

## *The Reception of the Works of Boccaccio in Estonia and His Novel Fiammetta*

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**Abstract.** This paper provides a survey of the Estonian reception of Boccaccio's oeuvre since its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the reception of the latest publication of the Estonian *Decameron* in 2004. As the translator of the second work by Boccaccio to be published in Estonian, *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, I subsequently characterise a number of the major points of the reception of that particular book as well, both in the world and from the Estonian perspective. In the vein of expanding the understanding of and the Estonian reception of Boccaccio's works as a whole, this article finally discusses and disputes a claim about the handling of tragic motifs in Boccaccio's oeuvre in the chapter dedicated to Boccaccio of Erich Auerbach's monograph *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

**Keywords:** Giovanni Boccaccio, the *Decameron*, *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, the erotic, the tragic

### Boccaccio's Contribution to World Literature

In 2013, 700 years passed from the birth of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). The founder of Italian prose fiction is known in Estonia by his main work *Decameron* (written approximately in 1350–1352, revised version in 1373). With that collection, Boccaccio created the foundation of the modern genre of the novella. By its high artistic value, *Decameron* determined the main course of the fiction of the modern ages. However, Boccaccio was also a poet, the epic poems of whose youth – *The Hunt of Diana* (written ca 1333–1334), *Filostrato* (ca 1334–1335, a verse novel), *Theseid* (ca 1339–1341), *A Vision of Love* (ca 1342–1343, revised version in 1361), *The Nymphs of Fiesole* (ca 1344–1346) – shaped the Renaissance verse narrative by uniting the influences of antiquity and the Middle Ages. In addition, Boccaccio has merits in the formation of the modern novel. His novels include the previously mentioned *Filostrato* and the works in prose *Filocolo* (ca 1334–1336, the first novel in Italian) and *The Nymphs of Ameto or the Comedy of the Nymphs of Florence* (ca 1341–1342), as well as his last book in Italian, the half-visionary novel *Corbaccio or the Labyrinth of Love*

(ca 1355). The dating of the writing of all these books is approximate because Boccaccio kept revising his works (Marrone 2007: 239–261). His most important work after *Decameron* is usually considered to be the psychological novel *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* (ca 1343–1344).

## The Reception of Boccaccio in Estonia

The beginning of the reception of the works of Boccaccio in Estonia can be dated indirectly with the year 1782, when one of the first books of secular stories in the Estonian language, a collection of didactically aimed tales by the preacher of the Karja church of Saaremaa (the island and county of Ösel), Friedrich Wilhelm Willmann (1746–1819), *Juttud ja teggud* (*Tales and Deeds*), was published in Tallinn (Reval), directed to the indigenous country people. The work is in grammatically incorrect Estonian and too overtly moralising, in the spirit of Pietism; still, its value lies in being one of the first sources of humorous and edifying writings, drawn from a wide and rich background, for the peasants of Estonia and Livonia. The 57<sup>th</sup> story is titled “Kolm kosilassed” (“Three Suitors”). In it, a widow tricks her three bothersome suitors. By promising herself to the first, she persuades him to play a dead body in the coffin. By similar promises, she tricks the second to stand in wake by the coffin as an angel, and the third, to impersonate the devil who takes the deceased away. Unaware of one another’s roles, the suitors flee in panic, leaving the widow at peace. The origins of that yarn can be found in the 81<sup>st</sup> novella of *Decameron*, as was shown by the Estonian scholar Aarne Vinkel (1918–2006) in a monograph of 1970 and in the facsimile print of *Juttud ja teggud* of the year 1975 (Vinkel 1970: 62). The actual reception of Boccaccio in Estonia has been limited to the *Decameron*. Almost 600 years had passed from the birth of the writer when in 1906 a slim booklet, *Dekameron: 1. väljavalik: 13 uudisjuttu* (*Decameron: 1<sup>st</sup> Selection: 13 Novellas*), appeared in Tartu under the authorial name Giovanni Boccaccio / Dshiwanni Bokkatshio. The use of the Estonian language in the book shows uneven principles of translation. There is no reference to the framing story of *Decameron*; however, the selection of the tales demonstrates the richness of the book in quite an encompassing way. In 1908, another slim selection was published in Tallinn: *Vabadel tundidel* (*Ainult täiskasvanutele*) (*In Free Hours (Only for Adults)*). The title betrays the aspiration to catch a readership with the erotic reputation of *Decameron*. The Gothic script gives the text an additional ancient flavour. In 1929, the artist Eduard Viiralt completed two finely erotic etchings on the themes of *Decameron*. In 1930, a series of six booklets titled *Erootilised jutud* (*Erotic Tales*), based on *Decameron*, appeared in Tallinn in the translation

of F. Taideründ. The cover design is related to the title but in the rather thorough foreword, the publisher warns that Boccaccio's artistic authority is far too high for the attempts of moral watchers ever to succeed in undermining it. The foreword is the first comprehensive introduction to Boccaccio's life and oeuvre in the Estonian language. Boccaccio's youth is dealt with, when the young man with a poetic vocation was forced by his pragmatic father to spend six years on the studies of business and six years on the studies of law. Those compulsory studies are said to have left Boccaccio always with a humble feeling that he never became either a successful poet or an outstanding scholar. It is true that the purely lyrical side of Boccaccio is weaker than the one of Dante or Petrarch. Having dedicated his later life, from about the age of forty, seriously to scholarly work, writing the rest of his books in Latin, in his more scholarly writings he always revealed himself as a bit of an amateur. But as the author of the foreword of *Erootilised jutud* says, Boccaccio was a great poet in what was new and unique in his works. It can even be guessed on the basis of the considerations of Boccaccio's biographer John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) that without the studies of business and law, Boccaccio would have never attained the stature that engraved his name in the history of literature forever – a down-to-earth observer of life, the founder of the realist prose fiction of the modern ages. The foreword of *Erootilised jutud* also introduces the Estonian reader to the legend of Boccaccio's muse Fiammetta ('A Little Flame' in Italian), whose identity has been connected with the noblewoman Maria d'Aquino of Naples. Later researchers like Francesco Erbani have expressed doubts about the real-life existence of that person. (Erbani 2007: xi)

Boccaccio's reception in Estonia reached its peak with the publication of the full translation of *Decameron* in Tallinn in 1957. The book was rendered by Johannes Semper (1892–1970), one of the most meritorious translators and broad-minded literary theoreticians of Estonia of all times. The issue of the book was given an additional value by the thorough afterword of Aleksander Kurtna (1914–1983). Thanks to that, the Estonian reader could for the first time learn about all the major achievements and aspects of Boccaccio's life and oeuvre. In the spirit of the Marxist literary theory, Kurtna places an emphasis on the explanation of the economic relationships and ties of social classes of early Renaissance Italy, introducing their dynamics and their role in the formation of the mentality. The same kind of thoroughness in the analysis of the human connections echoed in the *Decameron* characterises Rudolf Kulpa's (1906–1997) review of the book in the March 1958 issue of the journal *Keel ja Kirjandus*. Kulpa similarly praises Boccaccio's closeness to life, comprehensiveness and broadness of spirit, but he also finds shortcomings in his tales which leave less convincing impressions. He esteems Semper's translation but "there

are also thistles in the cornfield” and he therefore counts a lot of slips and a few blunders in the style of translation, in the conveyance of thoughts and in the authenticity of the rendering of names and terms. Johannes Semper’s translation was later also praised by the literary scholar Nigol Andresen in his article in a 1962 issue of *Keel ja Kirjandus*. In 1963, the topic of the *Decameron* was briefly dealt with by the literary researcher Heino Puhvel (1926–2001) in his article “Kas detail on pisiasi?” (*Is A Detail a Trifle?*).

In 1974, the writer Kulno Süvalep completed the libretto, based on the 21<sup>st</sup> novella of *Decameron*, for the opera *Imelugu* (*Miracle*, music by Raimo Kangro). The novella tells of the gardener Masetto. By pretending to be deaf and a fool, he gets a job in the nunnery and the nuns spend a jolly time with him in the garden, as a result of which a lot of little monks are born. Consequently the gardener lives a happy life, without burdensome family obligations. In 1978, a 42-minute long film by the same title was produced on the basis of the opera in the film studio *Eesti Telefilm*. The role of the gardener was played by the young and highly talented actor Urmas Kibuspuu (1953–1985) who became a legend in his lifetime and even more so after his early death. In 1976, the essay “Dekameroni küsimus” (*The Question of the Decameron*) by the poet and translator Ain Kaalep was published in the cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*. Kaalep ponders what spurred the 35-year-old Boccaccio to create that collection of “dirty tales” in his native vernacular, a work that by the common understanding of its day did not reach any high genres. (Kaalep 1984: 85) Most of the Renaissance scholars, humanists, saw as their literary ideal the revival of the culture of antiquity which was only attainable in noble poetry in Latin. Ain Kaalep concludes that Boccaccio was motivated by the wish to offer pleasant and edifying, if mainly just entertaining, material of reading for the ladies, on the one hand, and, secondly, by the shock of the plague epidemic of the year 1348, which gave rise to the need of sanctifying the beauty, force and urges of life in all forms, even the indecent ones: “Ah, everything is good and noble!” (Kaalep 1984: 86–87) Like Dante in his *Comedy* a few decades earlier, Boccaccio chose Italian, considered to be a feminine and timely language of the kitchen, instead of Latin, as his medium of expression. By that he founded Italian literature in prose, and initiated, in a less direct way, an even larger turnover that led to the emergence of the literatures in the modern vernaculars, to develop into national languages, of Europe. In spite of its “low” topics, the structure of the *Decameron* in its narrative framework of ethical weight forms an imposing earthly counterpart, mirroring temporal humanity, to the otherworldly, cathedral-like textual construction of Dante’s central achievement.

In 1994, the second edition of the Estonian translation of the *Decameron* was published in two volumes. It included Aleksander Kurtna’s afterword with

the alterations and additions by the Professor of Comparative Literature of the University of Tartu, Jüri Talvet. The number of explicatory remarks about the background of economic and social relationships of the Renaissance has been decreased. The specific artistic qualities and innovations of all of Boccaccio's works are surveyed with a greater emphasis. In 2004, new editions of the *Decameron* were published by two Estonian publishing houses, Eesti Raamat and Tänapäev, simultaneously. In response to those editions, the critic Rein Veidemann recalls the impact of the first edition of the book of 1957 in the conditions of the Soviet Communist leader Khrushchev's political "thaw" in the Soviet Estonian society. In those years, numerous high-quality translations into Estonian of classic works of world literature appeared. "Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* that is regarded as contrasting with the former – those works founded the strait in which the whole of Western literary tradition, by the way of references, imitations, re-creations or polemics has been sailing," Veidemann writes. "In the case of Boccaccio, take alone the structure of the very novellas, the interconnections of the themes employed in them with tales originating in different places, tied to folklore. And the pleasure of narration for its own sake that starts the entire *Decameron*! [...] Reading Boccaccio takes us to the springs of great literature and helps us understand the magic of both the story and the act of the telling of it." (Veidemann 2005: 16)

In 2011, the author of this article translated parts of Boccaccio's epic poem *The Nymphs of Fiesole* from Italian into Estonian. Of the 473 ottava rimas of the book, the first 80 were rendered, mostly into iambic blank verse, with the last two lines of every stanza rhyming. The translation is available at the Estonian writers' website *Kirjanike kodu (Writers' Home)*. In 2014, Tartu University Press will publish the Estonian translation by the author of this article of Boccaccio's novel *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*.

### The Reception of *Fiammetta*

Boccaccio probably completed writing *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* by the year 1345. The first print of the book appeared in Padova in 1472. In the 15th century, four editions of the work were published in Italy. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was published in Italy for approximately 40 times. The most influential of those proved to be Bernardo di Giunta's edition, published in Florence in 1517, and the publisher Gaetano Tizzone's edition in Venice in 1524. Tizzone revised *Fiammetta* according to his own tastes and replaced the nine chapters with seven "books". That revised version remained in use for centuries. Only in the second and third quarters of the 19th century, *Fiammetta* was more or less

restored to its original form by publishers who studied the manuscripts of the work. (Михайлов 1968: 292–294)

In her monograph *Boccaccio and Fiammetta: the Narrator as Lover* (1986), the American researcher Janet Levarie Smarr has been observing the ways the interpretation of the story of *Fiammetta* by its publishers changed from feelings of bewilderment to admiration. Di Giunta's edition of 1517 began with the publisher's message to Cosimo Rucellai, in which he wrote:

You who read the present treatise will find a woman tangled in the snares of love, and more wretched in them than any other woman ever was. Whose sighs, tears, sorrowing complaints, both to you and to whoever else by chance will read them, may be a most useful example against putting oneself incautiously into the perils of love. (cited in: Smarr 1986: 147)

Tizzone's print of 1524 has more sympathy for *Fiammetta*, as his dedicatory letter to Dorothea di Gonzaga reveals. The reader will find in the book:

the infinite power of Love, the most beautiful and sweetest ways of speaking, the true observance of our most useful common tongue, the most clever proceedings adopted by a perfect lover, the amorous affections, and not pretended ones, used by a lady, a most unhappy ending of love born from a most happy beginning that happened to two lovers, a continual grieving with a most bitter complaint, and with a lament quite worthy of compassion, and in brief how much power unbending fortune has over mortals. (cited in: Smarr 1986: 147)

Later, as in Filippo Giunti's dedication to Francesco Nerli in the edition of 1594, *Fiammetta* and Panfilo's story had even started to be interpreted as some sort of glorious model for lovers. (Smarr 1986: 148) In the tale of the terrible sinful fall of a wife spoiled by leisure, *Fiammetta*'s gentleness, sensitivity and advanced powers of expression began to be recognised.

In 1497, the first Spanish translation of *Fiammetta* appeared. In 1532, the book was first printed in French and in 1587, in English. The most widespread translation into German dates from 1806, rendered by the Romantic author Sophie Brentano (Sophie Merceau, 1770–1806). In the Russian language, *Fiammetta* first appeared in 1913 in the translation of the St. Petersburg poet, fiction writer and playwright Mikhail Kuzmin (1875–1936). In 1968, thoroughly revised, Kuzmin's translation was published anew. (Mikhailov 1968: 292–294)

In his book *Giovanni Boccaccio as Man and Author* that appeared in London in 1895, the English poet and biographer John Addington Symonds touched

upon the significance of *Fiammetta*. While he remarks that there have even been doubts about its actual authorship, he affirmatively characterises the riches of the work:

[...] “*Fiammetta*” is a very wonderful performance. It is the first attempt in modern literature to portray subjective emotion exterior to the writer. Since Virgil’s “*Dido*”, since the “*Heroidum Epistolæ*” of Ovid, nothing had been essayed in this region of psychological analysis. The picture of an unholy and unhappy passion, blessed with fruition for one brief moment, then cursed through months of illness and anxiety with the furies of vain desire, impotent jealousy, and poignant recollection, is executed with incomparable fulness of detail and inexhaustible wealth of fancy. The author of this extraordinary piece proved himself not only a consummate rhetorician by the skill with which he developed each motive furnished by the situation, but also a profound anatomist of feeling by the subtlety with which he dissected a woman’s heart and laid bare the tortued nerves of anguish well-nigh unendurable. At the same time, “*La Fiammetta*” is full of poetry. The “*Vision of Venus*”, the invocation to Sleep, and the description of summer on the Bay of *Baia* relieve the sustained monologue of passionate complaining, which might otherwise have been monotonous. The romance exercised a wide and lasting influence over the narrative literature of the Renaissance. It is so rich in material that it furnished the motives of many tales, and the novelists of the sixteenth century availed themselves freely of its copious stores. [...]

The prose [of *Fiammetta*] is no longer laboured and affected, as in “*Filocolo*” and “*Ameto*”. Yet it has not attained that sparkling variety, that alternative of stately periods with brief but pregnant touches, which reveals the perfect master of style in the “*Decameron*”. (Symonds 1895: 53–56)

In the revised edition of Aleksander Kurtna’s article about Boccaccio that was published in 1994, Professor Jüri Talvet has characterised the work in the following way:

One of Boccaccio’s major achievements from the period preceding the *Decameron* is doubtless *Fiammetta* (1343–1344) – a work in prose that has justly been called the first psychological novel of Italy and modern Europe.

[...]

The originality of *Fiammetta* begins from the fact that the role of allegory and symbols, as well as a ready-made plot, decreases considerably. Of course, models from antiquity for single motifs have been found, and even here, the story of love is surrounded by a mythological framework. But the role of Boccaccio in the arrangement of the plot is still more recognisable than in earlier works. There are no historical anachronisms, the vagueness of temporal signs of mediaeval literature in *Fiammetta*. Instead, Boccaccio with

full concreteness presents his contemporary Naples in real pictures. The colourful details of the social life of Naples and the customs of the time form an independent virtue of the book.

But above all, *Fiammetta* is a psychological work. That frank confession by a deceived and abandoned woman is the first of such prose tales in which the viewpoint belongs to the woman for the entire length of the work. We can only admire how well Boccaccio knows the life of the soul of a woman, in what numerous shades and transitions he was able to convey it. *Fiammetta* describes her spiritual torments, hopes, illusions fostered in solitude, followed by sad and burning disappointments and despair. The pain in the soul and the jealousy of a raging woman that even push her to seek for death are contrasted with fleeting memories of a brief life spent together with her lover (Panfilo), the consolations of the old nurse and finally the attempts of the husband who is fond of his wife to amuse her.

The display of the intimacy of a woman is enhanced by the narrative I-form (one can say that at times the narrative almost resembles an interior monologue), as well as by the rhetoric that is characteristic of *Fiammetta's* speech. It is clearly a new type Renaissance rhetoric, emphasising the individuality of a person, decoding her as a personality. In the case of *Fiammetta*, we have the first woman with her own voice, a natural life of feelings, no longer a ladylove impersonating the ideals of the Middle Ages. She is not a goddess but a veritable woman, and, as the scholar of Boccaccio, Cochin has said, "one of the most beautiful figures of desperate women ever represented in arts". (Talvet and Kurtna 1993: 298)

In the original version of the article, the afterword to the 1957 print of the Estonian *Decameron*, Aleksander Kurtna wrote of the novel:

The psychological problem belongs to the ones that *Fiammetta* is grounded upon. Boccaccio referred to his unhappy love story in his other works as well, but in those, the deceived figure was always the man, justly complaining about the frivolity of women and his sad fortune. Here, the role of the betrayed belongs to *Fiammetta*, abandoned by Pamfilo who is invited back to Florence by his father for a new love. The parts have been changed. The representation of the abandonment of a woman was novel in the literature of the time, and Boccaccio's treatment of it is rich in the conveyance of the phases of psychological development. Compared with earlier novels, the work signifies a great advance, as it avoids allegories and pushes the mythological-classical apparatus into more tolerable frames. Moreover, *Fiammetta* is speaking in such luscious prose that it emancipates the reader from the mere power of a human fact. With admirable nuances of psychological analysis, *Fiammetta* is describing her torments of soul, hopes, illusions fostered in solitude [...]. (Kurtna 1957: 650–651)

Viewed as a whole, *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* deserves attention as a testimony of the revival of Graeco-Roman influences and of the new realistic tendencies in the Renaissance literature. It can also be studied as a forerunner of various fictional works in the Modern Ages that depict the psychic traps and tragic of love betrayals, as in, for example, the famous novels of adultery by Gustave Flaubert, Lev Tolstoi and Kate Chopin.

### Representation of the Tragic in the Renaissance

In his major work of literary theory, the monograph *Mimesis* first published in 1946 in German, Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) dedicated the chapter “Brother Alberto” to the analysis of the poetics of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Comparing Boccaccio critically with Dante, Auerbach writes:

Early humanism, that is, lacks constructive ethical force when it is confronted with the reality of life; it again lowers realism to the intermediate, unproblematic, and non-tragic level of style which, in classical antiquity, was assigned to it as an extreme upper limit, and, as in the same period, makes the erotic its principal, and almost exclusive, theme. Now, however, this theme contains – what in antiquity there could be no question of its containing – an extremely promising germ of problem and conflict, a practical starting point for the incipient movement against the culture of medieval Christianity. But at first, and merely in itself, the erotic is not yet strong enough to treat reality problematically or even tragically. (Auerbach 1953: 228)

Auerbach finishes the chapter that discusses Boccaccio:

It is precisely when Boccaccio tries to enter the realm of problem or tragedy that the vagueness and uncertainty of his early humanism becomes apparent. His realism – which is free, rich, and assured in its mastery of phenomena, which is completely natural within the limits of the intermediate style – becomes weak and superficial as soon as the problematic or the tragic is touched upon. In Dante’s *Commedia* the Christian-figural interpretation had compassed human and tragic realism, and in the process had itself been destroyed. Yet that tragic realism had immediately been lost again. The worldliness of men like Boccaccio was still too insecure and unsupported to serve, after the fashion of Dante’s figural interpretation, as a basis on which the world could be ordered, interpreted and represented as a reality and as a whole. (Auerbach 1953: 231)

A reader of *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* who follows the main character's pains of soul which ominously deepen until the suicidal madness in Chapter Six may come to the question to what extent and if at all Auerbach was correct in assessing Boccaccio's oeuvre this way on the basis of the novellas of the *Decameron*. Was Auerbach acquainted with *Fiammetta* at all? It rather appears that in *The Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, Boccaccio was the first to find out in prose something typical of the tragic of the human soul in a timeless way – an achievement the echoes of the impact of which range from the visionary prose of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist and writer Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) to the analysis of psychic paradoxes seasoned with eroticism in the novels of Philip Roth (born in 1933), the Jewish American writer of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the *Decameron* was written later than *Fiammetta* and that the common assessment estimates it more important than the latter, as Boccaccio's main and top achievement, ought not to overshadow the independent values of the earlier – as well as later – works of the author. In his main work, *The Canterbury Tales* (published in Estonian in 2006 in the translation of Votele Viidemann), the founder of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400), who knew well Boccaccio and his works, synthesised the influences of the verse narratives in the courtly style of young Boccaccio with the solid down-to-earth realism of the *Decameron*. It can therefore be said that at least through the translation of *The Canterbury Tales*, the impacts of Boccaccio's early works have reached the cultural space of the Estonian language.

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