente, promettendo debito *guiderdone* ad amenduni del ricevuto servizio. Rimase adunque la donna, costoro partiti, in dubbio a cui il suo amore donare dovesse, o al primo o al secondo, e di ciò dimanda consiglio: a quale direste voi ch'ella il dovesse più tosto donare? (4.55)

A few days after the lady was freed, the first knight went to her and humbled himself before her, reminding her that he had placed himself in mortal danger to save her from death just a few days before, and that thanks to the gods and his valor he had saved her life. For this he hoped it would please her to grant him her love as a reward. And soon after the second knight came with a similar plea, saying that he had also risked his life for her salvation: "What's more, in order to preserve your life I allowed myself to be defeated and have eternal shame follow me, even though I could have won great honor if I had used my strength to operate against your wellbeing." The lady thanked them both kindly, promising to give them a suitable reward for the

services they had rendered. Yet, once they had departed, the woman remained in doubt as to whom she should grant her love, to the first or the second knight. So she seeks counsel: upon whom do you say she should bestow her love?

If the *questioni* of the previous chapter address the concern of selecting a lover, the *questioni* of this chapter deal with the issue that arises next: how to convey attraction to a potential lover. In the first *questione*, two men ask a woman which of them she loves more, only to receive an ambiguous gesture that raises questions about the function of gifts within a romantic relationship. The sixth *questione* depicts two enamored women who demonstrate their affections for the same young man in markedly different ways, ultimately asking which is more deserving of his love. The tenth *questione* similarly compares the relative merits of two knights who, seeking the love of a widow sentenced to death, fight to save her life. At face value, all three *questioni* portray men and women putting on conspicuous displays in order to win over a prospective lover. Yet upon closer inspection, one finds that they examine the expectations placed upon the courtly lady within a romantic relationship, focusing exclusively on what was required of women in this context.

The highly prescriptive nature of courtly love literature is at the root of these *questioni*, but while the courtly love tradition set forth codes of comportment for men and women alike, Boccaccio uses these *questioni* to explore the standards imposed upon feminine conduct exclusively. In so doing, he creates a space to probe particular tropes, such as the concept of *guiderdone*, women's inherent lasciviousness, and the relationship between virtue and reward. Ultimately, the *questioni* of this chapter explore the ways in which women were expected to demonstrate – and respond to – erotic desire. These *questioni* make evident Boccaccio's interest in the inherent transactionality of courtly love and the disproportionate expectations placed upon women within the context of the courtly love affair.

3.1 Resolved: Women Who Display Their Affections Are Emboldened by Love

The sixth *questione*, posed by an unnamed woman, presents two ladies vying for the love of the same man. The woman recalls a moment from her childhood when she and her older brother were resting in a garden and, unbeknownst to the brother, two young women were watching him in the distance and discussing how they might approach him:

Avvenne che due giovani donzelle, di sangue nobili e di ricchezze copiose, e della nostra città natie, amando questo mio fratello e sentendolo essere in quel giardino, amendue là se ne vennero, e lui, che di queste cose niente sapeva, di lontano cominciarono a riguardare. Dopo alquanto spazio, vedendolo solo, fuori che di me, di cui elle poco curavano però che era picciola, così fra loro cominciarono a dire: “Noi amiamo questo giovane sopra tutte le cose, né sappiamo egli ama noi, né convenevole è che amendune ci ami; ma qui n’è al presente licito di prendere di lui parte del nostro disio, e di conoscere se di noi egli ama alcuna, o quale egli ama più; e quella che egli più ama, poi sua si rimanga senza esserle dall’altra impedito: però ora ch’egli dimora solo e che noi abbiamo tempo, corriamo, e ciascuna l’abbracci e baci: egli quale più gli piacerà, poi prenderà” (4.39).

It happened that two young women who were native to our city and both of noble blood and great wealth were in love with my brother and, hearing that he was in that garden, had gone there. He knew nothing of this and so they watched him from a distance for some time. Upon realizing that he was alone except for me (which was of little concern to them since I was just a child), they began to speak amongst themselves, saying: “We love this young man above all else, but we do not know if he loves us, nor is it fitting that he should love us both; but presently we may convey to him our desires and learn if he loves either of us, or which of us he loves more. Whichever of us he loves more will be his beloved and will not be held back by the other. Since he is alone, now is our chance – let us each run to him, embrace and kiss him, and he will choose whichever one of us he likes better.”

The details furnished by the narrator are not arbitrary, but rather provide a specific context within which the *questione* will unfold. The two women are not strangers or foreigners but are instead known members of the local community (“della nostra città natie”), and they are both noble and wealthy (“di sangue nobili e di ricchezze copiose”). Taken together, these various particulars yield some useful data: the women are of equal wealth and status and they have ties to the community, which means that they cannot be protected by any sort of anonymity. Thus, at the

start of the *questione*, neither enjoys a privileged status over the other and they both assume the same level of risk in attempting to court this man. They wish to know if he loves either of them, so they draw up a bold strategy to convey their attraction to him. Yet while they both decide to run to him and embrace and kiss him, their agreement does not proceed as planned:

Determinatosi a questo, le due giovani cominciarono a correre sopra la verde erba verso il mio fratello: di che egli si maravigliò vedendole, e vedendo come veniano. Ma l'una di loro ancora assai lontana, vergognosa quasi piangendo ristette, l'altra infino a lui corse e l'abbracciò e baciollo e poseglisi a sedere allato raccomandandoglisi. Ma poi che l'ammirazione che costui ebbe dell'ardire di colei fu alquanto cessata, egli la pregò che per quello amore ch'ella gli portava, ella gli dovesse di questa cosa dire intera la verità. Essa niente ne gli celò: la qual cosa questi udendo, e dentro nella mente esaminando ciò che l'una e l'altra avea fatto, fra sé conoscere non sapea qual più l'amasse, né qual più egli dovesse amare (4.39).

Having determined to do this, the two young women began to run over the verdant grass toward my brother; he marveled at the sight of them as they approached. But one of them, while she was still far away, held back, embarrassed almost to the point of tears, while the other ran up to him, kissed and embraced him and sat beside him, offering herself to him. Once his amazement at her ardor had subsided somewhat, he asked her (by the love she had for him) to tell him the whole truth of this matter. She hid nothing from him and, hearing of all this and turning over in his mind what she and the other woman had done, he could not determine who loved him more nor who was more deserving of his love.

The women, whose backgrounds initially rendered them almost indistinguishable, will ultimately be judged by the divergence in their behavior, as the queen bases her ruling solely on their actions in this particular moment:

Certo delle due giovani quella ne pare che più il vostro fratello ami, e più da lui deggia essere amata, che dubitando vergognosa rimase senza abbracciarlo: e per che questo ne paia, questa è la ragione. Amore, sì come noi sappiamo, sempre fa timidi coloro in cui dimora, e dove maggior parte è d'esso, similmente maggiore temenza. E questo avviene per che lo 'ntendimento della cosa amata non si può intero sapere; che se si potesse sapere, molte cose, temendo di non spiacione, non si fanno che si farebbono, però che ciascuno sa che spiacione si toglie cagione d'essere amato: e con questa temenza e con amore sempre dimora vergogna, e non senza ragione. Adunque, tornando alla nostra quistione, diciamo che atto di veramente innamorata fu quello di quella che timida si mostrò e vergognosa. Quello dell'altra, più tosto di scelerata libidinosa che d'innamorata fu sembante: e però essendo egli più da colei amato, più dee lei, secondo il nostro giudicio, amare" (4.40).

There is no doubt that the one who loves your brother more, and is more deserving of his love, is the modest one who stayed back without throwing her arms around him. This is why: love, as we well know, always makes timid the hearts in which it resides, such that love is commensurate with timidity. This occurs because the intention of the beloved can never be known entirely; if the beloved's intentions could be known, much would be done that is not done for fear of causing displeasure. After all, everyone knows that by causing displeasure one wipes away any chance of being loved; along with timidity and love there also dwells modesty, and this is not without cause. Therefore, returning to our question, we declare that the behavior of someone truly in love was that of the one who showed herself to be timid and modest. The actions of the other represent wicked lustfulness more than sincere love. So since he is loved more by the first woman, he should, in our opinion, love her instead."

Having sketched out the *questione* and Fiammetta's initial response, there are a few preliminary observations we can make.

Even before considering the subsequent debate that will unfold between the unnamed woman and the queen, the substance of the *questione* is quite clear: the woman who refrains from conveying her attraction to her beloved is motivated by love, while the woman who actively demonstrates her affections to him is, in contrast, driven by lust. The women speak openly to one another about their feelings for this man, yet only one of them progresses from passive discourse into tangible deeds. The queen does not criticize them for discussing their attraction to the young man nor for creating a scheme to surmise his interest in them, but she does condemn the woman who transformed speech into action. This distinction is epitomized in Teodolinda Barolini's essay on the words/deeds binary that runs through the *Decameron*. She evokes the proverb, "Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi," as a pithy means of characterizing the separation between the spheres of men and women, and she uses it as a springboard to examine the discourse surrounding women's words and deeds in the *Decameron*. She says of Dioneo, who practically quotes this proverb when he asks the ladies of the brigata if

they have begun to act without first speaking (“cominciate voi prima a far de’ fatti che a dir delle parole?”):

He argues that the desperate circumstances brought about by the plague have suspended normal mores, so that, as long as men and women refrain from “operar disonestamente, ogni ragionare è conceduto” (dishonorable behavior, all subjects may be freely discussed) (8) [...] In fact, says Dioneo, giving an extra twist to the logic whereby one can speak of what one cannot do, if the ladies were to refrain from speaking of such “ciance” (idle gossip) (13) people would suspect that they harbored guilty consciences. Dioneo’s argument thus hinges on the notion that there is no limit to what the ladies can say – to the *parole* that they can use – as long as they do not translate words into deeds, as long as they do not cross the bridge that separates the world of women from the world of men. To anticipate his later query, they can “dir delle parole” but not “far de’ fatti.” And yet, the *Decameron* does nothing if not effect the translation from words into deeds, from the sequestered world of women to the engaged world of men.¹⁰⁷

In this schema, women are relegated to the relatively harmless domain of speech while men may enjoy the vast freedom of action. Even as Boccaccio underlines the radicality of women who trespass these boundaries by acting rather than speaking, he does not hesitate to depict such transgressions, both within and beyond the *Decameron*.

As we return to the queen’s ruling, it is worth noting that while I have highlighted other instances in which her rhetoric is logically flawed or otherwise contradictory, her argumentation in the sixth *questione* is sound. Fiammetta claims that if one is in love then one will be timid or, translated into conditional logic, love → timid. She supports this claim by saying that timidity is a natural companion to love because it prevents the lover from doing anything that would displease the beloved and thereby jeopardize the relationship. This linking of love to timidity calls to mind Capellanus’s discussion of jealousy in the *De amore*, which I had previously referenced in my discussion of the second and fifth *questioni*:

¹⁰⁷ “*Le parole son femmine e i fatti sono maschi: Toward a Sexual Poetics of the Decameron (Decameron 2.9, 2.10, 5.10)*” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, p. 283-284.

Est igitur zelotypia vera animi passio, qua vehementer timemus propter amantis voluntatibus obsequendi defectum amoris attenuari substantiam, et inaequalitatis amoris trepidatio ac sine turpi cogitatione de amante concepta suspicio (I.VI.378).

Now jealousy is a true emotion whereby we greatly fear that the substance of our love may be weakened by some defect in serving the desires of our beloved, and it is an anxiety lest our love may not be returned.¹⁰⁸

In this context, jealousy does not signify the suspicion of infidelity but instead refers to a fear of endangering a love affair by dissatisfying the beloved in some way. With this explanation of the function of timidity, we may return to the queen's conditional statement (love → timid) in order to determine its contrapositive: ~~timid~~ → love or, in other words, if one is *not* timid then one is *not* in love. In fact, this is what the queen concludes when she states that the woman who did not behave timidly did not love the man. By evaluating the logical soundness of Fiammetta's argument, we ultimately acquire a rubric against which to read not only this *questione*, but also other iterations of the theme of women's sexual agency elsewhere in Boccaccio's oeuvre.

The concern with speech and action resurfaces perhaps most strikingly in *Dec.* 3.1, a *novella* that has not previously been compared to the sixth *questione*, I assert that, taken together, *Decameron* 3.1 and the sixth *questione* demonstrate Boccaccio's sustained meditation on these themes of words, deeds, and sexual agency.

Masetto da Lamporecchio, the protagonist of *Dec.* 3.1, pretends to be deaf and mute in order to infiltrate a convent of sexually voracious nuns. The parallels between the *novella* and the sixth *questione* are, at first, superficial; nonetheless, they are striking. At the start of *Dec.* 3.1, two nuns chance upon Masetto in the garden and, thinking him to be asleep, they begin to speak openly about how they might use him to satisfy their curiosity:

Or pure avvenne che costui, un dì avendo lavorato molto e riposandosi, due giovinette monache, che per lo giardino andavano, s'appressarono là dove egli era, e lui che

¹⁰⁸ *De amore*. Trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1957).

sembiante faceva di dormire cominciarono a riguardare. Per che l'una, che alquanto era più baldanzosa, disse all'altra: “Se io credessi che tu mi tenessi credenza, io ti direi un pensiero che io ho avuto più volte, il quale forse anche a te potrebbe giovare.” L'altra rispose: “Dì sicuramente, ché per certo io nol dirò mai a persona.” Allora la baldanzosa incominciò: “Io non so se tu t'hai posto mente come noi siamo tenute strette [...] e io ho più volte a più donne, che a noi son venute, udito dire che tutte l'altre dolcezze del mondo sono una beffa a rispetto di quella quando la femina usa con l'uomo. Per che io m'ho più volte messo in animo, poiché con altrui non posso, di volere con questo mutolo provare se così è” (3.1.21-24).

Now one day, when Masetto happened to be taking a rest after a spell of strenuous work, he was approached by two very young nuns who were out walking in the garden. Since he gave them the impression that he was asleep, they began to stare at him, and the bolder of the two said to her companion: “If I could be sure that you would keep it a secret, I would tell you about an idea that has often crossed my mind, and one that might well work out to our mutual benefit.” “Do tell me,” replied the other. “You can be quite certain that I shan’t talk about it to anyone.” The bold one began to speak more plainly. “I wonder,” she said, “whether you have ever considered what a strict life we have to lead [...] Yet I have often heard it said, by several of the ladies who have come to visit us, that all other pleasures in the world are mere trifles by comparison with the one experienced by a woman when she goes with a man. I have thus been thinking, since I have nobody else to hand, that I would like to discover with the aid of this dumb fellow whether they are telling the truth.”¹⁰⁹

While the other nun initially takes a more cautious stance – warning that their virginity is promised to God and that they would be in grave trouble if they were to become pregnant from such dalliances – they eventually agree that they would both like to take advantage of the deaf-mute gardener. His inability to speak or hear is no obstacle,¹¹⁰ as the bolder nun uses clear and conspicuous cues to communicate her wishes: “costei con atti lusinghevoli presolo per la mano, e egli facendo cotali risa sciocche, il menò nel capannetto, dove Masetto senza farsi troppo

¹⁰⁹ All translations of the *Decameron* are taken from G.H. McWilliam: *The Decameron*, London: Penguin, 1972.

¹¹⁰ The erotic function of Masetto’s silence has been commented upon by several scholars, including Millicent Marcus (“Seduction by Silence: A Gloss on the Tales of Masetto [Decameron III, 1] and Alatiel [Decameron II, 7]” in *Philological Quarterly* 58, Winter 1979, pp. 1-15) and Howard Limoli (“Boccaccio’s Masetto [Decameron III, 1] and Andreas Capellanus” in *Romanische Forschungen*, vol. 77, no. 3/4, 1965, pp. 281–292).

invitare quel fece che ella volle” (“she then took him by the hand, making alluring gestures to which he responded with big, broad, imbecilic grins, and led him into the hut, where Masetto needed very little coaxing to do her bidding” [3.1.31]). In other words, the nuns do not confine themselves to the feminine realm of *parole*, but rather make their desires known through *fatti*.

There are multiple similarities between these introductory phases of the *novella* and the *questione*: two women come upon a man alone in a garden and, thinking that no one can hear them, begin to speak about their desires and formulate a plan to bring these desires to fruition. One woman is bold while the other is hesitant, and the former uses unambiguous physical gestures to communicate with the man she is determined to seduce. There are, of course, very important differences: the women are noble ladies in the *questione* and nuns in the *novella*; the ladies of the *questione* wish to communicate their love to a man of equal social status while the nuns of the *novella* want to sexually exploit a supposedly disabled peasant; only one of the women in the *questione* proceeds to make physical advances while both of the nuns in the *novella* avail themselves of the willing gardener.

Even though the respective plot lines of the *novella* and the *questione* diverge, the queen’s ruling complements the *novella* quite well, as we might consider *Dec.* 3.1 a dramatization of the principle Fiammetta outlines in the sixth *questione*. If we recall her judgment that one in love will be timid (and, by extension, that if one is not timid then one is not in love), we find that the behavior of the nuns in the *novella* corresponds perfectly to this argument. Indeed, the actions of the nuns are anything but meek; they are motivated not by love, which would render them timid, but rather by lust.

Of course, the claim that one who is not timid is not truly in love does not go unchallenged. The unnamed woman who posed the *questione* makes the following rebuttal:

Gentil reina, vera cosa è che amore, ov'egli moderatamente dimora, temenza e vergogna conviene che ci sia, ma là ove egli in tanta quantità abonda, che agli occhi dei più savi leva la vista, come già qui per adietro si disse, dico che temenza non ci ha luogo, ma i movimenti di chi ciò sente sono secondo che egli sospigne: e però quella giovane, vedendosi inanzi il suo disio, tanto s'accese, che, abbandonata ogni vergogna, corse a quello di che era sì forte stimolata, che avanti sostenere non potea. L'altra, non tanto infiammata, servò più gli amorosi termini, vergognandosi, e rimanendo come voi dite. Dunque quella più ama e più dovrà essere amata (4.41).

Fair queen, it may be true that wherever love resides in moderation there will also be timorousness and modesty, but wherever love flows abundantly it steals insight from the wise, as was previously said. I say that in such a case timidity has no place, and whoever experiences such love will be entirely at its command. So that young woman, finding herself before that which she desired, was so enflamed that she abandoned all modesty and ran toward the one who had kindled her so fiercely that she could not bear it. The other woman, who was less enflamed, was better able to abide by love's boundaries and bashfully remained behind, as you say. Therefore, the first lady loved more and is more deserving of his love.

The unnamed woman here evokes the conception of love as an all-consuming force, a trope of courtly love literature that finds its origins in the amatory literature of antiquity. Even more significantly, she speaks of love as a self-contained entity that cannot be tempered by those experiencing it; she draws a distinction between a kind of love that is moderate in nature (“ov'egli moderatamente dimora,”) and another kind that abounds without limits (“ove egli in tanta quantità abonda”).¹¹¹ In other words, she argues that we experience love only as strongly as it dwells within us and we do not possess the ability to restrain or modify it in any way. In her view, the women's respective actions effectively signaled the intensity of the love they felt for her brother, therefore the woman who held back did not love the man as strongly as the one who embraced and kissed him.

¹¹¹ Such a description echoes Francesca's speech in *Inf.* 5 where she describes herself as a helpless victim of love and exculpates herself by claiming that she had no control of her behavior. Dante's design of this circle of hell completely repudiates such a conception of love, however, as he calls these sinners “peccator carnali / che la ragion sommettono al talento” (v. 38-39); in employing the Aristotelian view of moderation, Dante rejects the notion that we are powerless in the face of our desires.

Fiammetta responds to the woman's rebuttal by reiterating that love and timidity go hand-in-hand, and she further elaborates upon what she considers to be the difference between love and lust:

Adunque, quanta maggior quantità d'esso in alcuno si truova, e così del timore, come davanti dicemmo [...] Non è atto di donna innamorata, né d'alcun'altra, l'essere pronta, con ciò sia cosa che sola la molta vergogna, la quale in noi dee essere, è rimasa del nostro onore guardatrice [...] Quante ne sono già state, e forse noi d'alcune abbiamo saputo, le quali s'hanno molte volte fatto invitare di pervenire agli amorosi effetti, che volentieri n'avrebbero lo invitatore invitato prima che egli loro, se debita vergogna o temenza ritenute non l'avesse! E non per tanto, ogni ora che il no è della loro bocca uscito, hanno avuto nell'animo mille pentute, dicendo col cuore cento volte sì. Rimanga questo scelerato ardire nelle pari di Semiramis e di Cleopatra, le quali non amano, ma cercano d'acquetare il loro libidinoso volere, il quale chetato, non avanti d'alcuno più che d'un altro non si ricordano. I savi mercatanti mal volentieri arrischiano tutti i loro tesori ad un'ora a' fortunosi casi: e non per tanto una picciola parte non si curano di concedere loro, non sentendo di quella nell'animo alcuno dolore, se avviene che la perdano. Amava dunque la giovane, che abbracciò il vostro fratello, poco, e quel poco concedette alla fortuna, dicendo: "Se costui per questo acquisto, bene sta; se mi rifiuta, non ci sarà più che prendersene un altro." L'altra, che vergognandosi rimase, con ciò fosse cosa che ella lui amasse sopra tutte le cose, dubitò di mettere tanto amore in avventura, imaginandosi: "Se questo forse gli spiacesse e rifiutassemi, il mio dolore sarebbe tanto e tale ch'io ne morrei." Sia adunque più la seconda che la prima amata (4.42).

Therefore, the more of it [love] there is in a person, the more timid that person will be, as we said before [...] It is not the behavior of a woman in love, or of any woman, to be so forthright since the only thing we ought to have within us is modesty, which is the guardian of our honor [...] How many women have there been (some of whom we may have even known) who have been invited many times to partake of love's pleasures and would have readily invited the inviter first if they had not been held back by requisite modesty and timidity? Nevertheless, every time that "no" issued from their lips they were filled with regret and in their hearts were saying "yes" a hundred times. Leave such wicked passion to the likes of Semiramis and Cleopatra, who do not love but rather seek to slake their lustful thirst and once it is quenched barely remember one man more than another. Wise merchants are loath to risk all their treasures at once to the fancies of Fortune – they cannot even chance some small portion of it without feeling some fear that they will lose it. So the woman who embraced your brother loved him but little, and she risked only a little bit, saying to herself, "If I make a conquest of this one, that's fine; if he rejects me, it'll just be a matter of finding another." The other woman, who remained modest, loved him above all else and so she was afraid to leave such a love up to chance, thinking to herself, "If this displeases him and he refuses me, my pain would be so great that it would kill me." Therefore, let the second woman, not the first, be loved.

Fiammetta's disapproval of the bolder woman's behavior may, at first glance, seem to be little more than a misogynistic tirade against women's supposed lust, but upon closer inspection one finds that the discussion is more nuanced: Fiammetta considers the woman's actions inappropriate not simply because they were (in her view) motivated by lust, but because they were in violation of social norms. She argues that it is not proper for any woman to behave in such a forward manner and firmly states that being in love does not excuse this uninhibited behavior ("non è atto di donna innamorata, né d'alcun'altra, l'essere pronta"). Modesty is a social virtue that women have been conditioned to cultivate because it ensures that they will preserve their reputation ("vergogna ... è rimasa del nostro onore guardatrice"); any woman who does not practice it is effectively flouting a social norm of critical importance.

Consequently, there is an implicit question in Fiammetta's discourse: since a chaste reputation is a woman's most important asset, what kind of woman would be so willing to tarnish it? The queen uses a mercantile metaphor to represent this perplexing problem, noting that merchants are loath to risk even the smallest portion of their treasures for fear of losing it. Evidently, then, the bold woman is not a "savi[a] mercatant[e]," since she is willing to risk something that she ought to consider precious. The implication is clear: a woman who cares but little for her reputation is licentious, and a licentious woman sees men as objects she can use to satisfy her libidinous urges. Citing the examples of Semiramis and Cleopatra (so frequently associated with feminine profligacy that Dante includes them among the lustful in *Inf.* 5), Fiammetta says that such women do not care if they are rejected since men are disposable – if one man does not satisfy, there will always be another to take his place. This kind of attitude is in contrast to the modest woman, who so greatly fears rejection that she imagines the pain of it will destroy her.

More than a misogynistic reiteration of feminine vices, Fiammetta's rebuttal ultimately outlines the social virtues that women were expected to practice. She does not find fault with women for experiencing desire, evidencing the multitudes who would gladly have made the first move if not for the inhibiting forces of modesty and timidity ("volontieri n'avrebbero lo invitatore invitato prima che egli loro, se debita vergogna o temenza ritenute non l'avesse"). The proper response, however, is to resist all erotic inclinations and refuse such invitations ("ogni ora che il no è della loro bocca uscito, hanno avuto nell'animo mille pentute, dicendo col cuore cento volte sì").¹¹² The sixth *questione* ultimately establishes two poles: one in which women may think and speak of sensual desires but whose actions will nonetheless be tempered by modesty and reticence, and another in which women are so consumed by these desires that they will desperately and indiscriminately throw themselves upon men. In highlighting the social imperative of modesty, the *questione* problematizes the relationship between love and timidity by implying that it is not intrinsic or accidental but is instead socially determined: women who display timidity in love do so precisely because they have been socialized to behave that way. Boccaccio thus uses the *questione* to explore the social norms surrounding desire and courtship, and he calls attention to what would have been considered socially acceptable behavior for

¹¹² The idea that willing women would refuse sex because of the social imperative to appear modest – which was the most frequently deployed justification for rape – is rampant in literature dating back to antiquity. In the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid claims: "Pugnabit primo fortassis, et 'improbe' dicet: / Pugnando vinci se tamen illa volet" ("Though you call it force: it's force that pleases girls: / what delights is often to have given what they wanted, against their will" [v. 665-666, trans. A.S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*: 2001]). Boccaccio himself reproduced this trope most notably in the *Ninfale fiesolano* when Africo rapes Mensola after having been instructed by Venus: "Non temer di sforzarla, ché 'l mio figlio / la ferirà in tal modo e tal maniera / che non potrà uscir del tuo artiglio" ("Do not be afraid to force her, for my son / will pierce her in such a way / that she will not be able to escape your talons") (v. 203).

women. The discourse surrounding the women of the sixth *questione* stands in direct contrast to the women of the *Decameron*: they, unlike their *Decameronian* counterparts, are denied sexual agency. Ultimately, Fiammetta's ruling reads less like a philosophical treatise and more like a conduct manual: she does not assess them according to the Aristotelian rubric of virtuous moderation, but rather evaluates them according to prescriptive social norms of the period.

3.2 Resolved: Gifts Are Not the Ultimate Love Language

If the sixth *questione* explores what would have constituted socially unacceptable behavior for women, the first and tenth *questioni* instead probe what would have been considered compulsory behavior for women who were being courted. Filocolo narrates the first *questione*, recalling a feast day in his natal city upon which many fine ladies and knights had gathered to celebrate (“Io mi ricordo che in quella città dov’io nacqui si faceva un giorno una grandissima festa, alla quale cavalieri e donne erano molti ad onorarla”). He recalls two noble young men who had fixed their gaze upon a beautiful woman and had begun to argue quite passionately about which of them she liked more. Tempers escalated until they found themselves almost coming to blows, at which point they decided to enlist the help of an impartial third party: the young lady's mother.

Amenduni davanti alla madre della giovane se n'andarono, la quale similmente a quella festa stava, e così in presenza di lei proposero che, con ciò fosse cosa che sopra tutte l'altre giovani del mondo a ciascuno di loro la figlia di lei piaceva e essi fossero in quistione quale d'essi due piacesse più a lei, che le piacesse di concedere loro questa grazia, acciò che maggiore scandolo tra loro non nascesse, cioè che alla figlia comandasse che o con parole o con atti loro dimostrasse qual di loro da lei più fosse amato. La pregata donna ridendo rispose che volentieri (4.19).

Both went before the mother of the young woman, who was also at the feast, and in her presence they declared that they preferred her daughter to any other woman in the world and told her that they were in doubt as to which of them she liked more. So, in order to avoid further discord, they asked if she would do them the favor of asking her daughter to

communicate through words or gestures which of them she preferred. The woman laughed and said she would happily honor their request.

One might think that her willingness to help would guarantee a resolution to the problem – the young woman certainly would not defy the wishes of her mother – but the puzzle quickly becomes even knottier:

E chiamata la figliuola a sé, le disse: “Bella figlia, ciascuno di questi due più che sé t’ama, e in quistione sono quale da te più sia amato, e cercano, di grazia, che tu o con segno o con parola ne li facci certi; e però, acciò che d’amore, di cui pace e bene sempre dee nascere, non nasca il contrario, falli di ciò contenti, e con cortesi sembianti mostra inverso del quale più il tuo animo si piega.” Disse la giovane: “Ciò mi piace.” E rimiratili amenduni alquanto, vide che l’uno avea in testa una bella ghirlanda di fresche erbette e di fiori, e l’altro senza alcuna ghirlanda dimorava. Allora la giovane, che similmente in capo una ghirlanda di verdi frondi avea levò quella di capo a sé, e a colui che senza ghirlanda davanti le stava la mise in capo; appresso, quella che l’altro giovane in capo avea ella la prese e a sé la pose, e, loro lasciati stare, si ritornò alla festa, dicendo che il comandamento della madre e il piacere di loro avea fatto (4.19).

Calling her daughter to her, she said, “Fair daughter, each of these men loves you more than himself and they wish to know which of them you love better; they are hoping that you will, either with a word or a sign, resolve their doubts. And since love should breed peace and goodwill (and not the opposite), grant their wish and courteously tell them which one your soul favors.” “Gladly,” said the young woman. And gazing upon them for a while, she noticed that one of them had a garland of freshly cut greens and flowers upon his brow, while the other was without such a garland. So the young woman, who also had a garland of verdant leaves upon her head, took it off and placed it upon the man without a garland. Then she took the other man’s garland and placed it upon herself. She then left them to return to the feast, saying that she had fulfilled her mother’s request and granted their wish.

Far from resolving the doubts of her two suitors, the young woman’s actions breed even more confusion, and the men resume their arguing even more spiritedly than before:

I giovani rimasi così, nel primo quistione ritornarono, ciascuno dicendo che più da lei era amato; e quelli la cui ghirlanda la giovane prese e posela sopra la sua testa, diceva: “Fermamente ella ama più me, però che a niuno altro fine ha ella la mia ghirlanda presa, se non perché le mie cose le piacciono, e per avere cagione d’essermi tenuta; ma a te ha ella la sua donata quasi in luogo d’ultimo congedo, non volendo, come villana, che l’amore che tu l’hai portato sia senza alcuno merito” [...] L’altro dicendo il contrario, così rispondeva: “Veramente la giovane le tue cose ama più che te, e ciò si può vedere, ché ella ne prese; ma ella ama più me che le mie cose, in quanto ella delle sue mi donò: e non è segno d’ultimo merito il donare, come tu di’ ma è principio d’amistà e d’amore. E

fa il dono colui che 'l riceve soggetto al donatore: però costei, forse di me incerta, acciò che più certa di me avere per soggetto fosse, con dono mi volle alla sua signoria legare, se io legato forse non vi fossi. Ma tu, come puoi comprendere che se ella dal principio ti leva, ch'ella mai ti debbia donare?" E così quistionando dimorarono per grande spazio, e senza alcuna diffinizione si partirono. Ora, dico io, grandissima reina, se a voi fosse l'ultima sentenza in tale questione domandata, che giudichereste voi?

The young men remained this way, returning to their original questioning, each saying he was better loved by the woman. The one whose garland was taken by the lady and placed upon her own head said: "Certainly she loves me more, since she took my garland for no other reason than that she likes my things and so that she will have a reason to be linked to me. But to you she gave her own garland as a final farewell and, so as not to be callous, she did not want the love that you bore for her to be without any reward" [...] The other said the opposite, responding: "Obviously the lady loves your possessions more than she loves you, and this is evident in her taking your garland. But she loves me more than my possessions in that she gave me something that belonged to her; giving is not a sign of a final reward, as you have said, but is rather a source of friendship and love. A gift makes its recipient subject to its giver so she, perhaps uncertain of me and wanting to be confident that I would be her subject, wished to place me under her vassalage with a gift. But you, how can you believe that if she took from you at the start she will ever come to give to you?" And so they debated this for some time without ever resolving the issue. Now I ask you, great queen, if you were to give the final ruling in this matter, what would be your judgment?

Even before we examine Fiammetta's response, we find the *questione* presenting a key issue:

women's obligation to respond to their suitors by granting a *guiderdone*.

Guiderdone, from the Provençal *guerdon*, signifies, in the broadest terms, a reward; it is a term of multivalent meaning, and could refer to the reward that a lord would offer to his vassal or to the reward that a lady would grant her lover in exchange for his service. The inherently transactional nature of the courtly code is perhaps best represented by the notion of the *guiderdone*, which established a symbiotic relationship whereby acts of service were done in expectation of a reward. As Scaglione pithily states: "The expectation of a benefice was part of the appeal to *dreitz*, the cardinal virtue of justice the lover proclaimed about himself and

demanded of the lord.”¹¹³ According to the courtly ethos, it was only right (*dreitz*, in Provençal) that a man be rewarded for his loyalty, be it to a lady or a lord.

Guerdon appeared frequently in troubadour poetry and its Italian analogue and successor, *guiderdone*, was similarly a fixture within the Italian lyric tradition. Giacomo da Lentini provides a compelling example, evoking the trope of the haughty lady who is slow to repay her suitor’s unwavering love:

Guiderdone aspetto avere
da voi, donna, cui servire
no m’enoia;
ancor che mi siate altera
sempre spero avere intera
d’amor gioia (v. 1-6)
[...]
Fina donna, no mi siate
fera, poi tanta bieltate
in voi si trova:
ca donna c’à bellezze
ed è senza pietade,
com’omo [è] c’à ricchezze
ed usa scarsitade – di ciò c’ave;
se non è bene apreso,
nodruto ed insegnato,
da ogn’omo ’nd’è ripreso,
orruto e dispregiato – e posto a grave (v. 32-42).

I hope for recompense
From you, my lady, whom I’m not
Displeased to serve;
Although you treat me haughtily
I still hope to attain
Full joy of love.
[...]
My perfect lady, don’t be cruel,
Since so much loveliness
Is found in you:
For she who’s beautiful
But lacks all sympathy
Is like a man of wealth

¹¹³ Aldo Scaglione, *Knights at Court*, p. 93.

Who's parsimonious with what he has;
If he's not well-bred,
Refined, and well-informed,
He'll be reproached by all,
Reviled, despised, and put in dire straits.¹¹⁴

The implications are clear: the lover does not serve his lady unconditionally, but fully anticipates a fitting reward for his love. Furthermore, the lady who withholds a *guiderdone* for too long is cruel (“fera”) and in violation of the courtly ethos. By comparing the lady to a wealthy man who behaves avariciously, Giacomo da Lentini is describing transgressions of the courtly code: the beautiful woman is expected to provide recompense to her lover, just as the affluent man is expected to liberally share his riches and, like the miserly man who will be reviled and put in a bad way (“posto a grave”), the unyielding woman will similarly be subject to reproach.

The theme of *guiderdone* is thus central to the first *questione*, as this anecdote about the giving and taking of garlands provides Boccaccio a clever excuse to probe the expectations placed upon the courtly woman and the function of gifts within a courtship. The lady's two suitors are in disagreement as to the meaning of her gift: the man whose garland she took insists that she did so in order to be linked to him (“per avere cagione d'essermi tenuta”) while the man who received her garland maintains that the gesture symbolized her friendship and love for him (“principio d'amistà e d'amore”). The queen rules in favor of the man who received her garland, saying:

Diciamo che colui a cui ella donò la sua ghirlanda è più da lei amato. E questa ne pare la ragione: qualunque uomo o donna ama alcuna persona, per la forza di questo amore portato è ciascuno sì forte obligato alla cosa amata, che sopra tutte le cose a quella disidera di piacere, né a più legarla bisognano o doni o servigi; e questo è manifesto. Ma veggiamo che chi ama, la cosa amata, in qualunque maniera puote, di farsela benigna e suggesta s'ingegna in diversi modi, acciò che quella possa a' suoi piaceri recare, o con

¹¹⁴ *The Complete Poetry of Giacomo da Lentini*, trans. Richard Lansing, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018 (pp. 29-31).

più ardita fronte il suo disio dimandare [...] Dunque la giovane colui cui essa più amò, quello di più obligarsi cercò: e così diremo che quelli che 'l dono della ghirlanda ricevette, colui sia più dalla giovane amato (4.20).

We declare that he to whom she gave her garland is the one she loves more. And here is the reason: any man or woman that loves someone is obliged to the beloved because of the strength of the love he or she bears for that one. Therefore he or she desires above all else to please the beloved, and neither gifts nor services are required to bind him or her more strongly, and this is evident. But we find that those in love will try in various ways to make their beloved more sympathetic to them and will hope to make them their subject so that they can sway them to fulfill their desires or can more confidently ask for what they want [...] Therefore the young woman hoped to make the one she loved more obliged to her, so we argue that the one who received the gift of her garland was more loved by her.

In Fiammetta's estimation, gifts are not essential since love is what makes the lover obliged to the beloved, but gifts can ultimately make the beloved more receptive to the lover. In other words, because the lady was already subject to the man she loved, she hoped that by giving him her garland he would be similarly indebted to her.

Filocolo disagrees, interpreting the lady's gesture as a desire to possess some object of her beloved and treat it as a talisman:

Io terrei che il contrario fosse da giudicare, con ciò sia cosa che generalmente tra gli amanti soglia essere questa consuetudine, cioè desiderare di portare sopra sé alcuna delle gioie della cosa amata, però che di quelle le più volte più che di tutto il rimanente si sogliono gloriare, e, quella sentendo sopra sé, nell'animo si rallegrano [...] Per la qual cosa io così direi che, sì come voi diceste, saviamente fece la giovane, non diffinando però come voi faceste, ma in questa maniera: conoscendo la giovane che da' due giovani era molto amata e ella più che l'uno amare non potesse, però che amore indivisibile cosa si truova, ella l'uno dell'amore che le portava volle *guiderdonare*, acciò che tale benivolenza non rimanesse da lei *inguiderdonata*, e donogli la sua ghirlanda in merito di ciò. All'altro, cui ella amava, volle porgere ardire e ferma speranza del suo amore, levandogli la sua ghirlanda e ponendola a sé: nel quale levare gli mostrò sé essergli obligata per la presa ghirlanda; e però, a mio giudicio, più costui a cui tolse, che quello a cui donò amava (4.21) (emphasis mine).

I would argue the contrary, since it is customary for a lover to wish to place upon his or her person some object of the beloved; it is common for a lover to revel in this and, upon feeling the object upon himself or herself, his or her soul is gladdened [...] For this reason I would agree with you that the young lady behaved very sensibly, nonetheless I would not explain this as you do but rather in this way: since the woman knew that she

was loved by two men and she could not love them both in return (since love cannot be divvied up), she wished to reward the love of one of them so that such benevolence would not go unrewarded. To this one she gave her garland. To the other, whom she loved, she hoped to provide reassurance and firm hope of her love, so she took his garland and placed it upon herself. In that act she showed him that she was obliged to him for taking his garland so, in my opinion, she loved him from whom she took more than him to whom she gave.

Filocolo's rebuttal begins by reiterating that the lady cannot love both men. In his assertion that a person cannot love two people simultaneously ("però che amore indivisibile cosa si truova"), he makes explicit reference to the *De amore*: "Nemo duplici potest amore ligari" ("No one can be bound by a double love").¹¹⁵ He argues that, even though she could not love them both, she nonetheless wanted to reward the lesser man for his benevolence by gifting him the garland. At the same time, she wanted to demonstrate her love for the other man; taking his garland was thereby a symbol of her obligation to him ("gli mostrò sé essergli obligata per la presa ghirlanda").

The queen doubles down on her original position and takes it a step further by asserting that his argument is self-refuting and, therefore, fallacious:

Assai il tuo argomentare ci piacerebbe, se tu te stesso nel tuo parlare non dannassi. Guarda come perfetto amore insieme col rubare può concorrere: come mi potrai tu mai mostrarne che io ami quella persona la quale io rubo più che quella a cui io dono, con ciò sia cosa che tra più manifesti segni d'amare alcuna persona è il donare? E secondo la quistione proposta, ella all'uno donò la ghirlanda, all'altro la tolse, non le fu dall'altro donata: e quello che noi tutto giorno per essempro veggiamo può qui per essempro bastare, che si dice volgarmente coloro essere da' signori più amati i quali le grazie e' doni ricevono, che quelli che di quelli privati sono. E però noi ultimamente tegnamo, conchiudendo, che quegli sia più amato a cui è donato, che a cui è tolto (4.22).

¹¹⁵ *De amore*, 3.8.44 (trans. John Jay Parry). It is also worth noting that, while Capellanus insists that a person cannot love two people at once, he sees nothing problematic about one person being loved by two people at the same time: "Unam feminam nil prohibet a duobus amari et a duabus mulieribus unum" ("Nothing forbids one woman from being loved by two men or one man by two women" 3.8.48]). Many of the *questioni* depict men or women with multiple suitors but Boccaccio, echoing Capellanus, emphasizes early on that it would not be permissible for them to love more than one person.

Your argument would please us quite well if you had not undermined it in your own speech. Ask yourself whether a perfect love can exist alongside thievery; how can you ever prove to me that I love the person from whom I steal more than the one to whom I give, since giving is one of the most evident signs of love? According to the question you posed, she gave a garland to one and took a garland from the other; it was not given to her by the other. What we witness every day can provide us a useful example in this regard, too: it is often said that those who receive gifts and graces are better loved by their lords than those who are deprived of them. So, in conclusion, we hold that the man to whom she gave was more loved than the one from whom she took.

For Fiammetta, the *guiderdone* reigns supreme – it is the ultimate symbol of love, and no other gesture could possibly match it.

I have already alluded to the central concerns underlying this *questione* but, in the interest of clarity, I elected to withhold a more detailed analysis until I had presented the *questione* and the ensuing debate in its entirety. The first *questione* demonstrates Boccaccio's interest in the transactionality of the courtly love affair, and he uses it to display the extent to which it placed women in a catch-22. In *Guiderdone aspetto avere*, Giacomo da Lentini depicted the courtly rules of engagement: a man would express his love for a woman through words and deeds, and if the lady did not reward his efforts, she might ultimately find herself in dire straits (“posto a grave”). Andreas Capellanus's treatise on courtly love expands upon these rules of engagement and, since Boccaccio repeatedly refers and responds to the *De amore*, it is once again a crucial intertext.

One is hard pressed to find a text that more clearly depicts the impossible situation of the courtly lady than the *De amore*. The complexity of her dilemma is belied by his declaration in the First Book:

Verus igitur amor ex sola cordis affectione procedit et ex pura gratia et mera liberalitate conceditur. Pretiosissimum namque munus amoris nullius potest pretii aestimatione pensari vel argenti dehonostari substantia (1.9.1).

Real love comes only from the affection of the heart and is granted out of pure grace and genuine liberality, and this most precious gift of love cannot be paid for at any set price or be cheapened by a matter of money.

In spite of such a seemingly unambiguous statement, Capellanus proceeds to complicate matters by underlining the inherently transactional nature of courtly love affairs. Don Alfred Monson notes:

The verb *largiari* and the noun *largitio* are used fifty-six times to describe the “bestowing” of a woman’s love, or at least the hope of it [...] In the debate of the First Dialogue concerning whether love or service should come first, the man, young and inexperienced, argues that it would be more to the woman’s credit to give him her love as an act of pure generosity rather than as payment for past deeds. The woman answers that if this principle were accepted, it would put those who do good deeds at a disadvantage [...] In the Eighth Dialogue it is the woman who claims the right to exercise her generosity by bestowing her love on a man who serves her only through his deeds. The man replies with an allusion to Seneca to the effect that he who must ask more than once for a favor has bought it dearly; from this he concludes that the woman’s love is owed to him, not only because of his deeds but also because of the asking. The woman answers that love is not a matter for commerce but a gratuitous act of generosity, forcing the man to acknowledge that his earlier discussion of love in terms of obligation was merely figurative.¹¹⁶

For Capellanus, the granting of a woman’s love constitutes a courtly virtue akin to liberality but, in drawing this equivalence, he exposes an inherent contradiction: courtly love conceptualizes love as a gift that women bestow generously and unconditionally yet, at the same time, men are encouraged to earn their love through acts of service. The Eighth Dialogue similarly presents the notion that, by asking a woman for her love, a man would be entitled to it; while this is not necessarily a correct or holistic representation of courtly love, it is accurate in its indication that the courtly lady was expected to respond in some way to a man’s offer of love.

A man could attempt to win a woman’s love through impressive deeds, verbal pronouncements of his ardor, or material gifts, which would come with their own set of

¹¹⁶ *Andreas Capellanus, Scholasticism, and the Courtly Tradition*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005, p. 265.

problems. In Book One, Capellanus rails specifically against venal women who “falsely pose as fine ladies to beguile men and rob them of their wealth,”¹¹⁷ yet he also states that there is no woman in the entire world who will not withhold her favors until she has received some kind of gift.¹¹⁸ Women are thus presented as intrinsically greedy beings, so much so that there exists an entire class of them whose sole purpose is to defraud men of their fortunes. Yet Capellanus is equally vitriolic toward women who grant their love without an exorbitant asking price, as evidenced by the moral tale in Book One in which ladies who indiscriminately bestow their favors upon knights are punished as harshly as those who withhold their favors from knights who worked to earn their affections.¹¹⁹ In considering these conflicting perspectives, we can appreciate the completely unworkable position of the courtly lady:

[There] emerges a picture of the very delicate position in which a woman finds herself, according to the *De amore*, upon being solicited by a suitor. If she gives in too easily, it will be assumed that she is motivated by excessive carnal desire [...] If, on the other hand, she holds out too long, it will be assumed that she is interested only in stringing the man along to get his money. In short, she is either a slut or a prostitute.¹²⁰

The *De amore* thus presents the harsh reality of the courtly lady: she was required to respond to her suitors and fittingly reward them for their displays of love (be they gifts, deeds, or words),

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 270.

¹¹⁸ “Mundi namque partes plurimas circuivi ac diligenti examinatione disquirens aliquem reperire non potui, qui mulierem aliquam se asserat invenisse, quae sponte non oblata instanti postulatione non exigat, et si oblata vel exacta plenaria munera non agnoscat, quae ab amore non retardet incepto” (“I have travelled through a great many parts of the world and, although I made careful inquiries I could never find a man who would say that he discovered a woman who if a thing was not offered to her would not demand it insistently and would not hold off from falling in love unless she got rich gifts in one way or another” [3.66]).

¹¹⁹ Howard Limoli cites this parable as evidence of Boccaccio’s departure from the courtly tradition, noting that *Dec.* 5.8 only partially imitates Andreas’s tale in that it punishes a lady who did not reward her faithful knight but makes no mention of ladies who bestow *guiderdoni* indiscriminately (“Boccaccio’s Masetto [*Decameron* III, 1] and Andreas Capellanus,” p. 288).

¹²⁰ Monson, p. 271.

but she would have to strike the right balance between asking too much of them and rewarding them too easily.

Boccaccio exhibits a fascination with the courtly lady's predicament, and he is interested in exploring the degree to which gifts would ensure the lover's obligation. To more fully appreciate how our author elaborated upon these themes over the course of his literary career, we might consider two *novelle* in particular within the *Decameron*: 8.10, which examines the role of gifts within a romantic relationship, and 5.8, which presents the predicament of the courtly lady forced to respond to her suitor.

Fiammetta's stance on gift-giving is problematized in *Dec.* 8.10, as the *novella* utterly contradicts her argument that the giving of gifts is the ultimate expression of love.¹²¹ The *novella* narrates the misadventures of Salabaetto, a young and inexperienced Florentine merchant, who is duped by Iancofiore, a beautiful but unscrupulous woman ("femin[a] del corpo bellissim[a], ma nemich[a] della onestà" [8.10.7]). She is the embodiment of the venal woman Capellanus so despises, as she belongs to a class of women who dedicate themselves to swindling men by surreptitiously ascertaining their net worth and subsequently seducing them in order to purloin their fortune ("da' libro della dogana s'informano di ciò che egli v'ha e di quanto

¹²¹ While I focus on the implications of gift giving in the *novella*, other scholars have put forward different readings of the commercial aspects of *Dec.* 8.10. In *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), Marilyn Migiel argues that the tale "stands as the crowning achievement of a day dedicated to showing how the forces of economic exchange and accountability (*ragione*) work to exclude women" (p. 57). Olivia Holmes instead maintains that the *novella* represents a figurative reclaiming of justice in the wake of the Black Death: "The *novelle* of Day Eight arguably describe a world out of whack in which human relationships have deteriorated [...] and are frequently commodified. But the stories also point toward the reconstruction of an orderly society based on a system of judicial mechanisms [in which] some things are put right again: the rules of courtly behavior are enforced (such as the one proscribing the mixing of love and money)" ("Trial by 'Beffa': Retributive Justice and In-Group Formation in Day Eight" in *Annali D'Italianistica*, vol. 31, 2013, p. 386).

può fare: e appresso con lor piacevoli e amorosi atti e con parole dolcissime questi cotali mercatanti s'ingegnano d'adescare e di trarre nel loro amore" [8.10.8]). Iancofiore convinces Salabaetto that she is a wealthy and upstanding woman by heaping luxuries upon him: she bathes and pampers him with the finest soaps and oils, offers him extravagant banquets, and showers him with lavish trinkets. But once she has convinced him to loan her the whopping sum of five hundred florins, she completely changes her attitude.¹²² She frequently turns him away when he comes to visit, and when she does deign to see him, she no longer greets him with the smiles, caresses, and sumptuous hospitality to which he had become accustomed ("né quel viso né quelle carezze né quelle feste piú gli eran fatte che prima" [8.10.38]); it is at that point that Salabaetto realizes the error of his ways.

The affair between Salabaetto and Iancofiore epitomizes the courtly relationship gone awry. Iancofiore grants him both sexual and material *guiderdoni*, which Salabaetto foolishly interprets as signs of genuine love, yet he never stops to consider that he did not, in fact, do anything to earn these amatory rewards; since he did nothing to merit these *guiderdoni*, they are not indicators of real love. The *novella* thus puts Fiammetta's claim on its head – gifts cannot always constitute a sign of love, especially if they are not merited in some way. *Dec.* 8.10 is ultimately a perverse caricature, as it suggestively depicts the consequences of the intrinsically transactional courtly love affair.

¹²² The *novella* provides an almost verbatim representation of Capellanus's claim that women, once they have decided that there is nothing left to gain from a suitor, will suddenly treat them with disdain: "Sed etsi mulieri substantiam largitus fueris infinitam, si tantum in soliti muneris te viderit praesentatione remissum vel ad inopiam te iam devenire cognoverit, incognitum te quasi alienigenam reputabit et in omnibus sibi eris taediosus atque nocivus" ("But even though you have given a woman innumerable presents, if she discovers that you are less attentive about giving her things than you used to be, or if she learns you have lost your money, she will treat you like a perfect stranger who has come from some other country, and everything you do will bore her or annoy her" [3.67]).

Dec. 5.8 instead examines the expectations placed upon the courtly lady to fittingly reward her suitor for his love. Nastagio degli Onesti hopes to win the love of a woman of superior social station through worthy deeds (“giovane troppo piú nobile che esso non era, prendendo speranza con le sue opere di doverla trarre ad amar lui” [5.8.5]). She is totally unreceptive to his efforts, perhaps owing to her singular beauty or her elevated status, and shows him nothing but disdain (“forse per la sua singular bellezza o per la sua nobiltà sí altiera e disdegnosa divenuta” [5.8.6]). When he comes upon a ghastly spectacle whereby the ghost of a woman is chased through the woods and brutally murdered by the ghost of the man whose affections she refused to return, he is pleased to learn that these apparitions occur on a weekly basis and decides to invite a coterie of women (his love interest among them) to a feast in those same woods so they can witness it for themselves. The lady is so shaken by the display that she immediately sends word to Nostagio that she will submit to his every desire; he asks for her hand in marriage and, she, without even consulting her parents, accepts his proposal.¹²³ While Giacomo da Lentini ominously insinuated in *Guiderdone aspetto avere* that the woman who does not yield to her suitor will be “posto a grave,” *Dec.* 5.8 discards all subtlety and brings these threats to vivid and horrifying life. The *novella* thus elaborates upon the first *questione*, dramatizing the expectations placed upon the courtly lady and depicting the perilous consequences of her refusal.¹²⁴

¹²³ This detail serves to emphasize the degree of her terror and the urgency of her desire to satisfy his request; as discussed in the previous chapter, marriages among wealthy families were almost never contracted without the intervention of the spouses’ respective families.

¹²⁴ Boccaccio, of course, was not the first medieval author to portray the punishments awaiting unyielding women, as Olivia Holmes notes: “Boccaccio also seems to draw on an extraordinary number of inherited literary sources in this tale, notably a long tradition of courtly allegories in which beautiful, hard-hearted ladies are punished for not having shown compassion to their lovers” (“*Decameron* 5:8: From Compassion to Compliancy” in *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2019, p. 27).

By placing the first *questione* in dialogue with *Dec.* 8.10 and 5.8, we see the extent of Boccaccio's engagement with the courtly love tradition (and with the *De amore* in particular) and we once again see him casting a critical eye on its tenets. Indeed, *Dec.* 8.10 exposes the absurdity of Fiammetta's claim that gifts are the ultimate sign of love, while *Dec.* 5.8 follows the implications surrounding women's refusal to their gravest conclusions. The *questione* stages these same issues by presenting a courtly woman who is required not just to reply to her suitors, but to signal her preference by bestowing a *guiderdone*. Boccaccio once more uses the *questione* to depict a courtly convention and then to subvert it entirely, in this case by having the woman cleverly give a non-response that her desperate suitors attempt to interpret in order to support their respective causes. There is something unmistakably defiant and impassive in the lady's behavior after she has given and taken the garlands; as soon as this is done, she does not speak any further to either of them, except to say that she fulfilled her mother's request and granted their wish, and then she leaves them without a backward glance ("loro lasciati stare, si ritornò alla festa, dicendo che il comandamento della madre e il piacere di loro avea fatto"). She does not verbalize if she loves either of them, nor does her gesture make any clear indication as to her preference – it is vague and highly interpretive at best. Furthermore, she does not seem to have any emotional investment in their debate but rather deigns to interact with them purely out of respect for her mother's wishes. The ambiguous nature of the *questione* ensures that the suitors, and we readers, will never be able to conclusively say which of them she preferred, or even if she loved either of them at all. But such concerns are almost immaterial, as the *questione*'s true significance lies in its depiction of a courtly lady who shrewdly liberates herself from the oppressive expectations of courtly love. In this sense, she anticipates the ladies of the

Decameron who, through cunning deeds or *pronte risposte*, triumph not only over men, but over the social structures that sought to subjugate them.

3.3. Resolved: Greater Risks Merit Greater Rewards

In many ways, the first *questione* sets the stage for the tenth *questione*, which similarly focuses on the role of the *guiderdone* and the expectations that suitors placed upon the courtly lady. Posed by Ascalion, the tenth *questione* depicts a high-stakes competition between two men vying for the love of a beautiful widow:

Altissima reina, io mi ricordo che già fu nella nostra città una bella e nobile donna rimasa di valoroso marito vedova, la quale per le sue mirabili bellezze era da molti nobili giovani amata, e, oltre a molti, due gentili e valorosi cavalieri, ciascuno quanto potea l'amava. Ma per accidente avvenne che ingiusta accusa di costei fu posta da' suoi parenti nel cospetto del nostro signore, e, appresso, per iniqui testimoni provata: per le quali inique prove ella meritò d'essere al fuoco dannata. Ma però che la coscienza del dannatore era perplessa, però che le inique prove quasi conoscere gli pareva, volendo agl'iddii e a' fortunosi casi la vita di quella commettere, cotale condizione aggiunse alla data sentenza: che poi che la donna fosse al fuoco menata, se alcuno cavaliere si trovasse il quale per la salute di lei combattere volesse contro al primo che a quella dopo lui s'opponesse, quello a cui vittoria ne seguisse, ciò che egli difendea se ne facesse (4.55).

Most high queen, I remember in our city there was a beautiful and noble woman who had been widowed by her valiant husband; because of her incredible beauty she was admired by many noble young men, and among them were two very refined and brave knights who loved her more than anything. But it happened by chance that her relatives unjustly accused her of some offense in the presence of our ruler and she was tried and convicted with false testimony. She was to be burned at the stake, but the conscience of the judge who had passed the sentence was puzzled, and he was almost positive that she had been convicted with false evidence. Hoping to leave her fate up to the gods and Fortune, he added a condition to her sentence: if, as the lady was being led to the stake, a knight were to come forward and defend her from the first person who opposed him, her fate would be determined by whoever won the duel.

Readers of the *questioni d'amore* will, by now, easily recognize the *dramatis personae* of Ascalion's tale, as he evokes the familiar social templates of the widow and the knight. It is an obvious pairing: widows were designated as a protected class (known as *miserabiles personae*),

while knights, under the chivalric code, were required to defend the most vulnerable of society. The *questione* is, at first glance, rather unexciting, as it depicts a conventionally courtly scenario in which a beautiful woman needs to be rescued by a valiant knight (or, in this case, knights). The attentive reader, however, notices a series of fascinating details within this seemingly pedestrian introduction: the widow's accusation by her own relatives, her conviction through false testimony, and her sentence to be burned at the stake. Such legal particulars should not be neglected, as they are indicative of Boccaccio's juridical background and, as such, they merit historical contextualization.

In order to historicize the juridical aspects of the *questione* concisely and effectively, I will touch upon the following questions: what offenses would warrant a death sentence for women in the Middle Ages? What, if anything, might we make of the fact that her relatives were the ones to accuse her? What was the role of testimony in the medieval trial and, by extension, how powerful a tool was false testimony?

Readers might find the idea of a woman sentenced to capital punishment unsettling and, in light of the gendered differences in criminal activity and the ensuing penalties, this is not without reason:

A rare consensus among scholars working across disciplines, regions, and periods concerns women's seemingly perennial marginality and gross underrepresentation in criminal processes. Explanations differ, running the gamut from women's law-abiding nature or their superior talent for concealing crime, to a lack of motives combined with limited opportunities, to the hegemony of patriarchal, gender-biased systems skewing detection, conviction, and sentencing patterns.¹²⁵

In the popular imagination, the image of a woman being burned at the stake may conjure up visions of witches or martyrs, but those were certainly not the only women sentenced to death.

¹²⁵ Guy Geltner: "A Cell of Their Own: The Incarceration of Women in Late Medieval Italy." *Signs*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, p. 27.

In the case of late medieval Reggio Emilia, for instance, men and women of all social classes could be sentenced to death for murder, arson, rape, theft, witchcraft and treason, though it was relatively uncommon that a death sentence actually be enacted upon nobles.¹²⁶ Adultery was also typically classified as a capital offense, yet, in this period in Italy, women offenders were more likely to be sentenced to death than their male counterparts.¹²⁷ In terms of the mode of execution, the typical outcome was burning or being buried alive, as Esther Cohen notes:

Jurists of late medieval customary law repeatedly stated that thieves must be hung and women must not, but none could, or would, explain the reason [...] In fact, all over western Europe women were very rarely hung or executed in any form that might exhibit their bodies to the public. Rather, they were either buried alive or burned.¹²⁸

Since the *questione* does not say what the widow was accused of, we are left to speculate as to the nature of her crime. The portrayal of a woman sentenced to burn at the stake is consistent with the typical mode of executing women in this period and, even more significantly, it calls to mind the novella of Madonna Filippa (*Dec.* 6.7). While *Dec.* 6.7 is not a perfect analogue, the *questione* and the novella are similar in that they both depict women (each is “nobile” and “bella”) sentenced to burn at the stake;¹²⁹ both women are ultimately saved by a

¹²⁶ Joanna Carraway Vitiello, *Public Justice and the Criminal Trial in Late Medieval Italy: Reggio Emilia in the Visconti Age*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 190.

¹²⁷ Vitiello refers to a case from 1386 in which a man sought the maximum penalty for his adulterous wife and her lover: “[He] made it clear in his accusation that his wife lived with him honestly, *honestate viventem cum dicto suo marito*. This was a crucial part of his charge [...] [because] the statutes at Reggio Emilia distinguished between sex crimes based on two criteria: whether the woman was of good *fama*, and whether she had consented to the act [...] The ‘violation’ of an honest married woman [...] carried a fine of 100 pounds for [the lover], and if proven, could have carried a capital penalty for [the wife]” (ibid., p. 92).

¹²⁸ “Symbols of Culpability and the Universal Language of Justice: The Ritual of Public Executions in Late Medieval Europe” in *History of European Ideas*, vol. 11, 1989, p. 412.

¹²⁹ I cite once again Trevor Dean, who notes that while *Dec.* 6.7 depicts an Italian legal system becoming more progressive, the historical reality was completely contrary: “Thirteenth-century statutes are largely silent on adultery, but in the early fourteenth-century they move quickly, first to impose financial penalties on the man, then to impose them on the woman also (fine and loss of dowry). From the mid-fourteenth century, more severe corporal penalties were introduced for

sympathetic judge willing to create some sort of legal loophole through which they are ultimately exonerated. Is it possible that the widow was falsely accused of adultery after the death of her husband?

This brings us to our next consideration: what are we to make of the fact that her relatives were the ones to accuse her? In his seminal study of the *questioni d'amore*, Pio Rajna admits to being puzzled as to Boccaccio's sources for this particular *questione*: while the trope of the unjustly accused woman is all too common in medieval literature, the detail of her being accused by her family is unique and difficult to explain.¹³⁰ Similar to our modern day, it was not unheard of for people in the Middle Ages to exploit the legal system by bringing false accusations against their own relatives out of spite or in order to avenge some slight.¹³¹ While we cannot determine with any real certainty why the widow of the *questione* is accused by her relatives, it is hard to find this detail completely insignificant. If we operate under the hypothesis that she was falsely accused of adultery by her family, we might find one explanation. Apart from the death penalty,

the woman, ranging from shaving and whipping, or imprisonment, to death. Boccaccio's story in the *Decameron* (VI.7), in which the city of Prato abolished the death penalty for a wife's adultery in response to one adulteress's clever pleading, runs entirely counter to the historical trend, but may, of course, have been intended as a fictional discussion of the appropriateness of this penalty" ("Fathers and Daughters, Marriage Laws and Marriage Disputes in Bologna and Italy, 1200-1500," pp. 86-87).

¹³⁰ "La donna è accusata «da' suoi parenti»: particolarità che non importa nulla per la storia [...] Ma poi non conosco casi in cui s'abbia in modo esplicito questa circostanza associata coll'altra, che sia un amante o un innamorato il difensore. Un dato prezioso per giudicare noi avremmo se il Boccaccio ci avesse detto, in che propriamente consistesse l'«ingiusta accusa»" ("L'episodio delle questioni d'amore nel *Filocolo* di Boccaccio," *Romania*, vol. 31, no. 121, 1902, p. 55).

¹³¹ In his discussion of the misuses of the justice system and the prevalence of false accusations, Trevor Dean provides some illuminating anecdotes, some of which depict interfamilial legal battles: "In Bologna, we find a woman charged with killing her husband (who, as was later proved in court, died of natural causes) as part of a battle with her in-laws for custody of her children; and girls 'abducted' in disputes within families regarding their marriage" (*Crime and Justice in Late Medieval Italy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 21).

less severe punishments for adultery included the forfeiture of a woman's dowry.¹³² Could her family have accused her of adultery in the hopes of seizing her dowry, with the (perhaps) unintended consequence of sending her to her death?

Leaving aside the ambiguity of her family's intentions, the *questione* explicitly notes that the case against her was built entirely upon false testimony, which raises questions about criminal procedure in the Middle Ages. The fact that her relatives make a false accusation in the presence of their city's ruler sheds light on one of the several ways that charges could be brought against a person. If the podestà were to hear rumors about the commission of a crime, no plaintiff was required – hearsay would be sufficient to bring about a trial:

The community in general stood as accuser, with *fama* as its voice [...] The rumor or common understanding (*fama*) that a particular person had committed an act was sufficient to launch a criminal trial against that individual [...] By the end of the thirteenth century, *fama* was... 'the procedural threshold that had to be surmounted before the inquisitorial magistrate could institute criminal proceedings... analogous to the common law theory of probable cause.'¹³³

False accusations could thus have been made quite easily and would have carried significant weight. As for trial testimony, by the mid fourteenth century trials had begun to rely less on the statements of witnesses but, up to that point, this were the most prevalent type of evidence in criminal procedures. Both kinds of juridical proceedings (accusations and inquisitions) relied upon witness testimony, yet they were structured in such a way that they virtually invited false testimony. In the case of an inquisition, the judge was responsible for selecting what he believed to be neutral witnesses to provide testimony, but in the case of an accusation, it was incumbent upon the accuser to nominate witnesses to vouch for their claims.¹³⁴ It seems unlikely that, left

¹³² Ibid., p. 138.

¹³³ Vitiello, p. 57-58.

¹³⁴ Dean, *Crime and Justice in Late Medieval Italy*, p. 22.

to their own devices, accusers would have selected unbiased witnesses to support their allegations, and it is not unreasonable to suspect that perjury would have been a frequent occurrence at such trials.

While I cannot conclusively validate the theories I have suggested regarding the nature of the widow's crime and the motives of her relatives, the legalistic details of the tenth *questione* undoubtedly lend themselves quite well to historicization. With this historical contextualization in place, let us return to the events narrated in the *questione*. Word of the widow's sentence reaches the ears of her lovers, but this unfortunately does not ensure a simple resolution to her dilemma:

Udita la condizione da' due amanti, e per ventura dall'uno prima che dall'altro, quelli che prima l'udì prese l'armi subitamente, e salito a cavallo venne al campo, contradicendo a chi contravenire gli volesse la morte della donna. L'altro che più tardi sentito avea questo, udendo che già era al campo colui per la difesa di lei [...] non sapendo che si fare, si doleva imaginando che l'amore della donna per sua tardezza avea perduto, e l'altro giustamente l'avea guadagnato. E così dolendosi, gli venne pensato che se prima che alcuno altro al campo andasse armato, dicendo che la donna dovea morire, egli, lasciandosi vincere, la potea scampare: e così il pensiero mise in effetto, e fu campata la donna (4.55).

Both of her suitors learned of the sentence, but one happened to hear of it before the other, so he took up arms, leapt on his horse and rode to the field, challenging anyone who would fight him for her life. The other discovered this later and, upon hearing that the first knight was already on the field to defend her, [...] he did not know what to do, and he lamented having rightly lost his lady's love to the other knight because of his tardiness. But, in mourning this turn of events, it occurred to him that, if he were to arrive at the field before anyone else, he could claim to want her dead, challenge the other knight and thus free her by letting him win; so this plan was put into effect and the woman was indeed freed.

The widow is liberated from one precarious situation only to be thrust into another, as she is now prevailed upon by the two men:

Liberata adunque la donna, dopo alquanti giorni, il primo cavaliere andò a lei, e sé umilmente le raccomandò, ricordandole come egli per lei campare da morte a mortale pericolo pochi giorni davanti s'era posto, e, mercé degl'iddii e della sua forza, lei e sé da tale accidente avea campato: onde per questo le piacesse, in luogo di merito, il suo amore,

il quale sopra tutte sempre desiderato avea, donare. E appresso con simile preghiera venne il secondo cavaliere, dicendo che a rischio di morire per lei s'era messo: "e ultimamente perché voi non moriste, sostenni di lasciarmi vincere, onde eterna infamia me ne seguirà, dov'io avrei vittorioso onore potuto acquistare, volendo incontro la vostra salute avere le mie forze operate." La donna ciascuno ringraziò benignamente, promettendo debito *guiderdone* ad amenduni del ricevuto servizio. Rimase adunque la donna, costoro partiti, in dubbio a cui il suo amore donare dovesse, o al primo o al secondo, e di ciò dimanda consiglio: a quale direste voi ch'ella il dovesse più tosto donare (4.55).

A few days after the lady was freed, the first knight went to her and humbled himself before her, reminding her that he had placed himself in mortal danger to save her from death just a few days before, and that thanks to the gods and his valor he had saved her life. For this he hoped it would please her to grant him her love as a reward. And soon after the second knight came with a similar plea, saying that he had also risked his life for her salvation: "What's more, in order to preserve your life I allowed myself to be defeated and have eternal shame follow me, even though I could have won great honor if I had used my strength to operate against your wellbeing." The lady thanked them both kindly, promising to give them a suitable reward for the services they had rendered. Yet, once they had departed, the woman remained in doubt as to whom she should grant her love, to the first or the second knight. So she seeks counsel: upon whom do you say she should bestow her love?

Fiammetta rules in favor of the first knight, arguing that he, unlike the second knight, was prepared to sacrifice his life for the lady; he assumed the greater risk and should consequently receive the greater reward:

Noi terremo [...] che il primo sia da amare, e l'ultimo da lasciare, però che il primo operò forza e dimostrò il buono amore con sollecito modo, dando se medesimo a ogni pericolo infino alla morte, il quale per la futura battaglia potesse adivenire. La quale assai bene gliene potea seguire, con ciò sia cosa che se sollicito fosse stato a tale battaglia fare contra di lui alcuno de' nemici della donna come fu l'amante [...] né manifesto gli fu che contro lui dovesse uscire uno che vincere si lasciasse, come avvenne. L'ultimo, veramente, andò avvisato né di morire né di lasciar morire la donna: dunque, con ciò sia cosa che egli meno mettesse in avventura, meno merita di guadagnare. Aggia, adunque, il primo l'amore della donna bella sì come giusto guadagnatore di quello (4.56).

We hold [...] that the first knight should be loved and the other should be forsaken, since the first showed strength and demonstrated his good love with great concern for her, submitting himself to every danger including death, which very well could have occurred in the ensuing battle. This could have easily been the outcome if one of the lady's enemies had been as eager as the lover to do battle against him [...] nor was it obvious that the one who challenged him did so with the intention of losing, as was the case. The second knight came into battle neither fearing his own death nor the death of the lady,

therefore since he risked less he should be rewarded less. Let, therefore, the first man have the love of the lady since he is the one who truly earned it.

Ascalion objects on the grounds that the first knight already received a sufficient reward, since he had earned public praise for defending the widow's honor; the second knight, on the other hand, sacrificed more than the first in order to save her. In an attempt to further bolster his claim, he references the queen's ruling in the third *questione*, asserting that, because the second knight demonstrated the superior virtue of wisdom (as opposed to physical strength), he is more deserving of the widow's love:

O sapientissima reina, che è ciò che voi dite? Non basta una volta essere meritato del bene, senza più meriti dimandare? Certo sì. Il primo è meritato, però che da tutti per la ricevuta vittoria è onorato: e che più merito gli bisogna se amore è merito della virtù? A maggior cosa ch'egli non fece basteria il ricevuto onore. Ma colui che con senno venne avisato, dee essere senza *guiderdone* e, poi, da tutti vituperato, avendo sì bene come il primo scampata la donna? Non è il senno da anteporre ad ogni corporale forza? Come costui, se con la salute della donna venne, dee per merito essere abbandonato? Cessi che questo sia. Se egli nol seppe tosto come l'altro, questa non fu negligenza, ché, se saputo l'avesse, forse prima che l'altro corso sarebbe a quello che l'altro corse. Quello che prese per ultimo rimedio il prese discretamente, di che merito giustamente gli dee seguire, il quale merito dee essere l'amore della donna, se dirittamente si guarda; e voi dite il contrario (4.57) (emphasis mine).

Wise queen, what are you saying? Is it not sufficient to win one prize without asking for others? Of course it is! The first knight was indeed rewarded, since he was honored by all for his victory, and what reward does he require if love is the reward of virtue? The honor he received was even greater than the labor he undertook. But he who came with his wits about him, must he go without any reward and be scorned by all, even though he did just as much as the first knight to free the lady? Is not wisdom to be valued over physical strength? If this one came to the aid of the lady, why should he be overlooked? Let that not come to pass. If he came to learn of the situation after the other knight, this is not due to negligence – if he had known sooner he might have been the first to come to her aid. What he took as a final solution he took astutely, and the reward ought to follow; his prize should be the lady's love, if one considers the situation correctly, and yet you say the exact opposite.

Fiammetta biting retorts that Ascalion should not mistake the second knight's vice for virtue, arguing that the intent behind an action is what determines its true worth:

Passi della mente vostra che il vizio, a fine di bene operato, meriti il *guiderdone* che la virtù, a simile fine operata, merita; anzi in quanto vizio merita correzione: alla virtù niuno mondano merito può giustamente soddisfare. Chi ci vieterà ancora che noi non possiamo con aperta ragione credere che l'ultimo cavaliere, non per amore che alla donna portasse, ma, invidioso del bene che all'altro vedea apparecchiato, per isturbare quello, si mosse a tale impresa, e misvennegli? Folle è chi sotto colore di nemico s'ingegna di giovare per ricever merito. Infinite sono le vie per le quali possibile ci è con aperta amicizia poter mostrare l'amore che alcuno porta ad alcuno altro, senza mostrarsi nemico, e poi con colorate parole voler mostrare d'aver giovato [...] Crediamo che quando queste poche parole per la mente debitamente avrete digeste, troverete il nostro giudizio non fallace, ma vero e da dovere essere seguito (4.58) (emphasis mine).

Expel from your mind the belief that vice performed for a good outcome merits the same reward as virtue performed for the same outcome. In fact, while vice merits correction, no earthly good can ever truly be a proper reward for virtue. Who can tell us that we may not reasonably believe that the second knight was motivated not by love for the lady but was driven to act (and subsequently failed) merely because he envied the good fortune he saw awaiting the first knight and hoped to ruin it? Anyone who, in the hopes of receiving a reward, tries to help while pretending to be an enemy is a fool. There are innumerable ways to show with open friendship the love that one bears for another without pretending to be an enemy and then employing falsities to prove that one has helped [...] We believe that when you have digested these words in your mind you will find our judgment is not fallacious but is true and ought to be followed.

We ultimately find that this *questione* employs the trope of the *guiderdone* not to evaluate the predicament of the courtly lady, as in the first *questione*, but rather to examine the relationship between risk and reward. Fiammetta and Ascalion ultimately evaluate the knights based on the goods they jeopardized: the first knight his life, the second knight his reputation. The *questione's* courtly conventions thus give way to broader questions concerning the execution of justice, the relationship between risk and reward, and the distinction between virtue and vice.

I have already underlined the specifically juridical aspects of the *questione*, but the binaries of risk/reward and vice/virtue have yet to be discussed. Fiammetta points out that while the first knight risked his life not knowing who he would have to do battle against, the second knight was already aware of his opponent and came into the fray fully intending to be defeated – for him there was no actual threat, no real risk. Ascalion maintains that the widow should take

pity on him since he knowingly sacrificed his reputation, but Fiammetta nuances the debate by contending that only one knight truly behaved virtuously.

There is a repugnant quality to the second knight's speech to the widow, as he effectively tries to bully her into submitting to him by reminding her that he could have instead fought to uphold her conviction ("io avrei vittorioso onore potuto acquistare, volendo incontro la vostra salute avere le mie forze operate"). His distasteful logic lends support to Fiammetta's argument: if he were truly motivated by genuine love and concern for his lady, how could he ever have even considered operating against her best interests? The fatal flaw of the second knight lies in his slimy reasoning that, because he intentionally lost to the first knight and allowed his reputation to be diminished, he should automatically be awarded her love. Fiammetta reminds Ascalion that, in order for an action to truly be considered virtuous, good intentions must result in good actions; in other words, even if the second knight secretly wanted the lady to live, he publicly fought to have her sentenced to death. His actions were evil, even if he claimed to have had virtuous motives, and the goodness of his intentions cannot cancel out the immorality of his deeds.

Boccaccio revisits the connection between intent and virtue in *Dec.* 9.9, albeit in a rather different context. Melissus comes to king Solomon with the following predicament: "Io sono ricco giovane e spendo il mio in mettere tavola e onorare i miei cittadini, e è nuova e strana cosa a pensare che per tutto questo io non posso trovare uomo che ben mi voglia" (9.9.13) ("I am a rich young man, and I spend my substance in banqueting and entertaining my fellow citizens, but the curious thing is about it is that despite all this I cannot find a single man who wishes me well"). Much to the young man's confusion, Solomon's answer is a one word imperative: "ama" ("love"). Upon his return home, he shares his bewilderment with a wise old man who explains:

“Niuno più vero consiglio né migliore ti potea dare. Tu sai che tu non ami persona, e gli onori e' servigi li quali tu fai, gli fai non per amore che tu ad altrui porti, ma per pompa. Ama adunque, come Salamon ti disse, e sarai amato” (9.9.34) (“He could not have given you a truer or a better piece of advice. You knew perfectly well that you love no one, and that you dispense your hospitality and your favors, not because you love other people, but merely for pomp and pride. Love, therefore, as Solomon told you, and you will be loved”). The context of the *novella* is entirely different, yet the core argument is the same: behavior that does not accurately reflect the doer's intention can never be virtuous, and superficially good deeds are not actually good if they are not rooted in virtuous intentions. Melissus's liberality was not truly virtuous because it was not motivated by love for others but rather by a selfish need to appear generous and garner praise. In the same vein, the second knight's attempts to save the widow were not virtuous since he was motivated not out of true love and concern for her, but by the prospect of a reward. To Fiammetta's point, virtue cannot be motivated by a desire for a reward since there is no worldly prize that can adequately compensate virtue. The tenth *questione* thus uses the concept of the *guiderdone* as a starting point for a larger meditation on virtue and reward, and it mines courtly conventions for deeper ethical issues.

On the most superficial level, the first, sixth and tenth *questioni* depict demonstrations of love, but a more profound consideration of these *questioni* demonstrates Boccaccio's robust engagement with issues both ethical and social, as he transforms arid courtly tropes into fruitful intellectual inquiries. While all three delve into the standards imposed upon women in the context of courtly love, each branches off into its own unique examination of a particular issue, be it the distinction between lust and love, the obligation of women to grant their love to suitors, or the correlation between virtue and reward. Each *questione* explores the ways in which women

were required to respond to men's erotic demands, and they all expose in some way or another the transactional nature and gendered imbalances of courtly love. Boccaccio again conducts thought experiments on the corpus of courtly love, and the subversions he stages – the woman who cleverly evades her admirers in the sixth *questione*, the knight of the tenth *questione* whose chivalric deeds are exposed for their immorality, the lady of the sixth *questione* who rebels against the standards of feminine timidity – presage the many rich rebellions of the *Decameron*.

Chapter 4: How Do We Use Love as a Tool for Control?

“Where is the good? In our choices. Where is the evil? In our choices” (Discourses, 2.16.1).¹³⁵

Dubitasi ora quale di costoro fosse maggiore liberalità, o quella del cavaliere che concedette alla donna l’andare a Tarolfo, o quella di Tarolfo, il quale quella donna cui egli avea sempre disiata, e per cui egli avea tanto fatto per venire a quel punto che venuto era, quando la donna venne a lui, se gli fosse piaciuto, rimandò la sopradetta donna intatta al suo marito; o quella di Tebano, il quale, abbandonate le sue contrade, oramai vecchio, e venuto quivi per guadagnare i promessi doni, e affannatosi per recare a fine ciò che promesso avea, avendoli guadagnati, ogni cosa rimise, rimanendosi povero come prima (4.31).

There is doubt now as to which was the greatest form of liberality: that of the knight who allowed the woman to go to Tarolfo; that of Tarolfo, who, even after desiring that woman for so long and doing so much to bring her to him, once he obtained her returned her intact to her husband; or that of Tebano, who abandoned his homeland in his old age in order to earn great rewards and, after working so assiduously to secure what he had been promised, renounced it all and remained in poverty.

“Ma di queste due cose l’una ti conviene prendere, o vuoi che noi t’uccidiamo o vuoi con questa vecchia e con la nostra sorella, con ciascuna, dormire un anno, giurando lealmente che, se tu prenderai di dormire con costoro due anni e il primo con la giovane, che tante volte quante tu la bacerai o ciò che tu le farai, altrettante il secondo anno bacerai o farai alla vecchia; o se la vecchia il primo anno prenderai, tante volte quante la bacerai o toccherai, tante simigliantemente e non più né meno la giovane nel secondo anno farai.” Il giovane ascoltato il partito, vago di vivere, disse di volere con le due due anni dormire. Fugli consentito: rimase in dubbio da quale dovesse inanzi cominciare, o dalla giovane o dalla vecchia. Di quale il consigliereste voi per più sua consolazione che egli dovesse avanti pigliare? (4.63).

“But you must choose one of these: either we kill you, or you sleep with this old woman and with our sister, each for one year, swearing that (if you choose to sleep with them for two years) if you take the young woman first you will replicate every kiss and every deed with the old woman in the second year. Or, if you take the old woman for the first year, you must kiss and caress the young woman no more and no less the following year.” The young man listened carefully to their deal and, eager as he was to live, replied that would sleep with the women for two years. His request was granted, and he remained in doubt as to which woman he should choose first, the young woman or the elderly one. So as to maximize his consolation, which of them do you say he should choose first?

¹³⁵ Excerpted from Epictetus’s *Discourses*; trans. Ward Farnsworth: *The Practicing Stoic: A Philosophical User’s Manual*, Boston: David R. Godine, 2018.

Si dubita qual fosse maggiore, o la lealtà del cavaliere o l'allegrezza del marito, che la donna e 'l figliuolo, i quali perduti riputava sì come morti, si trovò acquistati, priegovi che quello che di ciò giudicherete ne diciate (4.67).

There is doubt as to which was greater: the loyalty of the knight or the joy of the husband, who regained the wife and child he thought were dead and gone. So, I ask that you inform us of your judgement.

As we near the end of this study, it is worth recalling the reason for which the thirteen youths began posing these *questioni d'amore*: to pass the time in an enjoyable and productive manner ("il tempo utilmente con diletto sarà adoperato" [4.17]). The *questioni* mimic the seriousness of scholastic disputations while echoing the Horatian dictum of "dulce et utile" – discourse that is both enjoyable and useful is similarly what Boccaccio evokes in the Proem of the *Decameron*. The ten *questioni* I have addressed up to this point have lived up to this purpose, debating conceptions of love, the selection of a lover, and the ways in which a lover could demonstrate his or her affections to the beloved. In contrast, the three that remain meditate upon a more unsavory aspect of romantic love: how it might be used as a mechanism for manipulation. Compared to the *questioni* of the preceding chapters, the last three that I will discuss (the fourth, twelfth, and thirteenth, respectively) have a decidedly sinister quality to them.

In the fourth *questione*, a knight enlists the help of a necromancer to coerce a married woman into sleeping with him. The twelfth *questione* depicts a man who, in order to preserve his own life, is forced to perform every sex act he once enjoyed with his lover upon an elderly woman. The thirteenth *questione* narrates the tale of a man who, while molesting the corpse of the woman who never repaid his love, realizes she is still alive, nurses her back to health and, rather than immediately returning her to her husband, temporarily holds her hostage. If one considers the situation of women in these *questioni*, one finds that they are all stripped of their

agency and, ultimately, they amount to little more than pawns that men use to control other men. These final *questioni* illustrate the darker side of erotic love, exploring the abuses, manipulations, violations, and perversions of desire.

4.1 Resolved: Sensible Men Defer Gratification

The twelfth *questione*, posed by Parmenione, picks up the thread of the eighth *questione*, which asked if a man should choose a woman of greater or lesser wealth and family ties (“o quella di loro che è...di parenti possente, e copiosa d’averne molto più che il giovane, o l’altra la quale né è...ricca né di parenti abondevole quanto il giovane” [4.47]). Parmenione recounts the misfortunes of a certain friend of his who hoped to conduct an affair with a woman endowed with great wealth and a large family network:

Egli tanto quanto mai alcun giovane amasse donna, amava una giovane della nostra città bellissima e graziosa, gentile e ricca d’averne e di parenti molto, e essa molto amava lui, per quello che io conoscessi, a cui questo amore solamente era scoperto. Amando adunque questi questa con segretissimo stile, temendo non si palesasse, in niuna maniera a costei potea parlare, acciò che il suo intendimento le discoprisse e di quello di lei s’accertasse; né a persona se ne fidava che questo di parlare tentasse [...] E riguardato più giorni per cui più cautamente tale bisogna significare le potesse, vide un dì una vecchia povera, vizza, ranca e dispettosa tanto, quanto alcuna trovare se ne potesse, la quale, entrata nella casa della giovane, e cercata limosina, con essa se ne uscì; e più volte poi in simile atto e per simile cagione ritornare la vide. In costei si pose costui in cuore di fidarsi, imaginando che mai sospetta non saria tenuta e compiutamente le poria il suo intendimento fornire: e chiamatala a sé, grandissimi doni le promise, se aiutare il volesse in quello ch’egli le domanderebbe. Ella giurò di fare tutto suo potere: a cui questi allora disse il suo volere. Partissi la vecchia dopo picciolo spazio di tempo, accertata la giovane dell’amore che il mio compagno le portava [...] e occultamente ordinò questo giovane essere una sera con la disiatata donna (4.63).

He loved a young lady as much as any man ever loved a woman; she was from our city, beautiful and gracious, noble, wealthy, and with a great many relatives. I was the only one who knew of their love, and it seemed to me that she loved him very much. Since he loved her in such a covert manner and was afraid that his love might be discovered, he could not speak with her to communicate his intentions or ascertain hers; nor was there any person he trusted enough to speak of it [...] After searching for a few days for someone who could communicate his needs to her, one day he saw a poor old woman, as

wrinkled and wretched as could one could ever hope to find, going into her house to ask for alms; she came out with the young woman, and he saw them repeat this same ritual several times. In his heart he resolved to entrust this task to her, since he had determined that no one would ever suspect her and that she could help make his desires a reality. Calling her to him, he promised her great rewards if she would do what he asked of her. She promised to do everything in her power to help him, and he told her what he wanted. A little while later, she went to the young woman and assured her of my friend's love for her [...] and secretly made arrangements so that he could spend the night with the woman he desired.

Readers will recall that, in the eighth *questione*, the queen ruled in favor of the wealthier woman, but she nonetheless acknowledged that the man who hopes to love a woman of superior social status will face greater challenges in courting her, and she conceded that the woman's family would present the greatest obstacle to their affair. The twelfth *questione* brings this assertion to vivid life, as his friend's attempt to consummate the affair is thwarted when the woman's brothers intercept him as he is about to rendezvous with her:

Dove egli non fu prima venuto, che, per suo infortunio, la giovane, la vecchia e esso furono da' fratelli della giovane insieme tutti e tre trovati e presi: e costretti di dire la verità che quivi facessero, confessarono quello che era. Erano costoro amici del giovane, e conoscendo che a niuna loro vergogna costui era ancora pervenuto, non lo vollero offendere, che poteano, ma ridendo, gli posero questo partito, dicendo così: "Tu se' nelle nostre mani, e hai cercato di vituperarci, e di ciò noi ti possiamo punire se noi vogliamo; ma di queste due cose l'una ti conviene prendere, o vuoi che noi t'uccidiamo o vuoi con questa vecchia e con la nostra sorella, con ciascuna, dormire un anno, giurando lealmente che, se tu prenderai di dormire con costoro due anni e il primo con la giovane, che tante volte quante tu la bacerai o ciò che tu le farai, altrettante il secondo anno bacerai o farai alla vecchia; o se la vecchia il primo anno prenderai, tante volte quante la bacerai o toccherai, tante simigliantemente e non più né meno la giovane nel secondo anno farai". Il giovane ascoltato il partito, vago di vivere, disse di volere con le due due anni dormire. Fugli consentito: rimase in dubbio da quale dovesse inanzi cominciare, o dalla giovane o dalla vecchia. Di quale il consigliereste voi per più sua consolazione che egli dovesse avanti pigliare? (4.63).

No sooner had he arrived than (to his misfortune) the young lady, the old woman and he were all found together and apprehended by the brothers. Forced to tell the truth of what they were doing there, they confessed everything. The brothers were friends of the young man and, knowing that he had not yet done anything to cause them shame, they did not want to hurt him even though they very well could have. Laughing, they offered him this arrangement, saying: "You are in our hands now. You tried to dishonor us, for which we are entitled to punish you if we wish. But you must choose one of these: either we kill

you, or you sleep with this old woman and with our sister, each for one year, swearing that (if you choose to sleep with them for two years) if you take the young woman first you will replicate every kiss and every deed with the old woman in the second year. Or, if you take the old woman for the first year, you must kiss and caress the young woman no more and no less the following year.” The young man listened carefully to their deal and, eager as he was to live, replied that would sleep with the women for two years. His request was granted, and he remained in doubt as to which woman he should choose first, the young woman or the elderly one. So as to maximize his consolation, which of them do you say he should choose first?

The detail about the young woman’s large family is not insignificant, as the intervention of her brothers prevents the affair from proceeding as planned. Boccaccio thus provides an intratextual gloss, elaborating upon the concern voiced in the eighth *questione* of how a woman’s family might interfere in her romantic dalliances.

Even more significantly, the *questione* introduces the trope of the old woman as a go-between and gives it a perverse twist, as it forces her to participate in the very sexual encounter she helped to facilitate. The old woman of this *questione* does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather a product of a well-established tradition of misogyny within the medieval imagination:

The old woman who emerges from several works of the western Middle Ages is a frightening figure [...] Work after work features repulsive, toothless, stinking, ancient women who hobble about begging, bewailing their poverty, and, again and again, trapping young women into sex. This old woman is not only a literary figure. Joel Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, both historians, cite medieval preachers, moralists, and pamphleteers who accuse old women of sorcery and magic: they control fertility, impotence, and abortions, and they can concoct ruinous philters that bring on love [...] Sermons, exempla, and moralizing pieces...warn against her as a false counselor who lures young people to dance the old dance of love.¹³⁶

The old hag playing the role of go-between is crystallized in the *Pamphilus*, an early twelfth century Latin comedy, and the figure reappears in numerous French *fabliaux*, as well as in various prominent medieval texts, including the *Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula*, the *Roman de la*

¹³⁶ Gretchen Mieszkowski: “Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman” in *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, edited by Albrecht Classen, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007, p. 299.

Rose, the *Libro de buen amor*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*. While she may play different roles – a pimp, a sorceress, an enabler of rape, a facilitator of infidelity – her character is uniformly repulsive in all of these works.

Just as the figure of the old go-between is not specific to this *questione*, its characters and chain of events are also not unique within the larger context of Boccaccio's literary corpus. Indeed, in *Dec.* 4.5 we find the very same circumstances of the twelfth *questione* culminate in a much grislier outcome. Lisabetta's brothers, upon discovering that she has been having an affair with their business partner, murder him in cold blood; she later finds his corpse, cuts off his head, and buries it in a pot of basil, watering it daily with her tears until she eventually dies of despair. *Dec.* 8.4 depicts another set of brothers eager to punish a man for attempting to tarnish their sister's honor: a beautiful young widow is vexed by the local rector's constant attempts to seduce her, so she enlists the help of her brothers in order to teach him a lesson. She promises the rector that she will go to bed with him, instructing him to sneak into her room that night. The widow then tells her maidservant that she will reward her with a new shirt if she agrees to help her dupe him. Whereas the woman of the *questione* was simply "povera, vizza, ranca e dispettosa," the hideousness of the woman in the *novella* (who is not old, but is clearly not young) is elaborated upon and illustrated in lurid detail:

Aveva questa donna una sua fante, la qual non era però troppo giovane, ma ella aveva il più brutto viso e il più contrafatto che si vedesse mai: ché ella aveva il naso schiacciato forte e la bocca torta e le labbra grosse e i denti mal composti e grandi, e sentiva del guercio, né mai era senza mal d'occhi, con un color verde e giallo che pareva che non a Fiesole ma a Sinigaglia avesse fatta la state, e oltre a tutto questo era sciancata e un poco monca dal lato destro; e il suo nome era Ciuta, e perché così cagnazzo viso avea, da ogn'uomo era chiamata Ciutazza; e benché ella fosse contrafatta della persona, ella era pure alquanto maliziosetta (8.4.21-22).

Now, this lady had a maidservant, who was none too young and had the ugliest and most misshapen face you ever saw. She had a huge, flat nose, a wry mouth, thick lips, big teeth, which were unevenly set, and a pronounced squint; moreover she was always

having trouble with her eyes, and her complexion was a sort of yellow green, so that she looked as though she had spent the summer, not at Fiesole, but at Senigialla. Apart from this, she was hipshot on the right side, and walked with a slight limp. Her name was Ciuta, but because she was so ugly to look at, everyone called her Ciutazza. And although her body was so misshapen, she was always prepared for a spot of mischief.

She explains that she'll need Ciutazza to impersonate her and, under the cover of darkness, have sex with the unsuspecting rector. Ciutazza's uncouth response¹³⁷ affirms her unsavory character, as she immediately replies that she would sleep with six men if needed, let alone one ("Sì dormirò io con sei, non che con uno, se bisognerà" [8.4.26]). With the help of her brothers, the widow orchestrates the rector's downfall, ensuring that the bishop discovers him in bed with Ciutazza; chastised and humiliated, the rector never harasses the widow again.

A clear implication emerges when one considers *Dec.* 8.4 and the twelfth *questione* together: a man would only ever have sex with an old or ugly woman if he were tricked or forced into doing so. These depictions effectively evaluate women on a sliding scale of age and desirability: sex with a young, attractive woman is the epitome of pleasure, while sex with an ugly woman or with an elderly woman is a veritable calamity.

Along with the trope of the old go-between, vendetta is a recurring theme, and it is consistently depicted as a powerful tool of social control. The portrayals of vendetta are not incidental, as they were a prevalent social reality during the Middle Ages and, as such, they are an invitation to open a brief parenthesis. Historical sources indicate that vendetta constituted "vengeance for a *specific* injury [...] an event or a response to an event, not a state of continuous animosity"¹³⁸ and was, in many Italian communes, sanctioned by the law as a legitimate means

¹³⁷ Her response does, however, constitute consent, which is a crucial divergence between the *novella* and the *questione*.

¹³⁸ Trevor Dean: "Marriage and Mutilation: Vendetta in Late Medieval Italy" in *Past & Present*, no. 157, 1997, p. 15.

to settle personal or familial grievances. Vendetta could be in response to any number of offenses, but one particularly prevalent cause was centered on “gender and the outrage of female sexual honor.”¹³⁹ Indeed, from the supposed origins of the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict¹⁴⁰ to the longstanding feud between the da Romano and Camposampiero families¹⁴¹, avenging the tarnished honor of female relatives is a significant and recurring theme in the history of medieval Italian conflict.

The social and historical context surrounding vendetta is far too vast to treat in its entirety here, but there are two crucial observations to be made concerning Boccaccio’s representations of it. Firstly, his depictions of men eager to take revenge on other men for besmirching the sexual honor of female relatives is consistent with historical facts, lest readers dismiss these instances as overly dramatic fiction. Boccaccio does not, however, limit himself to reproducing historical facticity, but rather avails himself of the opportunity to experiment with and, ultimately, transgress social realities. Fourteenth century Florentine legal statutes were rooted in the principle that an act of vengeance had to be proportionate to the offense.¹⁴² In other words, an act of vendetta should be on par with the insult that triggered it: murder would merit murder,

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 16.

¹⁴⁰ The longstanding tensions between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines boiled over into bloody conflict when the Guelph nobleman Buondelmonte de’ Buondelmonti reneged on his betrothal to a woman of the Amidei family in order to wed a Ghibelline woman from the Donati clan instead. To avenge this insult, members of the Amidei family murdered Buondelmonte on the morning of his wedding. This, according to chroniclers, was the event that crystallized the Florentine Guelph-Ghibelline rivalry.

¹⁴¹ According to the *Cronica in factis et circa facta Marchie Trivixane* of Rolandino da Padova, Ezzelino da Romano orchestrated the dissolution of a marriage contract between Cecilia d’Abano and Gerardo da Camposampiero in order to procure the woman for his son. Infuriated, Gerardo da Camposampiero avenged this insult by sleeping with Cecilia while she was away on a visit to one of her landholdings. These events, according to Rolandino, triggered decades of interfamilial conflict and bloodshed in the Veneto.

¹⁴² Umberto Dorini, “La vendetta privata al tempo di Dante” in *Giornale dantesco*, vol. xxix (1926), p. 63.

assault would warrant assault. What, then, would have been an appropriate punishment for sexual misconduct? Boccaccio seems to contend with this exact problem in the twelfth *questione*, and he demonstrates the absurdities that could arise from applying the logic of vendetta to sexual offenses. While *Dec.* 4.5 depicts a relatively conventional act of retribution (murder would not have been an unusual punishment for ruining a woman's – and, by extension, her family's – honor),¹⁴³ Boccaccio experiments with and elaborates upon the issue of avenging female sexual honor elsewhere in his works. In the case of *Dec.* 8.4 and the twelfth *questione*, he hypothesizes some proportionate penalties for sexual transgressions: a man might pay for his lust by being tricked into sleeping with an ugly woman, or he might be forced to have sex with his elderly go-between. Boccaccio thus takes vendetta – a concrete social reality of his time – and uses it as a springboard to expose the, at times, bewildering nature of this codified system of retaliation.

Let us return to the *questione*. Having described his friend's disturbing dilemma, Parmenione awaits the queen's judgment. Fiammetta declares that he should avail himself of the beautiful young woman first, arguing that this is the only appropriate course of action in the face of an uncertain future:

Secondo il nostro parere il giovane dovria più tosto la bella donna giovane che la vecchia pigliare, però che niun bene presente si dee per lo futuro lasciare, né pigliare male per futuro bene è senno, però che delle cose future incerti siamo; e di questo faccendo il

¹⁴³ As Janet Nelson and Alice Rio note in their essay, “Women and Laws in Early Medieval Europe”: “A woman's sexual behavior, of course, mattered at any stage of life: since she always belonged to someone else (her husband if she were married; her family if she was not; her master if she was unfree), any sexual relationship she undertook outside of marriage infringed on at least one other person's rights, and diminished someone else's honor. This is evident from the use of the word *adulterium* in laws to refer not just to adultery, but to any unsanctioned sexual activity by women, including virgins, widows, and slaves. Indeed, laws seem to expect the reactions of fathers and husbands to be similar, some of them giving fathers to right to kill a daughter's lover caught in the act” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 109.

contrario, molti già si dolfero; e se alcuno se ne lodò, non dovere, ma fortuna in ciò gli aiutò. Prendasi adunque la bella inanzi (4.64).

According to our judgment, the young man should take the beautiful young woman before the old one, since no present good should be left for the future, nor is it wise to choose evil to ensure a future good. Since we are uncertain of future things, many have suffered by choosing the opposite; yet if any have been glad for this, it was because fortune smiled on them, and for no other reason. Therefore, let him take the beautiful woman first.

The notion that present goods ought to be enjoyed immediately rather than left to the future puzzles Parmenione, who replies:

Molto mi fate maravigliare [...] dicendo che presente per futuro bene lasciare non si dee: a che fine, dunque, con forte animo ci conviene seguire e sostenere i mondani affanni, dove fuggire li potremo, se non per gli eterni regni promessi a noi dalla speranza futuri? [...] Giusta cosa mi pare dopo l'affanno riposo cercare; ma senza affanno voler posare, secondo il mio giudizio, non dee né può essere diletto. Chi dunque consiglierà alcuno che prima sia da dormire un anno con una bella donna, la quale sia solo riposo e gioia di colui che con lei si dee giacere, mostrandogli appresso dovergli seguire tanta noiosa e spiacevole vita, quanto con una laida vecchia dovere altrettanto in tutti atti usare che con la giovane è dimorato? Niuna cosa è tanto noiosa al diletto vivere quanto il ricordarsi che al termine dalla morte segnato ci conviene venire. Questa, tornandoci nella memoria sì come nemica e contraria del nostro essere, ogni bene ci turba: né mentre questo si ricorda, si può sentire gioia nelle mondane cose. Così similmente niuno diletto con la giovane si potrà avere che turbato e guasto non sia, ricordandosi che altrettanto fare si convenga con una vilissima vecchia, la quale sempre davanti agli occhi della mente gli dimorerà. Il tempo, che vola con infallibili penne, gli parrà che trasvoli...e così la letizia, essendo dove futura tristizia infallibile s'aspetta, non si sente: però io terrei che il contrario fosse migliore consiglio, ché ogni affanno, di cui grazioso riposo s'aspetta, è più dilettevole che il diletto per cui noia è sperata (4.65).

You make me marvel greatly [...] by saying that goods in the present ought not to be postponed to the future. For what reason, then, do we follow and shoulder the burdens of worldly toils with a steady spirit, if we could instead simply escape them, if not for the hope of the eternal realms that have been promised to us? [...] It seems right to me to seek rest after work, but to want to rest without work must not and cannot, in my opinion, be pleasurable. Therefore, who would recommend that the young man should sleep with a beautiful woman for a year (which is pure rest and joy for the one who must lie with her) while reminding him that he must subsequently lead a harsh and unpleasant life in which he must perform with an ugly old woman all of the acts he previously enjoyed with his young lover? Nothing is more unsettling to a pleasurable life than the reminder that we must come to an end marked by death. This, returning to our memory as an enemy opposed to our very being, ruins every good in our lives: nor can we enjoy the joys of this world while we recall this. Similarly, no pleasure can be taken with the young woman

that will not be disturbed and ruined by the recollection that everything must be repeated with a vile hag, the vision of whom will always be in the mind's eye. Time, which flies on infallible wings, will seem to speed past...and so happiness will not be felt where an inevitable future sadness awaits. I maintain that the opposite would be the better advice, since every labor undertaken with the promise of rest will be more enjoyable than a delight which must be followed by agony.

Parmenione's rebuttal is fascinating on two counts. Firstly, he considers his friend's quandary through the lens of Christian eschatology, claiming that he ought to submit to the trial of a sexual relationship with an old woman so that he may later enjoy paradise with his beautiful young lover. He takes this a step further, asserting that the opposite strategy (that is, taking the young woman first) will ensure psychological torment since the man will be forced to ruminate on the fleeting nature of life and earthly delights. He draws an unsettling equivalence: the thought of having to make love to an old woman is just as psychologically distressing as having to contemplate one's mortality. It is a deeply misogynistic notion, yet it also evokes broader concerns surrounding age and death: if the woman in the prime of her youth represents life, the elderly woman is a reminder of death, a living, breathing *memento mori*.

He concludes by reiterating that there is an immutable order to life, restating his claim that it is unnatural for one to expect reward before travail:

Cessi, adunque, che l'uomo voglia prima il riposo che la fatica, o prima il guiderdone che fare il servizio, o il diletto che la tribulazione, con ciò sia cosa che, come già è detto, se a quel modo si prendesse, la futura noia impedirebbe tanto la presente gioia, che non gioia, ma presso che noia dire si potrebbe [...] Fuggansi adunque prima le dolenti cagioni, poi si seguano con piacevolezza e senza sospetto i graziosi dilette (4.65).

Then let man not desire rest before work, reward before service, delight before difficulty, since, as was already said, if things proceeded in this way, future pains would impede present joys [...] Let the causes for grief first be dispelled, then the lovely delights may follow smoothly and without anxiety.

Effort must come before rest, service before *guiderdone*, trials before pleasures. If this order were to be inverted, according to Parmenione, one would never be able to truly find satisfaction

in life's joys. Naturally, Fiammetta is not in agreement, and she responds by dismantling the core tenets of his argument:

Voi ne rispondete in parte come se degli eterni beni ragionassimo, per li quali acquistare non è dubbio che ogni affanno se ne dee prendere, e ogni mondano bene e diletto lasciare: ma noi al presente non parliamo di quelli, ma de' mondani dilette e delle mondane noie quistioniamo; a che noi rispondiamo, come prima dicemmo, che ogni mondano diletto si dee più tosto prendere che mondana noia ne segua, anzi che mondana noia per mondano diletto aspettare, però che chi tempo ha e tempo aspetta, tempo perde. Concede la fortuna con varii mutamenti i suoi beni, i quali più tosto sono da pigliare quando li dona, che volere affannare per dopo l'affanno averli. Ma se la sua ruota stesse ferma, infino che l'uomo avesse affannato, per non dovere più affannare, diciamo che si poria consentire di pigliare prima l'affanno: ma chi è certo che dopo il male non possa così seguire peggio, come il bene che s'aspetta? I tempi insieme con le mondane cose sono transitorii. Prendendo la vecchia, prima che l'anno compia, il quale non parrà che mai venga meno, potrà la giovane morire, o i fratelli di lei pentersi, o essere donata altrui, o forse rapita, e così dopo male, peggio seguirà al prenditore; ma se la giovane fia presa, avranne il prenditore primieramente il suo disio tanto tempo da lui desiderato, né ne gli seguirà però quella noia che voi dite che nel pensiero ne gli dee seguire: però che il dovere morire è infallibile, ma il giacere con una vecchia fia accidente da potere con molti rimedii da uomo savio cessare [...] Naturale cosa è di dovere più tosto il bene che il male pigliare, quando igualmente concorrono: e chi fa il contrario, non naturale ragione ma sua follia segue. Ben confessiamo però che dopo l'affanno è più grazioso il riposo che prima, e meglio conosciuto, ma non che sia più tosto da pigliare. Possibile è agli uomini folli e a' savi usare i consigli e de' folli e de' savi, secondo il loro parere, ma però la infallibile verità non si muta, la quale ci lascia vedere che più tosto la bella e giovane donna, che la vecchia e laida, sia da prendere da colui a cui tale partito donato fosse (4.66).

You respond in part as though we were speaking of eternal goods, which, in order to obtain them, there is no doubt that every labor must be undertaken, and every earthly delight must be renounced. But we are not speaking of such matters at the moment, but rather we are debating earthly pleasures and earthly pains, and we repeat that every worldly delight must be taken first with worldly anguish to follow, rather than worldly anguish followed by worldly delight. Indeed, he who has time and waits for time loses time. Fortune grants her favors with various modifications and they are to be taken when given, not when one decides to take them after toiling. But if her wheel stood still, until man had labored so as to not have to labor any more, we say that he could choose to labor first. But who can be certain that after evil more evil might not follow, even as one waits for the good? Time and worldly things are fleeting. If he takes the old woman first, before the year is passed (which may seem interminable) the young woman might die, or her brothers might change their minds, or she might be given to another, or she might be abducted, and so after evil even worse might befall the taker. But if the young woman is taken, the taker will finally enjoy what he has desired for so long, and that anguish that you say will follow him in his thoughts need not haunt him. Death is inevitable, but lying

with an old woman is an accident that a clever man might circumvent through various strategies [...] It is natural that good ought to be chosen over evil when they are both equally represented; whoever does the opposite does not follow natural reason but rather his own madness. However, we do grant that rest is much sweeter after labor than it is before, and it is more greatly valued, yet that does not mean that it is better to choose labor. In our estimation, it is possible for both foolish and wise men to use the advice of the foolish and the wise as they see fit, but infallible truth is unchanging, and it allows us to see that the lovely young woman – instead of the old, ugly one – is to be chosen by him to whom a choice is given.

The queen underlines the absurdity of Parmenione's application of Christian eschatological reasoning to the situation presented in the *questione*: after all, they are not discussing divine rewards but rather earthly pleasures. She similarly criticizes his comparison of sex with an old woman to death, reminding him that while death is an inevitability of life, his friend's unfortunate situation is little more than one of many contingencies that may arise over the course of life.¹⁴⁴

If Parmenione represents a rigid, Christian conception of pleasure, which considered earthly suffering essential for earning the joys of eternal salvation, Fiammetta demonstrates a perspective that is far more nuanced. She does not claim that there are no eternal pleasures or pains, but she does insist that these are not they, thus embracing a more classically infused attitude toward life. In this way, she demonstrates a quintessentially medieval approach, whereby medieval philosophers dialogued with and elaborated upon the writings of their classical predecessors, fusing Christian and classical ideals together. The issues raised in the debate between Parmenione and Fiammetta – how labor and rest related to pleasure, what constituted pleasure and how to best pursue it – are vast topics that cannot possibly be treated in

¹⁴⁴ Teodolinda Barolini discusses these two currents in the *Decameron*; there is one that meditates “on what is, on the essential nature of things, on truth versus falsehood; the other is devoted to the manifold contingencies and accidents of life” in her essay, “The Essential Boccaccio, or an Accidental Ethics” in the Musa-Bondanella translation of the *Decameron*, Signet Classics: 2010, p. 809.

their entirety here,¹⁴⁵ but it is sufficient to note that Boccaccio uses the twelfth *questione* to demonstrate his knowledge of and engagement with these philosophical issues.

One particularly useful intertext to consider here is Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputationes*, with which Boccaccio was certainly familiar.¹⁴⁶ Echoing Stoic philosophy, Cicero declares: "contemnendae res humanae sunt, negligenda mors est, patibiles et dolores putandi" ("the chances of mortal life are to be despised, death is to be disregarded, pains and toils are to be considered endurable" [IV.24]).¹⁴⁷ It would be near impossible to prove that Boccaccio had this exact citation in mind, yet the twelfth *questione* glosses Cicero's exhortation almost seamlessly. While Parmenione views fortune less as a lottery and more as an investment, the queen, echoing Cicero, argues that human affairs are unpredictable: a bout of bad luck does not guarantee future blessings, and calamity may very well be followed by more calamity. In other words, human beings ought not to fixate on life's contingencies but must instead learn to free themselves from the slavish obsession with fortune. Parmenione contends that the contemplation of our mortality drains life of its joy, while the queen, again parroting Cicero, reminds him that death is inevitable and must therefore be accepted rather than feared. In the same vein, Parmenione makes the case that his friend will suffer not only because he will have to have sex with the old woman, but even more so because he will be burdened by thoughts of his predicament. Fiammetta asserts that worldly things – be they pleasant or painful – are transitory and, consequently, the future need

¹⁴⁵ Jessica Rosenfeld's book on the medieval translations and responses to Aristotle provides an excellent overview of the classical and medieval perspectives on these issues: *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love After Aristotle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁴⁶ For an overview of Boccaccio's engagement with Cicero's corpus, see Michaela Paasche Grudin and Robert Grudin: *Boccaccio's Decameron and the Ciceronian Renaissance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

¹⁴⁷ *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945.

not be a source of anguish; the pains and labors of this world can thus be endured, as Cicero says. She concludes by reminding Parmenione that, in life, one is liable to encounter astute and asinine advice in equal measure, but neither intelligence nor inanity can alter the truth; in this case, she says, the truth is that the man ought to lie with the young woman first.

Having briefly discussed the philosophical underpinnings of the debate between the queen and Parmenione, there are some broader sociological observations to be made about the twelfth *questione*. Even as the discourse moves away from the social and into the philosophical in order to address the issue of whether it is better to delay gratification or to indulge in pleasures as they arise, the very concrete social concerns at the heart of the *questione* cannot be ignored. The *questione* is, in essence, a representation of the dangers of dealing with unpredictable men. Even though they are friends with the man, the brothers will not hesitate to murder him if he does not comply with their ultimatum: the bonds of male friendship are inconsequential in the face of injuries to familial honor. Their demands are as bizarre as they are perturbing; unlike the father of *Dec. 5.4* who, upon discovering his daughter *in flagrante* with her lover, commands that he marry her (a shrewd move that both preserves his family's honor and pleases his daughter greatly), the brothers of the twelfth *questione* expect the man to sleep with their sister but never stipulate that he marry her. It is difficult to fathom why the brothers would, in order to avenge a slight against their family's honor that had not even taken place, intentionally sully their sister's honor by forcing her to engage in pre-marital sex.

Fiammetta's rebuttal simultaneously underscores the unpredictability of the brothers' behavior and the helplessness of the woman: waiting to take her is a risky move, the queen says, since much can happen in a year. She may die, the brothers might renege on their agreement, she might be given in marriage to another man, or she might be abducted. Nowhere is it said

that, with some time and space, *she* might change her mind about their arrangement, and Fiammetta does not include the woman's desires or motivations in her calculations. The woman of the *questione* is entirely at the mercy of men, be they her brothers, who, not unlike pimps, will make decisions about her sexual relationships; other male relatives, who can decide to marry her to another man; or complete strangers, who might kidnap her. This is why the man must take his young lover for the first year, according to Fiammetta: his lover is a commodity that may very well be sold or transferred into the hands of another man. The twelfth *questione* forcefully demonstrates the degree to which women are at the mercy of men, but also the extent to which men could similarly find themselves subject to the *matta bestialità* of other men. Boccaccio thus uses this *questione* to illustrate the perils and precarities of dealing with men, particularly where issues of sex and honor are involved.

4.2 Resolved: Generous Men Share Their Wives

The fourth *questione* is one of two *questioni* that are reproduced almost verbatim in the *Decameron*; for that reason, I will highlight the divergences between the *questione* and the *novella* (*Dec.* 10.5) as I move through the *questione*.

It is posed by Menedon, who warns his audience that, in order to frame his question, he must recount a rather lengthy *novella*:

Altissima reina, ora viene a me la volta del proporre nel vostro cospetto, ond'io con la vostra licenza dirò. E da ora, se io troppo nel mio parlare mi stendessi, a voi e appresso agli altri circostanti dimando perdono, però che quello ch'io intendo di proporre interamente dare non si potrebbe a intendere, se a quello una novella, che non fia forse brieve, non precedesse (4.31).

Highest queen, it is now my turn to propose a question in your presence and so, with your permission, I will tell it to you. And if, from this point on, I extend my speech too much, I beg pardon from you and from the others here, for what I wish to ask cannot be fully understood unless it is preceded by a tale that may not be too brief.

He begins his tale:

Nella terra là dov'io nacqui, mi ricorda essere un ricchissimo e nobile cavaliere il quale di perfettissimo amore amando una donna nobile della terra, per isposa la prese. Della quale donna, essendo bellissima, un altro cavaliere chiamato Tarolfo s'innamorò; e di tanto amore l'amava, che oltre a lei non vedeva, né niuna cosa più desiava, e in molte maniere, forse con sovente passare davanti alle sue case, o giostrando, o armeggiando, o con altri atti, s'ingegnava d'aver l'amore di lei, e spesso mandandole messaggieri, forse promettendole grandissimi doni, e per sapere il suo intendimento. Le quali cose la donna tutte celatamente sostenea, senza dare o segno o risposta buona al cavaliere, fra sé dicendo: "Poi che questi s'avedrà che da me né buona risposta né buono atto puote avere, forse elli si rimarrà d'amarmi e di darmi questi stimoli." Ma già per tutto questo Tarolfo di ciò non si rimaneva, seguendo d'Ovidio gli amaestramenti, il quale dice l'uomo non lasciare per durezza della donna di non perseverare, però che per continuanza la molle acqua fora la dura pietra. Ma la donna, dubitando non queste cose venissero a orecchie del marito, e esso pensasse poi che con volontà di lei questo avvenisse, propose di dirgliela; ma poi mossa da miglior consiglio disse: "Io potrei, s'io il dicessi, commettere tra costoro cosa che io mai non viverei lieta: per altro modo si vuole levare via"; e imaginò una sottile malizia. Ella mandò così dicendo a Tarolfo, che se egli tanto l'amava quanto mostrava, ella voleva da lui un dono, il quale come l'avesse ricevuto, giurava per li suoi iddii, e per quella leanza che in gentile donna dee essere, che essa farebbe ogni suo piacere; e se quello che domandava, donare non le volesse, ponessesi in cuore di non stimolarla più avanti, se non per quanto egli non volesse che essa questo manifestasse al marito. E 'l dono il quale ella dimandò fu questo. Ella disse che voleva del mese di gennaio, in quella terra, un bel giardino e grande, d'erbe e di fiori e d'alberi e di frutti copioso, come se del mese di maggio fosse, fra sé dicendo: "Questa è cosa impossibile: io mi leverò costui da dosso per questa maniera." Tarolfo, udendo questo, ancora che impossibile gli paresse e che egli conoscesse bene perché la donna questo gli domandava, rispose che già mai non riposerebbe né in presenza di lei tornerebbe, infino a tanto che il dimandato dono le donerebbe (4.31).

In the land where I was born, I recall there was a rich and noble knight, who perfectly loved a local noblewoman and took her as his wife. The woman, who was quite beautiful, was similarly loved by another knight called Tarolfo; he loved her so greatly that he had eyes for no one else and there was nothing he desired more than her. So he tried in many different ways to win her love: passing frequently by her home, jousting, performing deeds of arms. He often sent her messages, perhaps promising her lavish gifts and hoping to learn her intentions. All of these things the lady kept secret, never giving a word or sign to the knight, all the while saying to herself: "Once he sees that he will not receive any encouraging response or gesture from me, perhaps he will stop loving me and pestering me." But Tarolfo did not cease, following the teachings of Ovid, who says that a man must not quit because of a woman's obstinance, since soft water eventually wears down hard rock. The woman, worried that these things might come to her husband's attention and that he might think that they were in some way indicative of her desires, considered telling him everything. But she then thought better of it: "If I

were to say something, it might stir up something between them, and then I would never live happily; this must be dealt with some other way.” And so she concocted a clever trick. She sent a message to him, saying that if he loved her as greatly as he claimed, she wanted a gift from him; she swore by the gods and by the loyalty a noble woman must possess that, if he did as she asked, she would do his every pleasure. But if he did not wish to fulfill her request, he would have to promise to never bother her again unless he wanted her to tell her husband of the whole affair. The gift that she wanted was this. She said that she wanted a great, beautiful garden, like the kind you find in May, full of grass and flowers and trees and fruit, in our land in the month of January. She said to herself: “This is an impossible request, and so I will finally free myself of him in this way.” Tarolfo, hearing this, found it quite impossible and understood why the lady had asked such a thing of him, yet he responded that he would not rest nor would he return to her presence until he had procured the gift she had requested.

There are some variations between the two versions that immediately stand out: in the *novella*, the location of the tale is made explicit, as we learn that it takes place in Udine, an ideal setting for the story because of its chilly climate. The *novella* is also more specific in the naming of its characters: while in the *questione* only Tarolfo is named (later changed to Ansaldo in *Dec.* 10.5), the married couple of the *novella* are called Dianora and Gilberto.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the respective social stations of Ansaldo and Gilberto are altered from the original *questione*: Ansaldo is simply “un gran ricco uomo,” while Gilberto is “un nobile e gran barone ... uomo d'alto affare e per arme e per cortesia conosciuto per tutto.” While the men effectively inhabited the same social sphere in the *questione*, they are ranked quite differently in the *novella*: one is moneyed, perhaps coming from the mercantile class, while the other is noble, chivalric, and prominent within the community.¹⁴⁹ The specificity of names, locations, and social status of the characters ultimately ground the *novella*, making it read less like a myth and more like a popular legend.

¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, the sorcerer of the *novella* goes unnamed. The protagonists of the *questione* are, in a sense, Tebano and Tarolfo: the longest descriptions and greatest amount of dialogue are dedicated to them, while the husband and wife occupy little textual space in comparison. Tebano’s role and importance are subsequently diminished in the *novella*, as he becomes a nameless magician, a mere plot device that aids Ansaldo in his quest to win Dianora.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Edwards notes the transformation these characters undergo as they transition from the world of the *questione* to that of the *Decameron*: “In the *Decameron*, the husband, Gilberto, is no

It should be noted that the events of the *questione* are described in a very prolonged manner and many of its intricate details were not ultimately included in the *Decameronian* tale; much of the details that follow, for instance, are unique to the *questione* and do not appear in the *novella*. Tarolfo sets out to find someone who can help create this spectacular garden, scouring the western world in vain, until he makes his way to Thessaly. Finding no one and beginning to despair, he sets out across the dusty plain of Pharsalus,¹⁵⁰ coming upon a small, withered man gathering herbs. He strikes up a conversation with the mysterious little man, who introduces himself simply as a Theban (Tebano); he asks Tarolfo what has brought him to this desolate place and, after some coaxing, the knight reluctantly tells him of his predicament. Tarolfo laments that he has still not found anyone who can aid him in his quest, to which Tebano replies:

“Tu e molti altri il sapere e le virtù degli uomini giudicate secondo i vestimenti. Se la mia roba fosse stata qual è la tua, tu non m’avresti tanto penato a dire la tua bisogna, o se forse appresso de’ ricchi precipi m’avessi trovato, come tu hai a cogliere erbe; ma molte volte sotto vilissimi drappi grandissimo tesoro di scienza si nasconde: e però a chi proffera consiglio o aiuto niuno celi la sua bisogna, se, manifesta, non gli può pregiudicare. Ma che doneresti tu a chi quello che tu vai cercando ti recasse ad effetto?” Tarolfo rimirava costui nel viso, dicendo egli queste parole, e in sé dubitava non questi si facesse beffe di lui, parendogli incredibile che, sei colui fosse stato Iddio, ch’egli avesse potuto fare virtù. Non per tanto egli li rispose così: “Io signoreggio ne’ miei paesi più castella, e con esse molti tesori, i quali tutti per mezzo partirei con chi tal piacere mi facesse.” “Certo” disse Tebano “se questo facessi, a me non bisognerebbe d’andare più cogliendo l’erbe” (4.31).

longer the ideal figure of stable, inherited aristocracy but a civic personality... He exists within the urban social sphere of Udine rather than a feudal world. Meanwhile, the idealization transfers to the importuning aristocratic lover... The unnamed husband of the *Questioni* loves his wife perfectly; in the *Decameron*, it is Ansaldo who loves her ‘sommamente’ and ‘fermamente.’ Ansaldo’s desire is a vestige of the milieu that Boccaccio abandons in moving from the *Filocolo* to the *Decameron*” (“Rewriting Menelion’s Story: *Decameron* 10.5 and the Franklin’s Tale” in *The Decameron: New Essays on an Old Question*, edited by Leonard Michael Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000).

¹⁵⁰ During the Roman civil war, this was the location of the decisive battle in which Caesar defeated Pompey; Boccaccio’s mention of the plain of Pharsalus is not incidental but rather a conspicuous display of his familiarity with the annals of classical history.

“You and many others judge the wisdom and virtues of men based on their clothing. If my robe were like yours or perhaps if you had found me among rich princes, instead of seeing me here collecting herbs, you would not have been so hesitant to tell me of your need. But many times under humble clothes great treasures of knowledge are hidden; so no one should hide his needs from one who offers counsel or aid if revealing it can do no harm. But what would you give to the one who could bring your request to fruition?” Tarolfo gazed intently at him as he spoke, and wondered if he had been taunting him, since he thought that even if this man were a god it would be incredible for him to perform such deeds. Nonetheless he replied: “I rule over many castles in my lands and possess a great deal of treasure, which I would divide equally with whomever did my bidding.” “Of course,” said Tebano, “if I were to do this, I would not need to gather herbs any longer.”

Tebano’s speech evokes a question of great interest to Boccaccio: the possibility of a noble spirit beneath an unassuming exterior. Not infrequently, he depicts characters whose inner worth is belied by their outwardly modest appearance, touching upon the theme repeatedly throughout his works.¹⁵¹ Several of the characters portrayed in Day Six of the *Decameron* demonstrate that it is indeed possible for those positioned at the lowest rungs of society to possess the greatest virtues; in *Dec.* 6.2, for instance, Pampinea narrates a story about Cisti, a humble baker, who proves that great virtue can reside in unexpected personages:

Io non so da me medesima vedere che più in questo si pecchi, o la natura apparecchiando a una nobile anima un vil corpo, o la fortuna apparecchiando a un corpo dotato d'anima nobile vil mestiero, sì come in Cisti nostro cittadino e in molti ancora abbiamo potuto vedere avvenire; il qual Cisti, d'altissimo animo fornito, la fortuna fece fornaio (6.2.3.).

I cannot myself decide whether Nature is more at fault in furnishing a noble spirit with an inferior body, or Fortune in allotting an inferior calling to a body endowed with a noble spirit, as happened in the case of Cisti, our fellow citizen, and many other people of our own acquaintance. This Cisti was a man of exceedingly lofty spirit, and yet Fortune made him a baker.

¹⁵¹ Leaving aside the numerous examples to be found in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio treats questions of inner nobility within the main plot of the *Filocolo* (the love affair between Florio and Biancofiore is complicated by the fact that he is the son of a king while she is a humble orphan), in the *Filostrato* (which similarly depicts a socially asymmetrical relationship between Troilus, a Trojan prince, and Cressida, the daughter of the disgraced Greek prophet Calcas), and in the *De casibus*, where he briefly discusses the nature of nobility in men, reiterating that it cannot be inherited but is rather cultivated through the practice of virtue.

Boccaccio thus uses the introduction to the *novella* of Cisti fornaio to call attention to Fortune's propensity for creating asymmetries between inner nature and outward appearance¹⁵²; Tebano similarly reminds Tarolfo of this reality. In his introduction to *Dec.* 6.5, Panfilo echoes Pampinea's assertion in terms that mirror Tebano's speech almost identically: "sì come la fortuna sotto vili arti alcuna volta grandissimi tesori di vertù nasconde" ("it is true that Fortune occasionally conceals abundant treasures of native wit in those who practice a humble trade" [6.5.3]). As Tebano says, one ought not to judge a humble appearance too harshly, since there may in fact be "grandissimi tesori" hidden underneath.

Tebano is indeed far more powerful than his small, wizened figure would have Tarolfo believe. Upon returning to the knight's homeland, Tebano sets out to create the mystical garden, and Menedon provides a lengthy narration of Tebano's occult deed: in the dead of night, the sorcerer calls upon Ceres and Hecate to aid him and is borne up by a chariot drawn by two dragons. He embarks upon a three-day transcontinental journey, collecting various herbs and roots from across Europe to use in a mystical brew that will include milk, blood, water, sulfur, the flesh of witches, the testicles of a wolf, the scales of a water snake, and the organs of a stag. As soon as he sprinkles the potion on the barren land, it becomes lush and verdant, and his blood magic produces a garden whose magnificence exceeds Tarolfo's wildest dreams.

Tarolfo is immensely pleased with Tebano's work, and he invites the woman to see it for herself; she and her companions are astonished by the bounteous garden and, thinking it to be an illusion, they taste the fruit from its trees only to find that it is as ripe and sweet as if it were

¹⁵² Boccaccio's ideas on the nature of true nobility were not wholly unique, as he drew inspiration from Seneca's writings on the matter. In his seminal essay, "Seneca nel *Decameron*," (*Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, CLXVIII, 1991, pp. 321-334) Giuseppe Velli uses *Ad Lucilium epistolae morales* as a critical intertext to examine the ways in which Boccaccio's engaged with and elaborated upon Seneca's views on nobility.

picked at the peak of summer. This fills the lady with dread, as she realizes that she must now fulfill her promise:

Questo giardino fu a tutti i paesani manifesto, avvegna che niuno non sapesse, se non dopo molto tempo, come venuto si fosse. Ma la gentil donna, che ricevuto l'avea, dolente di quello si partì, tornando nella sua camera piena di noiosa malinconia. E pensando in qual maniera tornare potesse adietro ciò che promesso avea, e non trovando licita scusa, in più dolore cresceva. La quale vedendo il marito più volte, si cominciò molto a maravigliare e a domandarla che cosa ella avesse: la donna dicea che niente avea, vergognandosi di scoprire al marito la fatta promissione per lo dimandato dono, dubitando non il marito malvagia la tenesse. Ultimamente non potendosi ella a' continui stimoli del marito, che pur la cagione della sua malinconia disiderava di sapere, tenersi, dal principio infino alla fine gli narrò perché dolente dimorava. La qual cosa udendo il cavaliere lungamente pensò, e conoscendo nel pensiero la purità della donna, così le disse: "Va, e copertamente serva il tuo giuramento, e a Tarolfo ciò che tu promettesti liberamente attieni: egli l'ha ragionevolmente e con grande affanno guadagnato." Cominciò la donna a piangere e a dire: "Facciano gl'iddii da me lontano cotal fallo; in niuna maniera io farò questo: avanti m'ucciderei ch'io facessi cosa che disonore o dispiacere vi fosse." A cui il cavaliere disse: "Donna, già per questo io non voglio che tu te n'uccida, né ancora che una sola malinconia tu te ne dia: niuno dispiacere m'è, va e fa quello che tu impromettesti, ch'io non te ne avrò di meno cara; ma questo fornito, un'altra volta ti guarderai di sì fatte impromesse, non tanto ti paia il domandato dono impossibile ad avere" (4.31).

This garden became known to all the citizens of the town, and soon everyone knew how it had come about. But the noble lady, who had been its recipient, was pained by it and returned to her room full of melancholy. She hoped that she might find some way to go back on her promise but, unable to find a legitimate excuse, her sadness grew. Her husband, seeing this, began to wonder at this and asked her what was the matter; she said it was nothing, ashamed lest her husband discover the promise she had made in return for this gift and afraid that he would think her wicked. After a while, unable to withstand the pestering of her husband (who wished to know the reason for her sadness), she narrated the whole affair from the beginning, explaining why she was so afflicted. Upon hearing this, the knight reflected on it for a while and, knowing in his heart the purity of the lady, said to her: "Go and fulfill your vow in secret and give Tarolfo what you freely promised; he has earned it fairly and with great pains." The woman began to weep, saying: "May the gods keep me from such sin; there is no way that I would ever do such a thing. I would sooner kill myself than do anything to bring you dishonor or displeasure." To which the knight replied: "Lady, I would not want you to kill yourself because of this, nor do I want you to feel any grief for this; it will cause me no displeasure, go and do as you pledged, for you will be no less dear to me for having done it. But, once this is over, next time be wary of making such promises even if it seems your request is impossible to fulfill."

When one compares the speech of the husband of the *questione* with that of Gilberto, one finds a fascinating divergence between their responses to the wife's dilemma:

Gilberto primieramente ciò udendo si turbò forte: poi, considerata la pura intenzion della donna, con miglior consiglio cacciata via l'ira, disse: “Dianora, egli non è atto di savia né d'onesta donna d'ascoltare alcuna ambasciata delle così fatte, né di pattovire sotto alcuna condizione con alcuno la sua castità. Le parole per gli orecchi dal cuore ricevute hanno maggior forza che molti non stimano, e quasi ogni cosa diviene agli amanti possibile. Male adunque facesti prima a ascoltare e poscia a pattovire; ma per ciò che io conosco la purità dello animo tuo, per solverti da' legame della promessa, quello ti concederò che forse alcuno altro non farebbe, inducendomi ancora la paura del nigromante, al qual forse messer Ansaldo, se tu il beffassi, far ci farebbe dolenti. Voglio io che tu a lui vada e, se per modo alcun puoi, t'ingegni di far che, servata la tua onestà, tu sii da questa promessa disciolta: dove altramenti non si potesse, per questa volta il corpo ma non l'animo gli concedi” (10.5.14-16).

Gilberto was at first extremely angry, but after mature reflection, bearing in mind the purity of his wife's intentions, he put aside his anger and said: “Dianora, no wise or virtuous woman should ever pay heed to messages of that sort, nor should she ever barter her chastity with anyone, no matter what terms she may impose. The power of words received by the heart through the ears is greater than many people think, and to those who are in love nearly everything becomes possible. Hence you did wrong, first of all to pay any heed to him and secondly to barter with him. But because I know you were acting from the purest of motives, I shall allow you, so as to be quit of your promise, to do something which possibly no other man would permit, being swayed also by my fear of the magician, whom Messer Ansaldo, if you were to play him false, would perhaps encourage to do us a mischief. I therefore want you to go to him, and endeavor in every way possible to have yourself released from this promise without loss of honor; but if this should prove impossible, just for this once you may give him your body, but not your heart.”

Whereas the husband of the *questione* shows an almost Griselda-like degree of patience and unconditional love, Gilberto chastises his wife, only agreeing to let her go to Ansaldo because he is afraid that the sorcerer will use his magic to punish them if they do not comply. And while the husband of the *questione* declares that she is duty-bound to surrender herself to Tarolfo, Gilberto is utterly unconcerned with the ethical implications of breaking a promise. The virtues of the respective men will naturally become a subject of debate by the end of the *questione*.

The *novella* and the *questione* conclude in the same way: Tarolfo marvels at the husband's liberality and permits the lady to return to him untouched. Tebano, struck by Tarolfo's generosity, emulates his virtuous behavior by declining payment for his services. Menedon closes by asking the queen to determine which of the three men behaved most liberally:

Dubitasi ora quale di costoro fosse di maggiore liberalità, o quella del cavaliere che concedette alla donna l'andare a Tarolfo, o quella di Tarolfo, il quale quella donna cui egli avea sempre disziata, e per cui egli avea tanto fatto per venire a quel punto che venuto era, quando la donna venne a lui, se gli fosse piaciuto, rimandò la sopradetta donna intatta al suo marito; o quella di Tebano, il quale, abbandonate le sue contrade, oramai vecchio, e venuto quivi per guadagnare i promessi doni, e affannatosi per recare a fine ciò che promesso avea, avendoli guadagnati, ogni cosa rimise, rimanendosi povero come prima (4.31).

There is doubt now as to which was the greatest form of liberality: that of the knight who allowed the woman to go to Tarolfo; that of Tarolfo, who, even after desiring that woman for so long and doing so much to bring her to him, once he obtained her returned her intact to her husband; or that of Tebano, who abandoned his homeland in his old age in order to earn great rewards and, after working so assiduously to secure what he had been promised, renounced it all and remained in poverty.

The queen responds by outlining the three distinct types of generosity she believes the men displayed:

Bellissima è la novella e la dimanda ... e in verità che ciascuno fu assai liberale, e, ben considerando, il primo del suo onore, il secondo del libidinoso volere, il terzo dell'acquistato avere fu cortese: e però volendo conoscere chi maggiore liberalità ovvero cortesia facesse, conviene considerare quale di queste tre cose sia più cara. La qual cosa veduta, manifestamente conosceremo il più liberale però che chi più dona più liberale è da tenere. Delle quali tre cose l'una è cara, cioè l'onore... Il secondo è da fuggire, cioè il libidinoso congiugnimento... La terza non è da disiderare, cioè sono le ricchezze, con ciò sia cosa che esse sieno le più volte a virtuosa vita noiose, e possasi con moderata povertà vivere virtuosamente... Adunque, se solo l'onore è in queste tre caro, e l'altre no, dunque quelli maggiore liberalità fece che quello donava, avvegna che meno saviamente facesse. Egli ancora fu nelle liberalità principale, per la cui l'altre seguirono: però, secondo il nostro parere, chi diè la donna, in cui il suo onore consisteva, più che gli altri fu liberale (4.32).

Both the tale and the question are delightful ... and, in truth, each of them was quite liberal: the first was courteous with his honor, the second with his sensual desires, and the

third with the rewards he had earned. Yet since we must determine who showed the greatest liberality or courtesy, we must consider which of these three things is most valuable. Whichever we find is of the greatest value will show us clearly who was the most liberal since whoever was generous with the most valuable thing is the one that ought to be chosen. Of these three things only one is of value, which is honor... The second is to be avoided, that is, lustful coupling... The third is not to be desired either, that is, riches, which often are the reason that virtuous lives are ruined, and anyway one may live virtuously with a moderate degree of poverty... Therefore, if only honor is to be held dear among these three things and the others are not, the most liberal one was the man who gave his honor away, even though he behaved unwisely. His generosity was superior, and so the others trail behind him; indeed, according to our judgment, he who gave his wife, in whom his honor consists, was more liberal than the others.

Menedon disagrees, claiming that the husband in fact displayed far less liberality than the other two:

A me pare che ciascuno degli altri fosse più liberale, e udite come. Egli è ben vero che 'l primo concedette la donna, ma in ciò egli non fece tanta liberalità quanto voi dite; però che se egli l'avesse voluta negare, giustamente egli non poteva, per lo giuramento fatto dalla donna, che osservare si convenia: e chi dona ciò che non può negare ben fa, in quanto se ne fa liberale, ma poco dà. E però, sì com'io dissi, ciascuno degli altri più fu cortese, però che, come io già dissi, Tarolfo avea già lungo tempo la donna desiderata e amata sopra tutte le cose, e per questa avere avea lungamente tribolato, e mettendosi per soddisfazione della dimanda di lei a cercare cose quasi impossibili ad avere, le quali pure avute lei meritò di tenere per la promessa fede: la quale, sì come noi dicemmo, tenendo, non è dubbio che nelle sue mani l'onore del marito, e il rimetterle ciò che promesso gli avea, stava. La qual cosa egli fece: dunque dell'onore del marito, del saramento di lei, del suo lungo disio fu liberale. Gran cosa è l'aver una lunga sete sostenuta, e poi pervenire alla fontana e non bere per lasciare bere altrui. Il terzo ancora fu molto liberale, però che, pensando che la povertà sia una delle moleste cose del mondo a sostenere, con ciò sia cosa ch'ella sia cacciatrice d'allegrezza e di riposo, fugatrice d'onori, occupatrice di virtù, adducitrice d'amare sollecitudini, ciascuno naturalmente quella s'ingegna di fuggire con ardente disio [...] Adunque, chi di povertà è in ricchezza venuto, e con quella il vivere gli diletta, quanta e quale liberalità è quella di chi quella dona, e nello stato, ch'egli ha con tanti affanni fuggito, consente di ritornare? [...] Però terrò che ciascuno de' due seguenti aggia maggiore liberalità fatta che 'l primo, e 'l terzo maggiore che niuno (4.33).

It seems to me that each of the others was more liberal, and you shall hear why. It is true that the first conceded his wife, but in this he did not display as much generosity as you claim. Even if he had wanted not to, he could not in all conscience do so, since the oath of his wife had to be fulfilled. Whoever gives that which he may not withhold does well with regard to generosity, but he does not give much. And so, as I said, each of the other two was more courteous since, as I said, Tarolfo had long desired and loved the lady above all things and had travailed at length to pursue things that seemed impossible to

attain in order to satisfy her demands; having fulfilled her request, he was entitled to hold her to her promise. Therefore, there is no doubt her honor and the return of what had been promised to him rested solely in his hands. And return her is precisely what he did, so he was liberal with the honor of the husband, with the vow of the lady, and with his longstanding desire for her. It is no small feat to have been subjected to a long thirst only to come to a fountain and not drink so that others might partake of it. The third was also very liberal since poverty is one of the greatest discomforts of this life – it dispels happiness and rest, destroys honors, overcomes virtues, brings about bitter worries – and one naturally tries to avoid it all costs [...] Therefore, what level of generosity is displayed by one who goes from poverty to wealth (thus being able to delight ever more in his life) and consents to return to the condition from which he had worked so hard to escape? [...] So I maintain that the other two showed greater liberality than the first, but the third was the most liberal of them all.

The queen takes exception to Menedon's claim that the husband was not generous since he was simply fulfilling an obligation, and she proceeds to educate him on the nature of agreements made between spouses:

Voi volete dire che colui niuna liberalità facesse concedendo la moglie, però che di ragione fare gliele convenia per lo saramento fatto dalla donna: la qual cosa saria così, se il saramento tenesse; ma la donna, con ciò sia cosa ch'ella sia membro del marito, o più tosto un corpo con lui, non potea fare quel saramento senza volontà del marito, e se 'l fece, fu nullo, però che al primo saramento licitamente fatto niuno subseguente puote derogare, e massimamente quelli che per non dovuta cagione non debitamente si fanno [...] dunque la donna non poté giurare, e se giurò, come già detto avemo, per non dovuta cosa giurò; e contraria al primo giuramento, non dee valere, e non valendo, oltre al suo piacere non si dovea commettere a Tarolfo, e se vi si commise, fu egli del suo onore liberale, e non Tarolfo, come voi tenete. Né del saramento non poté liberale essere rimettendolo, con ciò sia cosa che il saramento niente fosse: adunque solamente rimase liberale Tarolfo del suo libidinoso disio [...] Da sapere è che castità insieme con l'altre virtù niuno altro premio rendono a' possessori d'esse se non onore, il quale onore, tra gli altri uomini meno virtuosi, li fa più eccellenti [...] La quale se la donna al suo marito la serve, egli vive lieto e certo della sua prole, e con aperto viso usa infra la gente, contento di vedere lei per tale virtù dalle più alte donne onorata, e nell'animo gli è manifesto segnale costei essere buona, e temere Iddio, e amare lui, che non poco gli dee piacere, sentendo che per eterna compagnia indivisibile, fuor che da morte, gli è donata. Egli per questa grazia ne' mondani beni e negli spirituali si vede continuo moltiplicare [...] Dunque grandissimo onore è quello che la castità della donna rende all'uomo, e molto da tener caro. Beato si può chiamare colui a cui per grazia cotal dono è conceduto, avvegna che noi crediamo che pochi sieno quelli a' quali di tal bene sia portato invidia (4.34).

You wish to say that the man displayed no liberality in conceding his wife, since he had to do this because of the vow made by the lady; this would be the case if the promise were binding. The woman, who is part of her husband, or rather shares a body with him,

cannot make vows without the consent of her husband. If she does, they are invalid since no subsequent vow can supersede an original, properly made vow, especially if those later vows are improperly made and made without good reason [...] Therefore the woman could not swear and, if she did, as we have already said, she swore improperly. Whatever is contrary to the original vow cannot carry weight, and since it did not carry weight, she could not give herself to Tarolfo, and, if she did do so because her husband bade her to, it was the husband who was generous with his honor – not Tarolfo, as you claim. Nor could he be generous in freeing him from this promise, since the promise was void; therefore, Tarolfo was only liberal with his sensual desires [...] You must understand that chastity, together with the other virtues, gives no reward to its possessors if not honor, and honor makes them superior among less virtuous men [...] If the woman remains faithful to her husband, he lives happily and certain of his heirs, and carries himself confidently among the people, glad to see his wife honored for that virtue above even noble women, and in his soul it is clear to him that she is good and God-fearing and loves him; this must please him more than a little, knowing that he has been gifted her companionship for eternity, inseparable apart from death. As a result of this blessing, he shall see his worldly and spiritual goods multiply continuously [...] Therefore, a woman's chastity bestows great honor upon a man, and it is to be prized. Blessed is the man who has been given such a gift, though we believe there are few men who are to be envied for such a boon.

As I have said before, in light of his juridical background, legalistic details in Boccaccio's works should not be overlooked. As such, Fiammetta's claims about the validity of the wife's vow merit a brief historicizing digression. Indeed, the queen employs logic that would have been consistent with Italian medieval law when she asserts that a woman may not make vows without the consent of her husband. Medieval jurists inherited the statutes of Roman law, which assigned women to a distinct legal class that necessitated unique protections and limitations; only women who were *sui iuris* (a relatively rare category of women who were legally emancipated from the control of any man) could "sign contracts and undertake legal action on their own behalf."¹⁵³ Fiammetta's statement that women share a body with their husbands echoes a fundamental principle of canon law, which "regarded man as the 'head' of woman and woman as the 'body' of man – in other words, canon law provided a model of male-female relations that

¹⁵³ Marie A. Kelleher: "Later Medieval Law in Community Context" in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, p. 135.

assumed both gender complementarity and inherent female inferiority.”¹⁵⁴ And while legal practice in medieval Italy varied somewhat from commune to commune, the notion of women’s legal incapacity was consistent throughout. In Boccaccio’s Florence, “the consent of a husband or guardian [was required] for almost any legal action a woman wished to undertake. In all cases, however, Italian women’s status as legal agents was the result of a blending of two [patriarchal] traditions [of *ius commune* and older customary laws].”¹⁵⁵ In the context of the *questione*, the woman attempted to enter into a contract with Tarolfo, but it was not, in fact, legally valid since it was ratified without the consent of her husband. Therefore, according to Fiammetta, neither the husband nor the wife was obliged to fulfill the promise she had made to Tarolfo since the contract was null from its inception. Consequently, the husband’s decision to give his wife to Tarolfo was motivated by generosity, not duty.

Having refuted Menedon’s claim that the husband’s behavior was obligatory rather than liberal, Fiammetta turns her attention Tebano:

Ma ritornando al nostro proposito, vedete quanto il cavaliere dava: ma egli non ci è della mente uscito quanto diceste, Tebano essere stato più che gli altri liberale [...] Apertamente si pare che da voi è mal conosciuta la povertà, la quale ogni ricchezza trapassa se lieta viene. Tebano già forse per l’acquistate ricchezze gli pareva esser pieno d’amare e di varie sollecitudini. Egli già imaginava che a Tarolfo paresse avere mal fatto, e trattasse di ucciderlo per riavere le sue castella. Egli dimorava in paura non forse da’ suoi sudditi fosse tradito. Egli era entrato in sollecitudine del governmento delle sue terre. Egli già conosceva tutti gl’inganni apparecchiati da’ suoi parziali di farli. Egli si vedea da molti invidiato per le sue ricchezze, egli dubitava non i ladroni occultamente quelle gli levassero. Egli era ripieno di tanti e tali e sì varii pensieri e sollecitudini, che ogni riposo era da lui fuggito. Per la qual cosa ricordandosi della preterita vita, e come senza tante sollecitudini la menava lieta, fra sé disse: “Io desiderava d’arricchire per riposo, ma io veggo ch’elli è accrescimento di tribulazioni e di pensieri, e fuggimento di quiete.” [...] se Tebano si levò questo stimolo da dosso, non fu liberale, ma savio (4.34).

Returning to our question, you may now see how much the knight truly gave; but it has not escaped our mind that you claimed that Tebano was more generous than the others

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 135

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

[...] Evidently you do not understand the nature of poverty, which outstrips all wealth if it comes happily. Perhaps Tebano had already seen the various bitter cares that come along with the acquisition of wealth. He already imagined that Tarolfo thought he had done wrong and was plotting to kill him in order to regain his estates. He was living in fear that perhaps his subjects would betray him. The management of his lands preoccupied him. He already anticipated the many traps his fiefs had laid for him. He understood that he was envied by many on account of his riches and worried that thieves would craftily steal them from him. He was so full of thoughts and apprehensions that he could not rest. For this reason, recalling his previous life and how he had led it so happily and free from all these cares, he said to himself: "I desired riches in order to rest, but I see now that this comes with a great many ordeals and worries, and tranquility will be put to flight" [...] If Tebano freed himself from the cares that would be heaped upon him, he was not generous but wise.

While the queen's defense of poverty smacks of hypocrisy (readers will recall that she and the other twelve members of the group all hail from the wealthy upper echelons of society), if one considers it through a historicizing lens, one might see it as an indication of the financial and social anxieties that feudal lords would have experienced. Indeed, thefts, fief uprisings, issues with wealth management, and murder were concrete possibilities that could have inspired fear in feudal lords.

Her discourse on Tebano finished, Fiammetta concludes by reiterating the generosity of the husband and reflecting upon the lasting imprint left by injuries to a man's honor:

Fu adunque più liberale il cavaliere, che il suo onore concedea, che nullo degli altri. E pensate una cosa: che l'onore che colui donava è inrecuperabile, la qual cosa non avviene di molti altri, sì come di battaglie, di pruove e d'altre cose, le quali se una volta si perdono, un'altra si racquistano, e è possibile (4.34).

The knight was more generous than the others in that he gave up his honor. And reflect on this: the honor that he gave away could not be recuperated, which is not the case with many other affairs, like battles and trials and many other things which, if they are lost once, may possibly be regained another time.

She makes a pronouncement that has been heavily implied throughout the *questioni d'amore* but has not, up to this point, been so explicitly stated: honor, once tarnished, can never be truly restored. These are powerful words that speak to an issue of immense cultural significance: wars

were waged, murders were carried out, intergenerational tensions were fomented, and resentments persisted beyond the grave¹⁵⁶ because of injuries to honor. Her conclusion connects seamlessly to her previous comments on chastity: she extolled it as a social virtue of immense importance since it would ensure the integrity of families and provide husbands a sense of security, both privately and publicly. Nonetheless, she opines that there are few men who can rejoice in the fidelity of their wives, effectively reaffirming the allusions she made in the ninth *questione* to the prevalence of female adultery. There is a gravity to her final words, as her remarks concerning the permanence of female sexual dishonor is in direct contrast to Panfilo's blithe conclusion to *Dec. 2.7* that "bocca basciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnuova come fa la luna" ("a kissed mouth doesn't lose its freshness, for like the moon it always renews itself" [2.7.122]). Unlike Alatiel, who exists in an exotic fictional world in which she regains her agency and brokers a new future for herself by convincing her father that she is still a virgin, the wife of the fourth *questione* is bound by social and legal structures that will pass enduring and inflexible sentences on her worth as a woman. Fiammetta's judgment is unambiguous: a woman's honor is a finite good which, once depleted, cannot be restored.

If one considers the fourth *questione* as an iceberg, the themes of honor and liberality are situated at its tip, obscuring larger concerns surrounding gender and control. Indeed, it is a cautionary tale of reversal, a parable of the risks that women assume when they try to trick crafty men.¹⁵⁷ While the *Decameron* is brimming with women who cleverly extricate themselves from

¹⁵⁶ The unavenged murder of Dante's cousin, Geri del Bello, is a source of contention in *Inf. 29* and a powerful representation of the cultural, moral, and social significance of familial honor in medieval Italy.

¹⁵⁷ This theme is threaded throughout the *Decameron*, yet it is summarized so crisply by Pampinea, who, in her introduction to *Dec. 8.7*, encourages the ladies of the brigata to pay special attention to her tale: "E questo udire non sarà senza utilità di voi, per ciò che meglio di beffare altrui vi guarderete, e farete gran senno" ("Nor will it be unprofitable for you to hear this

men's wiles and demands, the woman of the fourth *questione* is a model of female susceptibility. Like the woman of the first *questione*, she attempts to outsmart her insistent suitor yet, differently from her counterpart from the first *questione*, she is ultimately unable to free herself from his oppressive advances. She thus finds herself totally at the mercy of men: her husband, whom she begs to deliver her from an unwilling act of adultery, resolutely sends her away to fulfill her vow, and Tarolfo, who releases her from their agreement not out of concern for her wishes but rather out of respect for her husband's incredible permissiveness. The husband may as well be speaking to all women when he warns his wife: "ti guarderai di sì fatte impromesse, non tanto ti paia il domandato dono impossibile ad avere." The *questione* thus urges women to beware of their dealings with men, lest they find their own clever manipulations used against them.

4.3 Resolved: Loyal Men Are Not Exemplary

Messallino poses the thirteenth and final *questione* which, like the fourth *questione*, is also replicated in the *Decameron*. The cast of characters is quite similar to the fourth *questione*: a knight is hopelessly in love with a beautiful woman who is happily married to a wealthy man. The *questioni* diverge early on, however, as Messallino's tale takes a dark turn almost immediately:

Io udii già dire che nella nostra città un gentile uomo ricco molto avea per sua sposa una bellissima e giovane donna, la quale egli sopra tutte le cose del mondo amava. Era questa donna da un cavaliere della detta città per amore intimamente amata, ma ella né lui amava né di suo amore si curava: per la qual cosa il cavaliere mai da lei né parola né buon sembiante avea potuto avere. E così sconsolato di tale amore vivendo, avvenne che al reggimento d'una città, assai alla nostra vicina, fu chiamato, ove egli andò [...] per

tale, for it will teach you to think twice before playing tricks on people, which is always a sensible precaution" [8.7.3]). Indeed, the widow of the novella pays dearly for duping the young scholar who hoped to win her love.

accidente gli venne un messaggere, il quale dopo altre novelle così gli disse: “Signor mio, siavi manifesto che quella donna la quale voi sopra tutte l’altre amavate nella nostra città, questa mattina, volendo partorire, per greve doglia non partorendo morì, e onorevolmente co’ suoi padri in mia presenza fu sepellita.” Con greve doglia ascoltò il cavaliere la novella e con forte animo la sostenne, non mostrando nel viso per quella alcun mutamento; e così fra se medesimo disse: “Ahi, villana morte, maladetta sia la tua potenza! Tu m’hai privato di colei cui io più ch’altra cosa amava, e cui io più desiderava di servire, ben che verso di me la conoscessi crudele. Ma poi che così è avvenuto, quello che amore nella vita di lei non mi volle concedere, ora ch’ella è morta nol mi potrà negare: ché certo, s’io dovessi morire, la faccia, che io tanto viva amai, ora morta converrà ché io baci” (4.67).

I heard it said that there was in our city a very rich gentleman who had a beautiful young woman as his wife, whom he loved above everything in this world. This woman was intimately loved by a knight from this same city, but she did not love him nor care anything for his love. Because of this, the knight could never win neither a word nor a kind gesture from her. Dejected by this unrequited love he bore for her, it happened that he was called to govern a city not far from our own, so he went [...] by chance a messenger came to him and, after recounting various other matters, told him: “My lord, you should know that the woman whom you loved above all else in our city tried to give birth this morning but, because of her great suffering, was unable to birth the child. She died and was buried honorably with her ancestors in my presence.” With immense grief the knight listened to this tale and with a strong spirit he endured it, not showing any sign on his face; he said to himself: “Ah, wicked death, your powers be damned! You took from me she whom I loved above everything and whom I wished to serve, even though, as you know, she was cruel to me. But now that this has happened, that love which she never wanted to grant me in life cannot be withheld from me in death. Indeed, even if I had to die, now that she is dead, I must kiss the face that I loved so much while she was alive.”

As was the case in the fourth *questione*, the setting and characters of the thirteenth *questione* go mostly unnamed. In *Dec.* 10.4, however, the tale is furnished in greater detail: the story unfolds in Bologna, the husband and wife are named Catalina and Niccoluccio Caccianimico, and the lover is no longer a knight, but rather a nobleman called Gentile de’ Carisendi. In the *novella*, Gentile’s response to the news possesses an almost vindictive quality: “Ecco, madonna Catalina, tu se’ morta: io, mentre che vivesti, mai un solo sguardo da te aver non potei: per che, ora che difender non ti potrai, convien per certo che, così morta come tu se’, io alcun bacio ti tolga” (“So, Madonna Catalina, you are dead! You never accorded me so much as a single glance when you

were alive; but now that you are dead, and cannot reject my love, I am determined to steal a kiss or two from you” [10.4.8]). The knight of the *questione* addresses himself to death and, while he admits that she never repaid his affections while she was alive, he laments her untimely passing and promises to kiss the face he loved so dearly. Gentile de’ Carisendi, in contrast, lacks the courtly niceties of his predecessor in the *questione* and addresses himself directly to Catalina, spitefully recalling her coldness toward him and vengefully vowing to take his pleasure now that she can no longer defend herself against his advances.

The events of Messallino’s tale are quite similar to those of the *novella*, as the distraught knight returns to his city and breaks into the tomb in order to kiss the corpse of his beloved:

...con pietoso pianto dolendosi cominciò a baciare la donna e a recarlasì in braccio. E dopo alquanto, non potendosi di baciare costei saziare, la cominciò a toccare e a mettere le mani nel gelato seno fra le fredde menne, e poi le segrete parti del corpo con quelle, divenuto ardito oltre al dovere, cominciò a cercare sotto i ricchi vestimenti: le quali andando tutte con timida mano tentando sopra lo stomaco la distese, e quivi con debole movimento sentì li deboli polsi muoversi alquanto. Divenne allora questi non poco pauroso, ma amore il faceva ardito: e ricercando con più fidato sentimento, costei conobbe che morta non era; e di quel luogo la trasse con soave mutamento (4.67).

...with a piteous sob he began to kiss her and hold her in his arms. But after a brief time, no longer satisfied with mere kisses, he began to touch her and put his hands on her frozen chest between her cold breasts and, from there, he began to search under her rich garments for the secret parts of her body, becoming more passionate than he should. And, venturing across her body with his timid hand, he rested it on her stomach, where he felt a slight and faint movement of her weak pulse. Then he was no longer afraid, and love made him brave: prodding her with greater confidence he realized that she was not dead and so he took her from that place.

While in *Dec.*10.4 Gentile fondles her breasts but restrains himself from going any further, the scene in the *questione* is far more lurid, as the knight continues to probe “le segrete parti del corpo.” The scene is, by design, deeply unsettling, even more so because it plays a crucial function within the overarching plot. His molestation of the woman’s corpse is ultimately what

saves her life, as he realizes that she is not actually dead and rescues her from her tomb, placing her in the care of his mother, who nurses her back to health and delivers her baby.

Once the woman is sufficiently recovered, she begins to wonder where she is and how she has gotten there:

A cui il cavaliere rispose: “Donna, non ti meravigliare, confortati, ché quello che tu vedi, piacere degl’iddii è stato, e io ti dirò come.” E cominciandosi dal principio, infino alla fine come avvenuto gli era le dichiarò, conchiudendo che per lui ella e ’l figliuolo erano vivi: per la qual cosa sempre a’ suoi piaceri erano tenuti. Questo sentendo la donna e conoscendo veramente che per altro modo alle mani del cavaliere non poria essere pervenuta, se non per quello che egli le narrava, prima gl’iddii con divote voci ringraziò e appresso il cavaliere, sempre a’ suoi servigii e piaceri offerendosi. Disse adunque il cavaliere: “Donna, poi che a’ miei voleri conoscete essere tenuta, io voglio che in guiderdone di ciò che io ho adoperato voi vi confortiate infino alla tornata mia dell’ufficio al quale io fui eletto già è tanto tempo, che presso alla fine sono, e mi promettiate di mai né al vostro marito né ad altra persona senza mia licenza palesarvi.” A cui la donna rispose sé non potergli né questo né altro negare, e che veramente ella si conforterebbe, e con giuramento gli affermò di mai non si far conoscere senza piacere di lui (4.67).

To which the knight responded: “Lady, do not be bewildered, but take comfort; everything you see has been the work of the gods, and I will explain how.” And he narrated everything that had happened to her from the very beginning, concluding that it was because of him that she and her son were alive. For this reason, he said, they would be forever bound to his pleasures. The woman heard this and knew truly that she could not have come into the hands of the knight in any other way if not for that which he had recounted; she thanked the gods and the knight, offering to always be at his service and pleasure. So the knight said: “Lady, since you realize you are bound to my will, I wish that you will reward me for all I have done by resting until I return from my service, to which I was elected some time ago and which is soon coming to an end. Promise me that you will not reveal yourself to your husband or to anyone else without my permission.” To which the woman responded that she could not deny him this nor anything else, and she promised that she would rest, and she swore that she would not make herself known to anyone without his approval.

This scene also occurs in the *novella*, but it is described in such a way as to highlight the lady’s terrifying predicament. When Gentile narrates the whole affair to Catalina, she is anguished by the helplessness of her situation:

Di che ella dolendosi, dopo alquanto quelle grazie gli rendé che ella poté, e appresso il pregò, per quello amore il quale egli l’aveva già portato, e per cortesia di lui, che in casa

sua ella da lui non ricevesse cosa che fosse meno che onor di lei e del suo marito, e come il dí venuto fosse, alla sua propria casa la lasciasse tornare (10.4.16).

At this she began to sob, but eventually she thanked him as best she could and implored him out of the love he had borne her and his sense of honor to do nothing that would bring herself or her husband into discredit, and to let her return home as soon as daylight came.

Catalina despairs because she knows that she is trapped in the home of the man who loved her in vain for years and now expects to receive a *guiderdone* for rescuing her; even more disturbingly, she realizes that she is only alive now because he molested what he at the time believed was her lifeless body.

In both the *questione* and the *novella*, the lady agrees to do as her rescuer asks. Once he completes his service in the nearby city, he returns home and hosts a banquet to which he invites the woman's husband, brothers and various other citizens:

E essendo gl'invitati per sedere alla tavola, la donna, come piacere fu del cavaliere, venne vestita di quelli vestimenti i quali alla sepoltura avea portati [...] e, per comandamento del cavaliere, senza parlare a lato al suo marito mangiò quella mattina, e il cavaliere a lato al marito. Era questa donna dal marito sovente riguardata, e i drappi e gli ornamenti, e fra sé gli pareva questa conoscere essere sua donna, e quelli essere i vestimenti co' quali sepellita l'avea, ma però che morta gli ele pareva avere messa nella sepoltura, né credea che risuscitata fosse, non ardiva a far motto, dubitando ancora non forse fosse un'altra alla sua donna simigliante, estimando che più agevole fosse a trovare e persona e drappi e ornamenti simiglianti ad altri, che risuscitare un corpo morto; ma non per tanto sovente rivolto al cavaliere domandava chi questa donna fosse. A cui il cavaliere rispondea: "Domandatene lei chi ella è, che io non lo so dire, di sì piacevole luogo l'ho menata." Allora il marito dimandava la donna chi ella fosse. A cui ella rispondea: "Io sono stata menata da codesto cavaliere, da quella vita graziosa che da tutti è disiata, per non conosciuta via in questo luogo" (4.67).

Having seated the guests around the table, the woman appeared in the same garments in which she had been buried, as the knight had bid her [...] and, following the knight's command, she ate at the side of her husband without speaking, and the knight sat at his other side. The husband could not look away from her, carefully observing her clothing and her jewelry, and thinking to himself that this must have been his wife and those must have been the clothes in which she was buried. But he had seen her dead in her tomb, so he did not think this could be possible, so he did not dare breathe a word. He concluded that it must have been another similar woman, deciding it would have been far easier to find a similar woman and similar garments and trinkets than it would have been to

resuscitate a dead body. But nonetheless, he asked the knight numerous times who this lady was, to which the knight eventually replied: “Ask her who she is, since I do not know how to say it, having brought her back from such a delightful place.” So the husband asked the woman who she was, to which she responded: “This knight brought me here by an unknown path from that sweet life that everyone seeks.”

The knight then gives the husband the child, tells him who they are and explains how he brought his wife back from the brink of death. Everyone in attendance is astonished, and the entire community joins in celebrating the incredible turn of events. Messallino concludes his tale by asking the queen to resolve his doubt:

Si dubita qual fosse maggiore, o la lealtà del cavaliere o l'allegrezza del marito, che la donna e 'l figliuolo, i quali perduti riputava sì come morti, si trovò racquistati, priegovi che quello che di ciò giudicherete ne dciate (4.67).

There is doubt as to which was greater: the loyalty of the knight or the joy of the husband, who regained the wife and child he thought were dead and gone. So, I ask that you inform us of your judgement.

At face value, the conclusion of *Dec.* 10.4 is virtually the same, yet the buildup is far more dramatic. Unlike the *questione*, Gentile does not seat her at the table near her husband but rather keeps her hidden until he is ready to present her to his guests. Before his theatrical reveal of Catalina, he makes a cunning speech that puts him in a position of total control. He first insinuates that he is about to show his guests his most treasured possession but, before doing so, he asks them to resolve an issue for him. His pseudo-hypothetical question ensures that his guests, once they discover his true motives, will be unable to object to his depraved reasoning:

“Signori, io mi ricordo avere alcuna volta inteso in Persia essere, secondo il mio iudicio, una piacevole usanza, la quale è che, quando alcuno vuole sommamente onorare il suo amico, egli lo 'nvita a casa sua e quivi gli mostra quella cosa, o moglie o amica o figliuola o che che si sia, la quale egli ha più cara, affermando che, se egli potesse, così come questo gli mostra, molto più volentieri gli mosterria il cuor suo; la quale io intendo di volere osservare in Bologna. Voi, la vostra mercé, avete onorato il mio convito, e io intendo onorar voi alla persesca, mostrandovi la più cara cosa che io abbia nel mondo o che io debbia aver mai. Ma prima che io faccia questo, vi priego mi dciate quello che sentite d'un dubbio il quale io vi moverò. Egli è alcuna persona la quale ha in casa un suo buono e fedelissimo servidore, il quale inferma gravemente; questo cotale, senza

attendere il fine del servo infermo, il fa portare nel mezzo della strada né piú ha cura di lui; viene uno strano e mosso a compassione dello 'nfermo e' sel reca a casa e con gran sollicitudine e con ispesa il torna nella prima sanità. Vorrei io ora sapere se, tenendosi e usando i suoi servigi, il suo signore si può a buona equità dolere o rammaricare del secondo, se egli raddomandandolo rendere nol volesse” (10.4.24-27).

“Gentlemen, I recall having once been told that in Persia there is a custom, highly agreeable to my way of thinking, whereby when a person wishes to pay the highest honor to a friend, he invites him to his house and shows him the thing he holds most dear, whether it be his wife, his mistress, his daughter, or what you will, at the same time declaring that if it were possible to do so he would even more readily show him the very same heart from his body. And I propose that we should observe the selfsame custom here in Bologna. You have been good enough to honor my banquet with your presence, and I now intend to honor you in the Persian style by showing you the most precious thing I possess or am ever likely to possess. But before doing this, I would ask you to give me your opinion upon the problem that I am about to place before you. A certain person has in his house a good and most loyal servant, who suddenly falls seriously ill; the gentleman in question, without waiting for the ailing servant to breathe his last, has him thrown onto the street and takes no further interest in him; then a stranger comes along who, taking pity on the invalid, conveys him to his house, where, with much loving care and at much expense, he restores him to his former state of health. Now what I should like to know is whether, if the second gentleman keeps him and uses his services, the first has any reasonable ground for complaint or regret when he demands to have him back and is refused.”

The guests debate Gentile’s question for a while. Once they have reached a conclusion,

Niccoluccio is, ironically, the one to voice it:

...il primo signore niuna ragione avesse piú nel suo servidore, poi che in sí fatto caso non solamente abbandonato ma gittato l'avea, e che per li benefici del secondo usati giustamente pareva di lui il servidore divenuto, per che, tenendolo, niuna noia, niuna forza, niuna ingiuria faceva al primiero (10.4.29).

...the first gentleman had no legal claim to the servant, because in the instance cited he had not only abandoned him but cast him away; and that on account of the good offices rendered by the second gentleman, it appeared he was entitled to regard the servant as his own, because in refusing to give him up, he was neither causing any trouble, nor offering any insult, nor doing any injury, to the first.

This answer is exactly what Gentile had hoped for. Shortly thereafter, he presents Catalina as his most prized possession and explains how he had recovered her from her tomb and nursed her back to health. He concludes that, unless his guests – and Niccoluccio especially – have changed

their minds, she belongs to him and no one can reasonably request that he return her to her husband (“se mutata non avete sentenza da poco in qua, e Niccoluccio specialmente, questa donna meritamente è mia, né alcuno con giusto titolo me la può radomandare” [10.4.40]). A tense silence fills the room until Catalina dissolves into tears, at which point Gentile gives her to Niccoluccio, saying:

“...non ti rendo tua moglie, la quale i tuoi e suoi parenti gittarono via, ma io ti voglio donare questa donna mia comare con questo suo figlioletto, il qual son certo che fu da te generato e il quale io a battesimo tenni e nomina'lo Gentile. E priegote che, perch' ella sia nella mia casa vicin di tre mesi stata, che ella non ti sia men cara; ché io ti giuro per quello Iddio che forse già di lei innamorar mi fece acciò che il mio amore fosse, sí come stato è, cagion della sua salute, che ella mai o col padre o colla madre o con teo piú onestamente non visse, che ella appresso di mia madre ha fatto nella mia casa” (10.4.42).

“...I shall not restore your wife to you, for she was cast out by your kinsfolk and her own; but I wish to present you with this lady, together with her little child, of whom you are assuredly the father, though I am his godfather, and when I held him at his christening I named him Gentile. Nor should you cherish her any the less for having spent the best part of three months under my roof; for I swear to you in the name of God (who possibly willed that I should fall in love with her so that my love would be the instrument of her deliverance) that she never led a more upright existence with her parents or with you yourself than the life she has lived here in this house under my mother's care.”

The scene is, in a word, unnerving. Gentile manipulates the unwitting Niccoluccio into renouncing all claims to his wife and, when he presents her to him, she is no longer his spouse but instead is introduced as Gentile's most prized possession. Niccoluccio is given his son, who was christened without his knowledge and named after his wife's abductor. Finally, Gentile underscores the length of time that Catalina spent in his home, subtly reminding Niccoluccio that he would have had ample opportunity to sexually exploit her. In the first half of the *novella*, Gentile enjoyed complete control over Catalina but, by its conclusion, he has power over Niccoluccio as well – he has checkmated him, stripped him of all his authority as a man, publicly denigrated him. By accusing Niccoluccio of carelessly discarding his wife, Gentile is able to style himself as a hero and rebrand all of his abhorrent acts – violating Catalina's lifeless body,

abducting her and holding her hostage, and refusing to return her to her husband – as exemplary behavior.

If we are to understand the changes Boccaccio made to the *questione* when rewriting it as a *novella*, we must examine the debate between Fiammetta and Messallino. She rules that the loyalty of the knight was greater than the joy of the husband:

Grandissima crediamo che fosse la letizia della racquistata donna e del figliuolo, e similmente la lealtà fu notabile e grande del cavaliere, ma però che naturale cosa è delle perdute cose, racquistandole, rallegrarsi [...] non riputiamo che sì gran cosa sia quanta una farne, a che l'uomo sia da propria virtù costretto a farla; e dell'essere leale questo adiviene, però che possibile è l'essere e 'l non essere leale. Diremo, adunque, che da cui l'essere leale in cosa tanto amata procede, ch'egli faccia grandissima e notabile cosa lealtà servando, e in molta quantità avanzi in sé la lealtà, che l'allegrezza in sé: e così terremo (4.68).

We believe that the joy upon regaining his wife and son was great, and similarly, the loyalty of the knight was noteworthy. But it is a natural thing to be delighted by the recovery of lost things [...] we do not find that this is as significant as doing something that man is driven by his own virtue to do. This is the case with loyalty, since it is possible to either be loyal or disloyal. We declare, then, that he who behaved with loyalty toward something he loved so dearly did a truly notable thing in preserving his loyalty, and that there was a greater amount of loyalty in him than there was happiness in the other; this shall be our verdict.

Echoing Menedon's argument in the fourth *questione*, Messallino objects that the knight's behavior was not truly praiseworthy since he was simply doing his duty:

Certo [...] altissima reina, come voi dite credo che sia; ma gran cosa mi pare a pensare che a tanta letizia, quanta in colui che la donna riebbe fu, si potesse porre comparazione di grandezza in niuna altra cosa, con ciò sia cosa che maggior dolore non si sostenga che quello quando per morte amata cosa si perde. Appresso, se 'l cavaliere fu leale, come qui già si disse, egli fece suo dovere, però che tutti siamo tenuti a virtù operare: e chi fa quello a che è tenuto, bene è fatto, ma non è da riputare gran cosa. Però io imagino che giudicare maggiore l'allegrezza che la lealtà si poria consentire (4.69).

Of course [...] great queen, I believe what you say is true; but it seems to me that the great joy of the man who regained his wife is beyond compare, since there is no greater pain than the loss one feels when a loved one dies. Furthermore, if the knight was loyal, as was previously stated, he was doing his duty, since we are all obliged to behave virtuously; whoever does what is obligatory has done well, but this is not to be regarded

as a great matter. So I imagine that one could argue that, in this case, joy was greater than loyalty.

The queen claims that Messallino has contradicted himself, and she proceeds to highlight the flaws of his argument:

Voi a voi medesimo contraddite nelle vostre parole [...] però che così si dee l'uomo rallegrare per dovere del bene che Iddio gli fa, come operare virtù; ma se essere si potesse nell'uno caso essere dolente, come nell'altro si poria disleale, poriasi al vostro parere consentire: le naturali leggi seguire, che non si possono fuggire, non è gran cosa, ma le positive ubidire è virtù dell'animo; e le virtù dell'animo e per grandezza e per ogni altra cosa sono da preporre alle corporali, e però esse opere virtuose, facendo degna compensazione, avanzano in grandezza ogni altra operazione [...] E però dicasi il cavaliere essere stato più leale che colui lieto, da chi diritto vuole giudicare (4.70).

You contradict yourself in your own words [...] since man is obliged to rejoice at God's goodness, just as he ought to behave virtuously; but if it were possible to be bereaved in the former case, as it would be possible to be disloyal in the latter, one could agree with your position. But to follow natural laws, which cannot be avoided, is no great deed, yet to obey positive laws is a virtue of the spirit. Spiritual virtues are to be placed above corporal ones in greatness and in every other respect. Therefore, when weighed correctly, virtuous works surpass all other deeds in their magnitude [...] So let anyone who wishes to judge correctly declare that the knight was more loyal than the husband was happy.

Fiammetta's distinction between natural and positive law is at the heart of Boccaccio's rewriting of the *questione* in *Dec.* 10.4. While natural law is intrinsic to human beings and guides our behavior and our reactions to events, positive law refers instead to the codes and statutes created by societies to govern their citizens. Boccaccio's juridical training once again shapes his authorial agenda, as he explores various ethical and legal questions: could a man ever legally lay claim to another man's wife?¹⁵⁸ Is immoral behavior justified if it has a beneficial outcome? Is

¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, there is a popular legend that began to circulate in Florence toward the end of the fourteenth century concerning Ginevra degli Almieri who, having been mistaken for dead, escapes her grave and goes in search of help. When she arrives at the door of her home, her husband thinks he is seeing a ghost, refusing to believe that his wife is still alive. She then goes to her parents' home and is similarly turned away. Finally, she comes to the house of her longtime admirer, Antonio Rondinelli, who, being the only reasonable person in this story, takes her in and nurses her back to health. They eventually decide to marry and make their case to the

there anything inherently praiseworthy in fulfilling one's duty? These embryonic concerns of the *questione* are fully gestated in the *novella*, as Gentile's extended speech makes these questions explicit. The knight of the *questione* would have been guided by a chivalric code of honor (it may be argued that in returning the woman to her husband he did indeed behave as a knight should), yet Gentile de' Carisendi is endowed with even greater power and knowledge of ethics – he acted as podestà in Modena, serving in the highest position of judicial authority in the city. Gentile uses his knowledge of the law to build a case for his claim to Catalina and, subsequently, when he makes a great show of giving her back to Niccoluccio, he ensures that he will be praised for having done so. He violated her and held her hostage, yet he is nonetheless commended by his fellow citizens for his supposed virtue. The implications are clear by the end of the *novella*: a knowledge of law and ethics can be repurposed for nefarious ends, an awareness of right and wrong does not guarantee moral behavior,¹⁵⁹ and, subsequently, even as we are obligated to do what is ethical, we should not take moral behavior for granted.

bishop, explaining how her husband had left her for dead and contending that this had effectively dissolved their marriage; convinced by their argument, he decides to marry them. There have been numerous debates as to the veracity of the tale. The detail of the bishop's ruling is one of the main points of contention, as scholars have argued that such a decision would never have been theologically or legally feasible. Some have wondered if the popular legend was inspired by Boccaccio's *novella*, having begun to circulate only a few decades after the publication of the *Decameron*. Pio Rajna is unconvinced by this theory, arguing that it is much more likely that the legend and the *novella* are unrelated (see "L'episodio delle questioni d'amore nel *Filocolo* di Boccaccio," p. 57-68).

¹⁵⁹ This theme resurfaces in *Dec.* 8.7: the scholar, in spite of his erudition and extensive philosophical training, takes excessively cruel revenge on the woman who humiliated and rejected him. As Teodolinda Barolini notes: "The scholar loses his *senno* and with it his reason and the ability to rein in his will. In *Decameron* VIII.7 Boccaccio depicts a life devoted to philosophical learning in which the acquired wisdom nonetheless fails to provide a bulwark against moral collapse" ("The Scholar and the Widow: Corrupt Appetite and Moral Failure in Society's Intellectual Elite [VIII.7]" in *The Decameron Eighth Day in Perspective*, edited by William Robins, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, p. 188).

The thirteenth *questione* is significant on two counts: it demonstrates Boccaccio's interest in the theme of social control, and it provides a *chiave di lettura* for *Dec.* 10.4. Once again, we see men using women to control other men, as the knight of the *questione* (and, by extension, Gentile in *Dec.* 10.4) decides that he can find greater satisfaction in manipulation than in sex. He could very well have decided to keep the woman, given her a new identity, married her and taken her son as his own – who could have stopped him? In light of the years he had spent pining for her, such a plan would be quite plausible. Yet his elaborate scheme to gain control of both the woman and her husband reveals how his motivations have changed: his sexual desires have become secondary to his desire for domination and his lust for prestige. The woman's value no longer consists in her sexual attractiveness, but rather in her utility as an object he can use to manipulate other men.

We may better understand Boccaccio's authorial agenda by comparing the *questione* to the *novella*, specifically by examining the elements he modifies or expands in his later writing. The adjustments he makes to the knight's persona are significant: the reader is told very little about his motives or feelings, but Gentile is a more fully developed character whose intentions are on clear display. His speech at the banquet provides insight into his sociopathic craving for control, and his theatrical return of Catalina to her husband reveals his narcissistic tendencies. Furthermore, his reliance on legalistic rhetoric is not by chance, but rather exemplifies the extent to which a legal education can be misappropriated¹⁶⁰. Prior to this reading, no one has gleaned such insights from reading the *novella* alongside the thirteenth *questione*. I argue that, taken

¹⁶⁰ *Dec.* 8.7 is similar in that it demonstrates the misappropriation, not of legal training, but of ethical knowledge, as the scholar uses his philosophical education to design a supremely cruel punishment for the offending widow.

together, the *questione* and the *novella* demonstrate Boccaccio's meditation on the intertwined concerns of gender, social control, and the law.

The three *questioni* of this chapter depict helpless women caught in horrifying predicaments: the woman of the fourth *questione* must submit herself to a man she had hoped to evade, the woman of the twelfth *questione* is forced by her brothers to share her lover with an elderly hag, and the woman of the thirteenth *questione* is molested and held hostage by a man whom she had resisted for years. Men make decisions for them, sexually exploit them, and force them into desperate positions but, curiously, none of this is done with the explicit intention of harming the women. Indeed, the men of these *questioni* give no thought whatsoever to the desires or emotions of these women: they are inconsequential in and of themselves, since they are only valuable as tools that these men can utilize to manipulate other men.¹⁶¹ The behavior of the men of these *questioni* is not an anomaly but is instead a microcosm of the social and legal systems designed to oppress women. Boccaccio uses these *questioni* to depict men's exploitation of women and sex, evoking a society in which men's capriciousness, cruelty, and callousness signal danger for men and women alike.

¹⁶¹ Barolini, citing Nelson Moe ("Not a Love Story: Sexual Aggression, Law and Order in *Decameron* X.4"), refers to Catalina's "thingness" – Gentile's concern is not for Catalina (who is reduced to a mere object) but for the honor he might bestow upon her husband. Both the twelfth and thirteenth *questioni* ultimately demonstrate the predicament of women who, as a result of their total objectification by men, had to proceed with constant caution lest they diminish their own honor and, by extension, the honor of the men in their lives: "Boccaccio here sums up the situation of a woman in the real world he lived in: a man was either a protector of a woman's honour or a threat to her honour, and on her fell the responsibility of assessing all social encounters and of making sure that her honour – that is, the honour of her husband, father, and brothers – could not be impugned" ("Sociology of the *Brigata*: Gendered Groups in Dante, Forese, Folgore, Boccaccio – From 'Guido, i' vorrei to Griselda" p. 19).

Conclusion

A careful reading of these *questioni d'amore* demonstrates their remarkable opacity, as they engender numerous incongruences: Fiammetta is a compelling figure who illustrates the intellectual potential of women, even as she, at times, employs faulty reasoning or outright contradicts herself; the courtly love tradition constructs a system whose core values are gentility and the beatification of women, yet it also objectifies these same women, obliging them to submit wholly to men's desires; the *questioni* foreshadow both the celebration of autonomous, clever women in the *Decameron*, and the jaded, ugly misogyny of the *Corbaccio*. This is a text that cannot be easily characterized, written by an author whose views cannot be simply categorized.

Even as the *questioni d'amore* defy neat classification, they do inform us quite clearly of one important fact: Boccaccio may have abandoned his legal career, but his jurisprudential training formed him as an author. Jurisprudence, from the Latin *ius* and *prudentia* (which we might translate as circumspection or prudence in the law) seeks to explain the nature of law, along with its attendant components of legal reasoning, legal systems, and legal institutions; Boccaccio employs that same training, addressing those very concerns of reasoning, systems, and institutions in his authorial endeavors. The *questioni* are indeed Boccaccio's first meditations on the ethical and social concerns that will ultimately make up the core of his literary career. They exemplify his extraordinary cleverness, as they show a young Boccaccio using courtly love – the cultural and literary lingua franca of the elite – as a vehicle to explore deeper sociolegal concerns. In this sense, the *questioni d'amore* are a reminder that there is still so much to examine, so much that has yet to be written. We've only just begun to scratch the surface of this incredibly complex, prolific author.

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Appendix: A New Translation of Boccaccio's Thirteen *Questioni*

Questione 1

(posed by Filocolo)

Filocolo: I remember in the city where I was born there was a feast day during which many knights and ladies gathered to celebrate. I too was present and, as I looked around and observed the many people assembled there, I noticed two well-mannered young men admiring a beautiful young woman – it was hard to tell which of them was more enamored of her...

Both went before the mother of the young woman, who was also at the feast, and in her presence they declared that they preferred her daughter to any other woman in the world and told her that they were in doubt as to which of them she liked more. So, in order to avoid further discord, they asked if she would do them the favor of asking her daughter to communicate through words or gestures which of them she preferred. The woman laughed and said she would happily honor their request.

Calling her daughter to her, she said, "Fair daughter, each of these men loves you more than himself and they wish to know which of them you love better; they are hoping that you will, either with a word or a sign, resolve their doubts. And since love should breed peace and goodwill (and not the opposite), grant their wish and courteously tell them which one your soul favors." "Gladly," said the young woman. And gazing upon them for a while, she noticed that one of them had a garland of freshly cut greens and flowers upon his brow, while the other was without such a garland. So the young woman, who also had a garland of verdant leaves upon her head, took it off and placed it upon the man without a garland. Then she took the other man's garland and placed it upon herself. She then left them to return to the feast, saying that she had fulfilled her mother's request and granted their wish.

The young men remained this way, returning to their original questioning, each saying he was better loved by the woman. The one whose garland was taken by the lady and placed upon her own head said: “Certainly she loves me more, since she took my garland for no other reason than that she likes my things and so that she will have a reason to be linked to me. But to you she gave her own garland as a final farewell and, so as not to be callous, she did not want the love that you bore for her to be without any reward” [...] The other said the opposite, responding: “Obviously the lady loves your possessions more than she loves you, and this is evident in her taking your garland. But she loves me more than my possessions in that she gave me something that belonged to her; giving is not a sign of a final reward, as you have said, but is rather a source of friendship and love. A gift makes its recipient subject to its giver so she, perhaps uncertain of me and wanting to be confident that I would be her subject, wished to place me under her vassalage with a gift. But you, how can you believe that if she took from you at the start she will ever come to give to you?” And so they debated this for some time without ever resolving the issue. Now I ask you, great queen, if you were to give the final ruling in this matter, what would be your judgment?

Fiammetta: *We declare that he to whom she gave her garland is the one she loves more. And here is the reason: any man or woman that loves someone is obliged to the beloved because of the strength of the love he or she bears for that one. Therefore he or she desires above all else to please the beloved, and neither gifts nor services are required to bind him or her more strongly, and this is evident. But we find that those in love will try in various ways to make their beloved more sympathetic to them and will hope to make them their subject so that they can sway them to fulfill their desires or can more confidently ask for what they want [...] Therefore the*

young woman hoped to make the one she loved more obliged to her, so we argue that the one who received the gift of her garland was more loved by her.

Filocolo: I would argue the contrary, since it is customary for a lover to wish to place upon his or her person some object of the beloved; it is common for a lover to revel in this and, upon feeling the object upon himself or herself, his or her soul is gladdened [...] For this reason I would agree with you that the young lady behaved very sensibly, nonetheless I would not explain this as you do but rather in this way: since the woman knew that she was loved by two men and she could not love them both in return (since love cannot be divided up), she wished to reward the love of one of them so that such benevolence would not go unrewarded. To this one she gave her garland. To the other, whom she loved, she hoped to provide reassurance and firm hope of her love, so she took his garland and placed it upon herself. In that act she showed him that she was obliged to him for taking his garland so, in my opinion, she loved him from whom she took more than him to whom she gave.

Fiammetta: *Your argument would please us quite well if you had not undermined it in your own speech. Ask yourself whether a perfect love can exist alongside thievery; how can you ever prove to me that I love the person from whom I steal more than the one to whom I give, since giving is one of the most evident signs of love? According to the question you posed, she gave a garland to one and took a garland from the other; it was not given to her by the other. What we witness every day can provide us a useful example in this regard, too: it is often said that those who receive gifts and graces are better loved by their lords than those who are deprived of them. So, in conclusion, we hold that the man to whom she gave was more loved than the one from whom she took.*

Questione 2

(posed by Longano)

Longano: Quite recently I was all alone in my chamber; I was completely consumed by the exhausting thoughts brought on by an infatuation that was cruelly assailing my heart, when I heard a sad little cry. I sensed the sound was nearby, and as I listened more closely I realized that it was coming from women. I got up to see who was crying and where they were and began to peer from my window. I found myself looking straight into the dwelling across from mine, where there were two women – sisters, both indescribably beautiful – weeping. Hiding myself from their sight, I watched them for a while, and while I couldn't comprehend the words they spoke through their sobs, I could surmise that love was the source of their tears. Still hidden, I felt myself pitying them and the source of their sorrow, and so I too began to weep.

Their crying went on for quite some time and, because we shared a bond in our similar pain and since I wanted to know the exact reason for their suffering, I decided to go to them. As soon as they saw me, they became embarrassed and tried to hold back their tears in an attempt at politeness. To which I said, “Young ladies, do not trouble yourselves with covering up your pain simply because I'm here – I've known about your suffering for some time. You don't need to be guarded or to feel so ashamed as to conceal from me the source of your anguish, which I in fact came here to learn about – I will not mistreat you in any way, but will try to help and comfort you as much as I possibly can.” They apologized profusely, saying that they weren't in any kind of pain, yet once they heard me imploring and saw how desperately I wished to understand, the elder began to speak: “The gods must be pleased that you have discovered our secrets. You need to understand that we, more than any other women, were tough, calloused opponents of Cupid's sharp arrows, which, in spite of his constant shooting, he could never lodge into our hearts. But

he eventually grew angrier and, determined to win his childish game, he extended his young arm, took his most prized bow, and wounded us in that place we had been struck so many times before. He hit us so hard that those arrowheads pierced our hearts and left more gaping wounds than they would have had we not been so resistant before.

We became his subjects so that we could find pleasure in the arms of two young noblemen, following his every whim with more faith and fervor than any other woman had ever shown before. But now fortune and our love for them have left us devastated, as I will explain to you.

I fell in love before my sister, and thought with enough cunning and control I could find gratification. I made it so that I could take my pleasure in the man I desired, who was just as taken with me as I was with him. But, of course, love's flames are not dampened by such behavior, nor did it exhaust my desire, and more than ever I burned and am burning still. I tried to mollify that fire by holding him in my arms, by seeing him from time to time, by keeping it to myself. Not even a month had gone by when he inadvertently committed a crime punishable by permanent exile and, fearing execution, he left without any hope of returning. And I, burning more than any woman has ever burned, have been left desperate without him. This is why I suffer, and what hurts me even more is that everywhere I look I see paths to follow him but all of them are closed off. Now think about it, tell me if I have a reason to be in such pain.”

Then I asked, “But why does your sister grieve?” She replied: “She fell in love just like I did, and the love between herself and this other man was similarly mutual. Hoping to make her fantasies a reality, she tried many times to follow the paths of love to their natural destination, but jealousy somehow always destroyed or barricaded these avenues. She could never attain her goal and still cannot find a solution, and so she is consumed, bound up in this intense love – as

you can imagine if you've ever been in love. Once we found ourselves alone here, we began to talk about our misfortunes and, knowing they're worse than any woman has ever experienced, we just couldn't hold back our tears and so we've been sobbing and suffering as you can see."

It hurt me so much to hear this; I tried to comfort them with whatever words I could find, and then I left. I have not been able to get their suffering off of my mind, and I've wondered to myself who actually has been hurt more, sometimes sympathizing more with first sister, other times sympathizing more with the second. Each has experienced many misfortunes and they tug at me, never letting me pity one over the other, so I remain undecided. May it please you to help me escape this muddle by telling me who you believe endured the greater torment.

Fiammetta: *Each woman suffered terribly but, considering that hardship is felt more strongly by those who have enjoyed prosperity, we hold that she who lost her lover feels greater pain and is more scorned by Fortune [...] And it is obvious that if we have never tasted the sweet, we cannot know the sour [...] Who will cry for something unknown? No one, but one will instead yearn for it. It follows then that these women wept for different reasons: one out of pain, the other out of desire.*

Longano: It is hard to accept what you say, gracious lady, since whoever has achieved the object of his desires will be more content in his spirit than someone who desires something that cannot be fulfilled [...] When souls find themselves before that which they desire and cannot attain them, they are consumed and suffer even more than if they were far away from their desires. And who tormented Tantalus in Hades if not for the apples and water that, fleeing from his mouth every time he drew near, multiplied his hunger? Truly I believe that more pain is felt by the one who still hopes for love [...] than the one who weeps for lost and irreplaceable things.

Fiammetta: *It is our judgment that greater pain was experienced by the woman who lost her lover and has no hope of ever seeing him again [...] since it is said, “Whoever loves well never forgets.” The other sister could hope to achieve in the future what she had never accomplished in the past. Indeed, hope can extinguish suffering – it was what kept Penelope chaste and less unhappy for many years.*

Questione 3

(posed by Cara)

Cara: I have chosen three whom I like equally; one is of such physical strength that I believe he would best even Hector, such is his vigor and power; the courtesy and liberality of the second is so great that I imagine his fame resounds in every corner of the world; the third is brimming with such wisdom that he surpasses all other sages [...] Recommend, then, one worthy of me, to whom I can give myself with the least risk and greatest security.

Fiammetta: *None of the three are unworthy of the love of a beautiful and graceful woman. Yet we are not endeavoring to storm castles or to bestow the estates of Alexander or the riches of Ptolemy but rather we are aiming to serve love and honor discreetly and at length. Neither strength nor courtesy can accomplish this – only wisdom can. Thus it is our decision that you (along with every other woman) ought to give your love to the wise one over any other kind of man.*

Cara: Oh, how different your view is from mine! It would seem to me that either of the other two would be a more fitting choice than the wise man, and the reason is this: love, as we see, has such a nature that, multiplying in strength in the heart it will cast out everything else. Making the heart its dwelling place, love will direct the heart according to its wishes; nor can any event resist these wishes, but they must be followed by anyone who has been made subject to love [...] Therefore, if love has the power to take discernment from the discerning, it will take wisdom from the wise, leaving nothing else behind, but if love takes from the strong or courteous what little wisdom they have, it will augment their other virtues and they will be of greater value than the wise man once they are in love. Furthermore, love has this property: it is a thing that cannot be hidden for long, and with its uncovering often come grave dangers: against these perils

what defense will the wise man stripped of his wisdom have? None! But the strong man can defend himself and his lover from any threat by virtue of his strength and, because of his courtesy and benevolence, the courteous man has won many over; for this reason he and those who love him will be protected and respected.

Fiammetta: *If what you say were true, who would be wise? No one! [...] Yet we will not deny that the wise man knows good from evil and does evil anyway, but this does not mean that he loses his ability to reason. Thus his reason enables him to use his will to control his desires, and his wisdom will remain, guiding his actions with necessary and correct style. In this way their love will be kept secret for great lengths of time (forever, even); but that, barring some doubtful attentiveness, will not happen with a man of little intelligence, even if he is strong or courteous. But if perhaps such an affair were to be exposed, the wise man with a hundred clever maneuvers will either obstruct the eyes and the understanding of those who would speak of it, or would equip himself to defend the honor of his lover and himself. If there is a need for security, the wise man cannot fail. The aid of the strong man is of little help, and friends bought through largesse often flee in times of adversity. And what kind of woman is she who, through lack of discretion, finds herself in a position of exposing her need for help so openly? Or if her love is discovered, what kind of woman hopes to become famous for having loved a strong man or a liberal man? I don't believe such a woman exists. Love, then, the wisest man, in the hopes that he will, in every situation, be the most useful of them all*

Questione 4

(posed by Menedon)

Menedon: Highest queen, it is now my turn to propose a question in your presence and so, with your permission, I will tell it to you. And if, from this point on, I extend my speech too much, I beg pardon from you and from the others here, for what I wish to ask cannot be fully understood unless it is preceded by a tale that may not be too brief.

In the land where I was born, I recall there was a rich and noble knight, who perfectly loved a local noblewoman and took her as his wife. The woman, who was quite beautiful, was similarly loved by another knight called Tarolfo; he loved her so greatly that he had eyes for no one else and there was nothing he desired more than her. So he tried in many different ways to win her love: passing frequently by her home, jousting, performing deeds of arms. He often sent her messages, perhaps promising her lavish gifts and hoping to learn her intentions. All of these things the lady kept secret, never giving a word or sign to the knight, all the while saying to herself: "Once he sees that he will not receive any encouraging response or gesture from me, perhaps he will stop loving me and pestering me." But Tarolfo did not cease, following the teachings of Ovid, who says that a man must not quit because of a woman's obstinance, since soft water eventually wears down hard rock. The woman, worried that these things might come to her husband's attention and that he might think that they were in some way indicative of her desires, considered telling him everything. But she then thought better of it: "If I were to say something, it might stir up something between them, and then I would never live happily; this must be dealt with some other way." And so she concocted a clever trick. She sent a message to him, saying that if he loved her as greatly as he claimed, she wanted a gift from him; she swore by the gods and by the loyalty a noble woman must possess that, if he did as she asked, she

would do his every pleasure. But if he did not wish to fulfill her request, he would have to promise to never bother her again unless he wanted her to tell her husband of the whole affair. The gift that she wanted was this. She said that she wanted a great, beautiful garden, like the kind you find in May, full of grass and flowers and trees and fruit, in our land in the month of January. She said to herself: "This is an impossible request, and so I will finally free myself of him in this way." Tarolfo, hearing this, found it quite impossible and understood why the lady had asked such a thing of him, yet he responded that he would not rest nor would he return to her presence until he had procured the gift she had requested.

Having departed with a group of carefully chosen companions, Tarolfo searched the western world for someone who could tell him how to fulfill this wish but, finding no one, he continued into the hotter regions until he arrived in Thessaly [...] At the foot of a mountain he saw a man, not too old but not young either, collecting herbs. From his clothes he judged him to be poor, and he was small and wrinkled and had a long beard [...] He approached him, greeting him and asking what he was doing in that place. The old man replied: "I am from Thebes and Theban is my name. I am collecting herbs with which to make medicinal potions... What is your task, that has brought you here emptyhanded? [...] You and many others judge the wisdom and virtues of men based on their clothing. If my robe were like yours or perhaps if you had found me among rich princes, instead of seeing me here collecting herbs, you would not have been so hesitant to tell me of your need. But many times under humble clothes great treasures of knowledge are hidden; so no one should hide his needs from one who offers counsel or aid if revealing it can do no harm. But what would you give to the one who could bring your request to fruition?" Tarolfo gazed intently at him as he spoke, and wondered if he had been taunting him, since he thought that even if this man were a god it would be incredible for him to perform

such deeds. Nonetheless he replied: "I rule over many castles in my lands and possess a great deal of treasure, which I would divide equally with whomever did my bidding." "Of course," said Tebano, "if I were to do this, I would not need to gather herbs any longer." [...] Tarolfo commanded that the garden be created so that he might present it to the lady [...]

This garden became known to all the citizens of the town, and soon everyone knew how it had come about. But the noble lady, who had been its recipient, was pained by it and returned to her room full of melancholy. She hoped that she might find some way to go back on her promise but, unable to find a legitimate excuse, her sadness grew. Her husband, seeing this, began to wonder at this and asked her what was the matter; she said it was nothing, ashamed lest her husband discover the promise she had made in return for this gift and afraid that he would think her wicked. After a while, unable to withstand the pestering of her husband (who wished to know the reason for her sadness), she narrated the whole affair from the beginning, explaining why she was so afflicted. Upon hearing this, the knight reflected on it for a while and, knowing in his heart the purity of the lady, said to her: "Go and fulfill your vow in secret and give Tarolfo what you freely promised; he has earned it fairly and with great pains." The woman began to weep, saying: "May the gods keep me from such sin; there is no way that I would ever do such a thing. I would sooner kill myself than do anything to bring you dishonor or displeasure." To which the knight replied: "Lady, I would not want you to kill yourself because of this, nor do I want you to feel any grief for this; it will cause me no displeasure, go and do as you pledged, for you will be no less dear to me for having done it. But, once this is over, next time be wary of making such promises even if it seems your request is impossible to fulfill."

There is doubt now as to which was the greatest form of liberality: that of the knight who allowed the woman to go to Tarolfo; that of Tarolfo, who, even after desiring that woman for so

long and doing so much to bring her to him, once he obtained her returned her intact to her husband; or that of Tebano, who abandoned his homeland in his old age in order to earn great rewards and, after working so assiduously to secure what he had been promised, renounced it all and remained in poverty.

Fiammetta: *Both the tale and the question are delightful ... and, in truth, each of them was quite liberal: the first was courteous with his honor, the second with his sensual desires, and the third with the rewards he had earned. Yet since we must determine who showed the greatest liberality or courtesy, we must consider which of these three things is most valuable. Whichever we find is of the greatest value will show us clearly who was the most liberal since whoever was generous with the most valuable thing is the one that ought to be chosen. Of these three things only one is of value, which is honor... The second is to be avoided, that is, lustful coupling... The third is not to be desired either, that is, riches, which often are the reason that virtuous lives are ruined, and anyway one may live virtuously with a moderate degree of poverty... Therefore, if only honor is to be held dear among these three things and the others are not, the most liberal one was the man who gave his honor away, even though he behaved unwisely. His generosity was superior, and so the others trail behind him; indeed, according to our judgment, he who gave his wife, in whom his honor consists, was more liberal than the others.*

Menedon: It seems to me that each of the others was more liberal, and you shall hear why. It is true that the first conceded his wife, but in this he did not display as much generosity as you claim. Even if he had wanted not to, he could not in all conscience do so, since the oath of his wife had to be fulfilled. Whoever gives that which he may not withhold does well with regard to generosity, but he does not give much. And so, as I said, each of the other two was more courteous since, as I said, Tarolfo had long desired and loved the lady above all things and

had travailed at length to pursue things that seemed impossible to attain in order to satisfy her demands; having fulfilled her request, he was entitled to hold her to her promise. Therefore, there is no doubt her honor and the return of what had been promised to him rested solely in his hands. And return her is precisely what he did, so he was liberal with the honor of the husband, with the vow of the lady, and with his longstanding desire for her. It is no small feat to have been subjected to a long thirst only to come to a fountain and not drink so that others might partake of it. The third was also very liberal since poverty is one of the greatest discomforts of this life – it dispels happiness and rest, destroys honors, overcomes virtues, brings about bitter worries – and one naturally tries to avoid it all costs [...] Therefore, what level of generosity is displayed by one who goes from poverty to wealth (thus being able to delight ever more in his life) and consents to return to the condition from which he had worked so hard to escape? [...] So I maintain that the other two showed greater liberality than the first, but the third was the most liberal of them all.

Fiammetta: *You wish to say that the man displayed no liberality in conceding his wife, since he had to do this because of the vow made by the lady; this would be the case if the promise were binding. The woman, who is part of her husband, or rather shares a body with him, cannot make vows without the consent of her husband. If she does, they are invalid since no subsequent vow can supersede an original, properly made vow, especially if those later vows are improperly made and made without good reason [...] Therefore the woman could not swear and, if she did, as we have already said, she swore improperly. Whatever is contrary to the original vow cannot carry weight, and since it did not carry weight, she could not give herself to Tarolfo, and, if she did do so because her husband bade her to, it was the husband who was generous with his honor – not Tarolfo, as you claim. Nor could he be generous in freeing him from this*

promise, since the promise was void; therefore, Tarolfo was only liberal with his sensual desires [...] You must understand that chastity, together with the other virtues, gives no reward to its possessors if not honor, and honor makes them superior among less virtuous men [...] If the woman remains faithful to her husband, he lives happily and certain of his heirs, and carries himself confidently among the people, glad to see his wife honored for that virtue above even noble women, and in his soul it is clear to him that she is good and God-fearing and loves him; this must please him more than a little, knowing that he has been gifted her companionship for eternity, inseparable apart from death. As a result of this blessing, he shall see his worldly and spiritual goods multiply continuously [...] Therefore, a woman's chastity bestows great honor upon a man, and it is to be prized. Blessed is the man who has been given such a gift, though we believe there are few men who are to be envied for such a boon.

Returning to our question, you may now see how much the knight truly gave; but it has not escaped our mind that you claimed that Tebano was more generous than the others [...] Evidently you do not understand the nature of poverty, which outstrips all wealth if it comes happily. Perhaps Tebano had already seen the various bitter cares that come along with the acquisition of wealth. He already imagined that Tarolfo thought he had done wrong and was plotting to kill him in order to regain his estates. He was living in fear that perhaps his subjects would betray him. The management of his lands preoccupied him. He already anticipated the many traps his fiefs had laid for him. He understood that he was envied by many on account of his riches and worried that thieves would craftily steal them from him. He was so full of thoughts and apprehensions that he could not rest. For this reason, recalling his previous life and how he had led it so happily and free from all these cares, he said to himself: "I desired riches in order to rest, but I see now that this comes with a great many ordeals and worries, and tranquility will

be put to flight” [...] If Tebano freed himself from the cares that would be heaped upon him, he was not generous but wise.

The knight was more generous than the others in that he gave up his honor. And reflect on this: the honor that he gave away could not be recuperated, which is not the case with many other affairs, like battles and trials and many other things which, if they are lost once, may possibly be regained another time.

Questione 5

(posed by Clonico)

Clonico: So I, like Apollo, could not resist that power – was not strong enough to oppose it – by which Cupid lodged himself in my heart and counted me among his subjects; I was taken, almost without realizing how it happened... Once the lady knew that she had me entirely at her pleasure and that it would be impossible for me not to love her, she revealed her duplicity to me, behaving with undeserved scorn, acting as though she were my cruelest enemy, never meeting my gaze, and mocking me in her speech [...]

Filled with despair over these things, I found myself alone in a garden one day, sighing and weeping a great many tears, when a dear friend of mine stumbled upon me. He knew of my troubles and tried to comfort me, but I did not listen to anything he said, insisting that no one else could ever match the misery I was experiencing [...] But he said, “I have greater cause for suffering than you, and let me tell you why.

You know that I have been loving a gentlewoman for some time, similarly to you [...] She was aware of this and generously gave me that which I longed for and, having received and still receiving this, I enjoyed a long period of happiness unlike any I have ever known in my life [...] Reposing one day with her in a secret place where we could watch passersby without being seen by them, a graceful and comely young man walked past, whom I saw her gaze upon and then release a sad sigh [...] This inspired a fierce rage in my heart.”

To this I replied that there was no way that his pain, no matter how significant, could ever match mine [...] I beg you to inform us of your judgment on this matter.

Fiammetta: *Young man, your suffering is indeed great, and the woman is certainly wrong not to return your love; but your pain can be eased by hope, whereas your companion*

cannot be helped, since suspicion, once it enters the mind, cannot be cast out [...] In our judgment, the pain of the jealous man is greater than the pain of the unloved man.

Clonico: ...How might one demonstrate that jealousy causes greater pain than that which I am experiencing, given that he possesses the object of his desires and could take enough pleasure in her in one hour so as to cancel out the pain he feels over time? Not to mention that experience may quash this jealousy, if he ultimately discovers that he was wrong to ever doubt her? But I, engulfed by flames of yearning, find that the farther I am from fulfilling my desires, the more I smolder and am overcome by a thousand burns. Therefore your response seems to me contrary to the truth: I find that it is no worse to possess with doubts than it is to long with tears.

Fiammetta: *It is evident that nothing is more deleterious to inner peace than rumination [...] He imagines that her every word is duplicitous and brimming with deception, and if he ever commits some small sin, it inspires in him fatal worry and he imagines that he is deserving of such betrayal [...] And experience cannot help him, for if he finds that his lady has comported herself faithfully he will think that she anticipated his concerns and took care to mislead him. If he finds what he has been looking for and yet does not wish to find, who suffers more than he? If you think that holding her in his arms might soothe these feelings, you are mistaken, since those very embraces wound him when he thinks that some other man has held her in the same way. And if the woman welcomes him with open arms, he believes she does so only in order to distract him from these thoughts and not out of any genuine love for him. If he finds her sad, he thinks that she is in love with someone else and is not content with him; and so we could list a million other things that provoke the jealous man.*

So what can we say about such a life, if not that it is the most agonizing existence one can have? He lives believing and not believing, perturbing himself and his lady. And it often

happens that the jealous die of the very illness of which they live in constant fear, for their convictions ultimately lead the way to their ruin. In light of the things we have just said, your jealous friend has greater reason to suffer, since you can still hope to achieve the object of your desires, while he lives in fear of losing that which he possesses.

Questione 6

(posed by an unnamed woman)

Woman: It happened that two young women who were native to our city and both of noble blood and great wealth were in love with my brother and, hearing that he was in that garden, had gone there. He knew nothing of this and so they watched him from a distance for some time. Upon realizing that he was alone except for me (which was of little concern to them since I was just a child), they began to speak amongst themselves, saying: “We love this young man above all else, but we do not know if he loves us, nor is it fitting that he should love us both; but presently we may convey to him our desires and learn if he loves either of us, or which of us he loves more. Whichever of us he loves more will be his beloved and will not be held back by the other. Since he is alone, now is our chance – let us each run to him, embrace and kiss him, and he will choose whichever one of us he likes better.”

Having determined to do this, the two young women began to run over the verdant grass toward my brother; he marveled at the sight of them as they approached. But one of them, while she was still far away, held back, embarrassed almost to the point of tears, while the other ran up to him, kissed and embraced him and sat beside him, offering herself to him. Once his amazement at her ardor had subsided somewhat, he asked her (by the love she had for him) to tell him the whole truth of this matter. She hid nothing from him and, hearing of all this and turning over in his mind what she and the other woman had done, he could not determine who loved him more nor who was more deserving of his love. Since this debate had to be cut short, he asked his friends their opinion, but none were able to provide a satisfying answer. Therefore I ask you, from whom I believe I will receive a solution: which of these two women should be loved more by the young man?

Fiammetta: *There is no doubt that the one who loves your brother more, and is more deserving of his love, is the modest one who stayed back without throwing her arms around him. This is why: love, as we well know, always makes timid the hearts in which it resides, such that love is commensurate with timidity. This occurs because the intention of the beloved can never be known entirely; if the beloved's intentions could be known, much would be done that is not done for fear of causing displeasure. After all, everyone knows that by causing displeasure one wipes away any chance of being loved; along with timidity and love there also dwells modesty, and this is not without cause. Therefore, returning to our question, we declare that the behavior of someone truly in love was that of the one who showed herself to be timid and modest. The actions of the other represent wicked lustfulness more than sincere love. So since he is loved more by the first woman, he should, in our opinion, love her instead.*

Woman: Fair queen, it may be true that wherever love resides in moderation there will also be timorousness and modesty, but wherever love flows abundantly it steals insight from the wise, as was previously said. I say that in such a case timidity has no place, and whoever experiences such love will be entirely at its command. So that young woman, finding herself before that which she desired, was so enflamed that she abandoned all modesty and ran toward the one who had kindled her so fiercely that she could not bear it. The other woman, who was less enflamed, was better able to abide by love's boundaries and bashfully remained behind, as you say. Therefore, the first lady loved more and is more deserving of his love.

Fiammetta: *Therefore, the more of it [love] there is in a person, the more timid that person will be, as we said before [...] It is not the behavior of a woman in love, or of any woman, to be so forthright since the only thing we ought to have within us is modesty, which is the*

guardian of our honor [...] How many women have there been (some of whom we may have even known) who have been invited many times to partake of love's pleasures and would have readily invited the inviter first if they had not been held back by requisite modesty and timidity? Nevertheless, every time that "no" issued from their lips they were filled with regret and in their hearts were saying "yes" a hundred times. Leave such wicked passion to the likes of Semiramis and Cleopatra, who do not love but rather seek to slake their lustful thirst and once it is quenched barely remember one man more than another. Wise merchants are loath to risk all their treasures at once to the fancies of Fortune – they cannot even chance some small portion of it without feeling some fear that they will lose it. So the woman who embraced your brother loved him but little, and she risked only a little bit, saying to herself, "If I make a conquest of this one, that's fine; if he rejects me, it'll just be a matter of finding another." The other woman, who remained modest, loved him above all else and so she was afraid to leave such a love up to chance, thinking to herself, "If this displeases him and he refuses me, my pain would be so great that it would kill me." Therefore, let the second woman, not the first, be loved.

Questione 7

(posed by Caleon)

Caleon: Gracious queen, I wish to know if, for his own benefit, every man ought to fall in love or not.

Fiammetta: *It is best for us to speak against that which we wish to follow. And, in asking your question, that which you claim to have doubts about must certainly be evident to you. The rules we have followed up to now will serve us well in responding to you, and I pray that the one who governs us all will forgive me for the words I am about to speak against his sovereignty (words not said willingly, but rather because I am constrained by the power of this game)...*

We declare that love is of three kinds [...] The first of these three is honorable love, which is a good, just, and loyal love, the kind that everyone ought to practice consistently. This is the love that binds the sovereign and first creator to all of his creation, and in turn binds them to Him. As a result, the heavens, the earth, all realms, provinces, and cities remain fixed in their place, and because of this we have been named the eternal heirs to the heavenly kingdom. Without this kind of love we lose all potential to do good.

The second is called love of delight, and we are subjects of this kind of love. It is our idol: we adore it, we pray to it, we hope that it will be our comfort and that it will fulfill all of our desires. The question posed asks if it is good to submit to this kind of love, and we will rightly respond to it.

The third is love of utility, and with this love the world is overflowing. It is joined to Fortune, dwelling wherever she dwells, going wherever she goes. It is the destroyer of many

goods and, if we were to speak of it in any sensible way, we would say that it should be called hate rather than love.

But since the proposed question does not require us to speak of the first or third kind of love, we must say of the second kind that no one who truly wishes to lead a virtuous life should submit himself to it. This kind of love strips away honor, attracts misfortune, arouses vice, provokes endless anxieties, unjustly encroaches upon the liberty of the other – which more than anything else is to be prized and protected. Therefore, what wise man would not flee from this kind of master? Whoever can live free from this love should, pursuing only those things that increase liberty and leaving depraved vassals to follow their depraved lords.

Caleon: ...I maintain that this love is not something to be avoided but rather something that ought to be pursued if one wishes to meet a glorious end and increase one's virtue. It is evident that the love of which we are speaking operates in the hearts of human beings and inclines the soul toward the desired object: it humbles the proud heart, makes the avaricious liberal and courtly, inspires bravery and strength in the hearts of men, clothes its subjects in the rich vestments of elegant manners, ornate speech, munificence, and graciousness, and grants cheer and gentility to those who dedicate themselves to it. Its greatness is manifest in the celebrated verses of Vergil and Ovid and countless other poets and one must marvel at the many goods that flow from this kind of love. Anyone who is not already its servant must dedicate all of his focus and effort to attaining the graces that come from vassalage to such a lord, since this is the path to virtue.

Fiammetta: *You are deceived in your thinking, but that it is no wonder since you are more enamored than anyone, and the judgement of a person in love is flawed because the eyes of his mind have been blinded and he has banished reason as though it were a mortal enemy [...]*

This passion is the result of a licentious pleasure begotten by the eyes and nourished by idleness, which allows for excessive recollection and rumination [...] This kind of love is not based in humility but in arrogance and inappropriate presumption [...] It does not render the avaricious liberal but, by depriving them of their intellectual capacity for discernment, makes them prodigals that foolishly throw away precious goods without measure or thought... it does not inspire acts of bravery and strength but rather encourages recklessness and ostentatious attempts to impress women... the ornate speech and elegant manners it is said to grant are merely cheap blandishments and hollow flattery... it does not ensure fame, but rather ruins reputations... this love does not lead its followers to abundant goods, but instead lures them into endless evils [...]

If it happens that its followers perform some virtuous act (which rarely occurs), these acts are the results of unscrupulous principles, since they are undertaken simply to obtain the object of their obscene desires. So these actions should be called wicked and not virtuous, since it is not what man does but rather the intent behind his actions that should be judged; an action can be considered a vice or a virtue depending on the objective of its doer. After all, no bad root ever grew into a good tree, and no bad tree ever yielded good fruit. So this love is evil, and if it is evil it must be avoided, and he who flees from evil things consequently pursues good things, and so he is good and virtuous. The beginning of this love is fear, its middle is sin, and its end is grief and suffering [...] It is an impetuous thing which knows no moderation and is without reason [...] Therefore, who would laud this as a path to follow if not foolish people? Of course, if it were possible, we would gladly live without it, yet we only come to learn of its evils once it is too late.

Questione 8

(posed by Pola)

Pola: I wish to know from you which of two women should be loved by a young man who likes them both equally: a woman of noble lineage, powerful family and riches greater than the young man, or the other one, who is neither noble nor rich nor blessed with a family as established as the young man's.

Fiammetta: *We argue that however rich, exalted and noble the woman may be, in any status or rank, she is more deserving of the young man's love than any woman who is below him, since man's soul was created to pursue higher things, he must better himself rather than debase himself. So goes the saying: "It is better to desire well than to obtain poorly." Therefore, in accordance with our judgment, let him love the nobler woman and rightly reject the lesser one.*

Pola: We all wish for trials to be short rather than long, and it is clear that winning the love of the less woman is a shorter and easier task [...] When a man loves a woman of higher status than himself, many dangers may arise, yet he will enjoy no greater pleasure with her than he would with the lesser woman. For we see that a great woman will have many kinsmen and a large family, and they will all serve as guardians of her honor; if any of them were to become aware of this love, as I have already said, it would put the lover in great danger. This would be far less likely to happen with the less noble woman. A man should do everything in his power to avoid such perils, not only because he would have to suffer the consequences but also because those who come to learn of it will laugh at him and mockingly say: "He got what he deserved; what gave him the right to love such a woman?" [...]. Furthermore, it is probable that the noble woman will love him but little, since she would rather love a man of greater – not lesser – station than herself. And so this man will have to wait quite a while to achieve his desire, if he ever

achieves it. The opposite will happen with the lesser woman, since she will delight in the love of such a man and will work to please him and nurture their love. And if this were not to be the case, the man can, by virtue of his supremacy, fulfill his desires without any trepidation.

Therefore, I maintain that he ought to love the lesser woman instead of the greater one.

Fiammetta: *Lazy men seek short labors, but those goods acquired through hard work are delightful and precious to wise men. Since loving the lesser woman would require less effort, as you say, it will therefore be a love of short duration and little worth [...] But the opposite will occur with the greater woman who must be won over with some determination [...] But if you wish to argue that the man will have to contend with her family, we will not deny it, and this is one of the reasons why gaining her love will require so much effort on the part of the man. Yet discreet men obtain their desires through hidden paths, and there is no doubt that the honor of both privileged and lowly women is guarded by their families according to their status [...]*

You also claim that the man may never fulfill his desires if he chooses to love the greater woman since she will rebuff him in favor of a man superior to her own station. Here you show yourself to be ignorant, since nature has made it so that even the lowest man will be superior to even the most noble woman in the world. Therefore, any man that a woman may desire will be inherently superior to her. Yet it often happens that a life of virtue or vice can elevate the lowly or humble the great, and any man who courts any woman with proper style will certainly satisfy his desires [...] So much good will come to any man who loves a greater woman since, in order to win her affections, he will possess excellent manners, seek out the company of noble men, utter sweet and ornate words, undertake great deeds and clothe himself in splendid garments. And if he wins her without any ill fortune, his spirit will revel in even greater glory and delight,

and the people will speak highly of him. Therefore, as we said before, let him love the more noble woman.

Questione 9

(posed by Ferramonte)

Ferramonte: But since ladies may be of different manners [...] one imagines that they love differently, some more and some less, some more fervently and others more tepidly; I wish to know from you which kind of woman a young man should love so as to bring his desires to a happy end: a maiden, a married woman, or a widow.

Fiammetta: *Of the three, one of them is not to be desired, and that is the married woman. This is because she is no longer her own, and so she is not free to give or yield herself to anyone. To desire or to possess her is to violate not only divine laws but natural and positive laws as well.*

It is clear that the more one blows on a fire the more it blazes and, if it is not blown upon, it will die out. Most things are lessened the more they are used, but lust increases the more it is used. Since she has been without for so long, the widow almost feels as though those flames were not there, and she becomes reignited by memory more than by concupiscence. The virgin does not yet know lust, except perhaps in her imagination, so she desires tepidly. Yet the married woman, who has more occasion to be ignited than the others, longs for its effects. Sometimes married women are likely to bear the brunt of offensive words or deeds from their husbands, which they would gladly avenge if they could. The most expedient way to take such revenge is to give their love to a man who is trying to seduce them, in order to spite their husbands. Although their vengeance must remain secret (so as not to increase their dishonor), they are nonetheless inwardly pleased. It is also boring to partake of the same foods over and over again, and we have many times seen women leave aside delicacies for slop only to return to those delicacies

once their craving for the other has been slaked. But, as we said, since it is not permissible to unjustly covet the goods of another, we shall leave the married women to their husbands.

We shall consider the others, of whom there are copious amounts in our city, arguing that widows are to be chosen over virgins. Virgins, since they are unpracticed and gauche in these matters, must strive at length to become proficient at satisfying men's desires; this is not the case with widows. Furthermore, if virgins do love they do not know what is desired and therefore will not follow the instructions of their lovers in the passionate and uninhibited way that widows do. Widows, after all, will have that old flame rekindled and will long for that which they had long forgotten. For them it is already late, and they lament the lost time and the long, lonely nights they spent in their widow beds. Therefore, according to our judgment, these are the women that should be loved.

Ferramonte: The widow has [...] loved and has seen and felt many aspects of love, and has had her doubts, and has come to know how much shame or pride follow these aspects of love; therefore, even though she knows these things better than the virgin, she loves slowly and doubtfully, or, not rooted firmly in her desire, she longs now for this and now for that, and not knowing which will give her greater delight and pride she sometimes feels she wants neither this nor that, and so she deliberates and vacillates in her mind, and amorous passion cannot take hold of her. But these things are unknown to the virgin, therefore when she discovers that she is liked by one young man among many, she deliberates no further and takes him as her lover [...] Furthermore, she more eagerly awaits those things she never seen, heard, nor experienced than one who has already seen, heard, or experienced those things many times [...]

The virgin has never known that pleasurable coupling by which we come into this world, and it is only natural for every creature to be moved by their yearning for it. What's more, she

has heard many times from those who have firsthand experience how sweet it is, and those words have kindled a fire of longing in her. So, driven by nature and by the desire to experience that which she has heard of but never tried, the virgin longs for this coupling with an ardent and inflamed heart.

Fiammetta: *Without a doubt, a woman's virginity is the most precious good she has at her disposal. This is reasonable, since all of her life's honor is tied to it, and there is no doubt that she will never be so moved by love that she would willingly be so liberal with it (unless it is with a man she believes will take her as his lawfully wedded wife). But this is not what we are considering, since a man looking for a wife ought to pursue the virgin rather than the widow. So the virgin will be slow and hesitant to give herself to a man unless he is loving her for this purpose, and to her absolute certainty. Furthermore, virgins are timid and are not astute enough to discover the paths by which secret delights may be taken; in such matters the widow acts without delay since she has already honorably parted with that which the virgin is still waiting to sacrifice. She is without her virginity, and so she does not have to worry that if she gives herself to someone she will be accused because of that fact. Then she is more reckless because, as we have said, she no longer has any concern for her virginity, and so she knows better than anyone else the secret paths to pleasure and puts them to use. It is true what you say, that the virgin, desirous of that which she does not know, is more solicitous than the widow, who already knows what it is she craves; but it is actually contrary to what you say. Virgins do not rush into sex for pleasure on the first try since it is more uncomfortable than enjoyable; it is something that becomes more pleasurable the more it is seen or heard or felt [...]*

The widow, on the other hand, since she gives less and more easily, will be more liberal than the virgin, who must give away the most precious thing she has. And, as we have shown,

the widow will be even more eager for the act than the virgin; for these reasons the widow ought to be loved more than the virgin.

Questione 10

(posed by Ascalion)

Ascalion: Most high queen, I remember in our city there was a beautiful and noble woman who had been widowed by her valiant husband; because of her incredible beauty she was admired by many noble young men, and among them were two very refined and brave knights who loved her more than anything. But it happened by chance that her relatives unjustly accused her of some offense in the presence of our ruler and she was tried and convicted with false testimony. She was to be burned at the stake, but the conscience of the judge who had passed the sentence was puzzled, and he was almost positive that she had been convicted with false evidence. Hoping to leave her fate up to the gods and Fortune, he added a condition to her sentence: if, as the lady was being led to the stake, a knight were to come forward and defend her from the first person who opposed him, her fate would be determined by whoever won the duel.

Both of her suitors learned of the sentence, but one happened to hear of it before the other, so he took up arms, leapt on his horse and rode to the field, challenging anyone who would fight him for her life. The other discovered this later and, upon hearing that the first knight was already on the field to defend her, [...] he did not know what to do, and he lamented having rightly lost his lady's love to the other knight because of his tardiness. But, in mourning this turn of events, it occurred to him that, if he were to arrive at the field before anyone else, he could claim to want her dead, challenge the other knight and thus free her by letting him win; so this plan was put into effect and the woman was indeed freed.

A few days after the lady was freed, the first knight went to her and humbled himself before her, reminding her that he had placed himself in mortal danger to save her from death just a few days before, and that thanks to the gods and his valor he had saved her life. For this he

hoped it would please her to grant him her love as a reward. And soon after the second knight came with a similar plea, saying that he had also risked his life for her salvation: “What’s more, in order to preserve your life I allowed myself to be defeated and have eternal shame follow me, even though I could have won great honor if I had used my strength to operate against your wellbeing.” The lady thanked them both kindly, promising to give them a suitable reward for the services they had rendered. Yet, once they had departed, the woman remained in doubt as to whom she should grant her love, to the first or the second knight. So she seeks counsel: upon whom do you say she should bestow her love?

Fiammetta: *We hold [...] that the first knight should be loved and the other should be forsaken, since the first showed strength and demonstrated his good love with great concern for her, submitting himself to every danger including death, which very well could have occurred in the ensuing battle. This could have easily been the outcome if one of the lady’s enemies had been as eager as the lover to do battle against him [...] nor was it obvious that the one who challenged him did so with the intention of losing, as was the case. The second knight came into battle neither fearing his own death nor the death of the lady, therefore since he risked less he should be rewarded less. Let, therefore, the first man have the love of the lady since he is the one who truly earned it.*

Ascalion: Wise queen, what are you saying? Is it not sufficient to win one prize without asking for others? Of course it is! The first knight was indeed rewarded, since he was honored by all for his victory, and what reward does he require if love is the reward of virtue? The honor he received was even greater than the labor he undertook. But he who came with his wits about him, must he go without any reward and be scorned by all, even though he did just as much as the first knight to free the lady? Is not wisdom to be valued over physical strength? If this one

came to the aid of the lady, why should he be overlooked? Let that not come to pass. If he came to learn of the situation after the other knight, this is not due to negligence – if he had known sooner he might have been the first to come to her aid. What he took as a final solution he took astutely, and the reward ought to follow; his prize should be the lady's love, if one considers the situation correctly, and yet you say the exact opposite.

Fiammetta: *Expel from your mind the belief that vice performed for a good outcome merits the same reward as virtue performed for the same outcome. In fact, while vice merits correction, no earthly good can ever truly be a proper reward for virtue. Who can tell us that we may not reasonably believe that the second knight was motivated not by love for the lady but was driven to act (and subsequently failed) merely because he envied the good fortune he saw awaiting the first knight and hoped to ruin it? Anyone who, in the hopes of receiving a reward, tries to help while pretending to be an enemy is a fool. There are innumerable ways to show with open friendship the love that one bears for another without pretending to be an enemy and then employing falsities to prove that one has helped [...] We believe that when you have digested these words in your mind you will find our judgment is not fallacious but is true and ought to be followed.*

Questione 11

(posed by Graziosa)

Graziosa: ...I propose this question: which is more delightful to a lover, to see his beloved before his eyes, or to lovingly contemplate her when they are apart?

Fiammetta: *In thinking adoringly about the beloved, all of the senses partake of a bountiful feast, so much so that those intense desires will almost be satiated with delight; but in looking upon the beloved that will not happen, since only the visual sense will be gratified while the other senses will be filled with such tremendous desire that they will not be able to stand it and they will be overcome...*

Graziosa: I believe there is much more delight to be had in seeing than in thinking, since every beauty is first pleasing through sight, then for continued sight this pleasure is solidified in the spirit and from there it engenders love and those desires born from love. No beauty is loved for any other reason than for the pleasure and contentment it brings to the eyes; therefore, in seeing one is satisfied, while in contemplating one's desire to see the beloved increases. And he who is satisfied experiences greater pleasure than he who longs to be satisfied [...] that there is greater joy in seeing than in contemplating, *since one can comprehend from external acts what is buried within the heart?*

Fiammetta: *Those things, delightful or dreadful, that come closest to the soul will provoke greater pain or joy than those which are farther from the soul. And who would deny that the faculty of thought dwells within the soul itself while the eyes are located far away from it (although the soul grants them the power of vision and, through various means, they render their perceptions unto the sensitive part of the soul)? So, by holding a sweet thought of the beloved in one's soul, one is able – through the act of thinking – to be with the beloved. Even long*

distances cannot conceal anything from mind's eyes with which he sees the beloved. And so he speaks with her, perhaps narrating to her in a doleful manner the wounds he has suffered because of his love for her, and then it is fitting for him to take her in his arms without fear or hesitation. Then, remarkably, he celebrates with her and takes his every pleasure with her. This cannot occur when looking upon her [...] And as we have already said, love, this fearful and timid thing, trembles in one's heart when one looks upon the beloved, such that neither thought nor spirit is left in its place. Many men, having looked upon their ladies, have lost their natural strength and been overwhelmed and unable to move or act [...] We acknowledge that if it were possible to look upon the beloved without fear there would be great delight, but without thought that delight would be worthless. Yet contemplation without sight is indeed quite pleasurable. And it is verifiable that all of this and more can happen through thought alone – we find men who, through contemplation, have gone higher than the heavens above and tasted eternal peace. There is, therefore, greater pleasure in thinking than in seeing.

Questione 12

(posed by Parmenione)

Parmenione: Noble queen, I was the longtime friend of a certain young man, whose story I wish to tell. He loved a young lady as much as any man ever loved a woman; she was from our city, beautiful and gracious, noble, wealthy, and with a great many relatives. I was the only one who knew of their love, and it seemed to me that she loved him very much. Since he loved her in such a covert manner and was afraid that his love might be discovered, he could not speak with her to communicate his intentions or ascertain hers; nor was there any person he trusted enough to speak of it [...] After searching for a few days for someone who could communicate his needs to her, one day he saw a poor old woman, as wrinkled and wretched as could one could ever hope to find, going into her house to ask for alms; she came out with the young woman, and he saw them repeat this same ritual several times. In his heart he resolved to entrust this task to her, since he had determined that no one would ever suspect her and that she could help make his desires a reality. Calling her to him, he promised her great rewards if she would do what he asked of her. She promised to do everything in her power to help him, and he told her what he wanted. A little while later, she went to the young woman and assured her of my friend's love for her [...] and secretly made arrangements so that he could spend the night with the woman he desired.

No sooner had he arrived than (to his misfortune) the young lady, the old woman and he were all found together and apprehended by the brothers. Forced to tell the truth of what they were doing there, they confessed everything. The brothers were friends of the young man and, knowing that he had not yet done anything to cause them shame, they did not want to hurt him even though they very well could have. Laughing, they offered him this arrangement, saying:

“You are in our hands now. You tried to dishonor us, for which we are entitled to punish you if we wish. But you must choose one of these: either we kill you, or you sleep with this old woman and with our sister, each for one year, swearing that (if you choose to sleep with them for two years) if you take the young woman first you will replicate every kiss and every deed with the old woman in the second year. Or, if you take the old woman for the first year, you must kiss and caress the young woman no more and no less the following year.” The young man listened carefully to their deal and, eager as he was to live, replied that would sleep with the women for two years. His request was granted, and he remained in doubt as to which woman he should choose first, the young woman or the elderly one. So as to maximize his consolation, which of them do you say he should choose first?

Fiammetta: *According to our judgment, the young man should take the beautiful young woman before the old one, since no present good should be left for the future, nor is it wise to choose evil to ensure a future good. Since we are uncertain of future things, many have suffered by choosing the opposite; yet if any have been glad for this, it was because fortune smiled on them, and for no other reason. Therefore, let him take the beautiful woman first.*

Parmenione: You make me marvel greatly [...] by saying that goods in the present ought not to be postponed to the future. For what reason, then, do we follow and shoulder the burdens of worldly toils with a steady spirit, if we could instead simply escape them, if not for the hope of the eternal realms that have been promised to us? [...] It seems right to me to seek rest after work, but to want to rest without work must not and cannot, in my opinion, be pleasurable. Therefore, who would recommend that the young man should sleep with a beautiful woman for a year (which is pure rest and joy for the one who must lie with her) while reminding him that he must subsequently lead a harsh and unpleasant life in which he must perform with an ugly old

woman all of the acts he previously enjoyed with his young lover? Nothing is more unsettling to a pleasurable life than the reminder that we must come to an end marked by death. This, returning to our memory as an enemy opposed to our very being, ruins every good in our lives: nor can we enjoy the joys of this world while we recall this. Similarly, no pleasure can be taken with the young woman that will not be disturbed and ruined by the recollection that everything must be repeated with a vile hag, the vision of whom will always be in the mind's eye. Time, which flies on infallible wings, will seem to speed past...and so happiness will not be felt where an inevitable future sadness awaits. I maintain that the opposite would be the better advice, since every labor undertaken with the promise of rest will be more enjoyable than a delight which must be followed by agony.

Then let man not desire rest before work, reward before service, delight before difficulty, since, as was already said, if things proceeded in this way, future pains would impede present joys [...] Let the causes for grief first be dispelled, then the lovely delights may follow smoothly and without anxiety.

Fiammetta: *You respond in part as though we were speaking of eternal goods, which, in order to obtain them, there is no doubt that every labor must be undertaken, and every earthly delight must be renounced. But we are not speaking of such matters at the moment, but rather we are debating earthly pleasures and earthly pains, and we repeat that every worldly delight must be taken first with worldly anguish to follow, rather than worldly anguish followed by worldly delight. Indeed, he who has time and waits for time loses time. Fortune grants her favors with various modifications and they are to be taken when given, not when one decides to take them after toiling. But if her wheel stood still, until man had labored so as to not have to*

labor any more, we say that he could choose to labor first. But who can be certain that after evil more evil might not follow, even as one waits for the good?

Time and worldly things are fleeting. If he takes the old woman first, before the year is passed (which may seem interminable) the young woman might die, or her brothers might change their minds, or she might be given to another, or she might be abducted, and so after evil even worse might befall the taker. But if the young woman is taken, the taker will finally enjoy what he has desired for so long, and that anguish that you say will follow him in his thoughts need not haunt him. Death is inevitable, but lying with an old woman is an accident that a clever man might circumvent through various strategies [...] It is natural that good ought to be chosen over evil when they are both equally represented; whoever does the opposite does not follow natural reason but rather his own madness. However, we do grant that rest is much sweeter after labor than it is before, and it is more greatly valued, yet that does not mean that it is better to choose labor. In our estimation, it is possible for both foolish and wise men to use the advice of the foolish and the wise as they see fit, but infallible truth is unchanging, and it allows us to see that the lovely young woman – instead of the old, ugly one – is to be chosen by him to whom a choice is given.

Questione 13

(posed by Messallino)

Messallino: I heard it said that there was in our city a very rich gentleman who had a beautiful young woman as his wife, whom he loved above everything in this world. This woman was adored by a knight from this same city, but she did not love him nor care anything for his affections. Because of this, the knight could never win neither a word nor a kind gesture from her. Dejected by this unrequited love he bore for her, it happened that he was called to govern a city not far from our own, so he went [...] by chance a messenger came to him and, after recounting various other matters, told him: “My lord, you should know that the woman whom you loved above all else in our city tried to give birth this morning but, because of her great suffering, was unable to birth the child. She died and was buried honorably with her ancestors in my presence.” With immense grief the knight listened to this tale and with a strong spirit he endured it, not showing any sign on his face; he said to himself: “Ah, wicked death, your powers be damned! You took from me she whom I loved above everything and whom I wished to serve, even though, as you know, she was cruel to me. But now that this has happened, that love which she never wanted to grant me in life cannot be withheld from me in death. Indeed, even if I had to die, now that she is dead, I must kiss the face that I loved so much while she was alive.”

... He entered her sepulcher and, with a piteous sob, he began to kiss her and hold her in his arms. But after a brief time, no longer satisfied with mere kisses, he began to touch her and put his hands on her frozen chest between her cold breasts and, from there, he began to search under her rich garments for the secret parts of her body, becoming more passionate than he should. And, venturing across her body with his timid hand, he rested it on her stomach, where he felt a slight and faint movement of her weak pulse. Then he was no longer afraid, and love

made him brave: prodding her with greater confidence he realized that she was not dead and so he took her from that place... and brought her to his mother's home... where he lit great fires to warm her lifeless limbs [...]

The lady, finally coming to her senses after this terrible ordeal... was stupefied and exclaimed, "Where am I? What miracle is this? Who has brought me to this unfamiliar place?" To which the knight responded: "Lady, do not be bewildered, but take comfort; everything you see has been the work of the gods, and I will explain how." And he narrated everything that had happened to her from the very beginning, concluding that it was because of him that she and her son were alive. For this reason, he said, they would be forever bound to his pleasures. The woman heard this and knew truly that she could not have come into the hands of the knight in any other way if not for that which he had recounted; she thanked the gods and the knight, offering to always be at his service and pleasure. So the knight said: "Lady, since you realize you are bound to my will, I wish that you will reward me for all I have done by resting until I return from my service, to which I was elected some time ago and which is soon coming to an end. Promise me that you will not reveal yourself to your husband or to anyone else without my permission." To which the woman responded that she could not deny him this nor anything else, and she promised that she would rest, and she swore that she would not make herself known to anyone without his approval [...]

He arranged a lavish banquet, to which he invited the lady's husband, her brothers, and many others. Having seated the guests around the table, the woman appeared in the same garments in which she had been buried, as the knight had bid her [...] and, following the knight's command, she ate at the side of her husband without speaking, and the knight sat at his other side. The husband could not look away from her, carefully observing her clothing and her

jewelry, and thinking to himself that this must have been his wife and those must have been the clothes in which she was buried. But he had seen her dead in her tomb, so he did not think this could be possible, so he did not dare breathe a word. He concluded that it must have been another similar woman, deciding it would have been far easier to find a similar woman and similar garments and trinkets than it would have been to resuscitate a dead body. But nonetheless, he asked the knight numerous times who this lady was, to which the knight eventually replied: “Ask her who she is, since I do not know how to say it, having brought her back from such a delightful place.” So the husband asked the woman who she was, to which she responded: “This knight brought me here by an unknown path from that sweet life that everyone seeks” [...] The knight placed the baby in the arms of his father, saying, “This is your son.” And taking the woman by her hand, he said, “This is your wife, his mother.” He then explained to him and to all the other gathered how this had come about [...]

There is doubt as to which was greater: the loyalty of the knight or the joy of the husband, who regained the wife and child he thought were dead and gone. So, I ask that you inform us of your judgement.

Fiammetta: *We believe that the joy upon regaining his wife and son was great, and similarly, the loyalty of the knight was noteworthy. But it is a natural thing to be delighted by the recovery of lost things [...] we do not find that this is as significant as doing something that man is driven by his own virtue to do. This is the case with loyalty, since it is possible to either be loyal or disloyal. We declare, then, that he who behaved with loyalty toward something he loved so dearly did a truly notable thing in preserving his loyalty, and that there was a greater amount of loyalty in him than there was happiness in the other; this shall be our verdict.*

Messallino: Of course [...] great queen, I believe what you say is true; but it seems to me that the great joy of the man who regained his wife is beyond compare, since there is no greater pain than the loss one feels when a loved one dies. Furthermore, if the knight was loyal, as was previously stated, he was doing his duty, since we are all obliged to behave virtuously; whoever does what is obligatory has done well, but this is not to be regarded as a great matter. So I imagine that one could argue that, in this case, joy was greater than loyalty.

Fiammetta: *You contradict yourself in your own words [...] since man is obliged to rejoice at God's goodness, just as he ought to behave virtuously; but if it were possible to be bereaved in the former case, as it would be possible to be disloyal in the latter, one could agree with your position. But to follow natural laws, which cannot be avoided, is no great deed, yet to obey positive laws is a virtue of the spirit. Spiritual virtues are to be placed above corporal ones in greatness and in every other respect. Therefore, when weighed correctly, virtuous works surpass all other deeds in their magnitude [...] So let anyone who wishes to judge correctly declare that the knight was more loyal than the husband was happy.*