Here's Your Sin: Elissa's Response to Panfilo in *Decameron* 2.8[*]

Introduction

Why are women who denounce rape so often questioned about the authenticity of their account? Why would anyone *not* believe them? Why would women expose themselves so completely were there not a truth that needed to be told? With these questions in mind, a reading of the Eighth Story of Day 2 of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* raises the following query: why, in the context of the work's sex wars, would a female narrator depict a woman who, upon being rejected, accuses a man of rape, given that this can feed into a misogynistic stereotype of women crying rape merely out of spite?

Narrated by Elissa, *Decameron* 2.8 recounts the story of the Count of Antwerp who, after rejecting the advances of the daughter-in-law of the Queen of France, is accused of wanting to rape her. He has to flee, with his children, and lives in poverty until the same woman — who has since become Queen — confesses her misdeed on her deathbed, enabling him to be rehabilitated to his position and his honor.

The particular story, which received little critical attention has, for the most part, prompted scattered analyses of broader themes. Marga Cottino-Jones, David Wallace and Francesco Ciabattoni address Day 2's theme of Fortune. Baratto has worked on the narrative mode of this novel which he refers to as the *novella-romanzo* (25) in a study that seeks more generally to consider the relationship between the variety of styles in the *Decameron* and Boccaccio's vision of the world. Christopher Livanos has commented on the theme of *translatio imperii* that is alluded to at the beginning of the novella in relation to the figure of Elissa as a narrator. Giuseppe Mazzotta,

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using a more content-based approach, is interested in the tension between "love" and "values" that appears to be at stake (80). Both Massimo Ciavolella and Maria Pia Ellero have focused on the topic of *aegritudo amoris*.

The vast majority of scholars who have studied this story tend to gloss over the false accusation of rape. Even the scholars who focus on Day 2's theme of Fortune (Cottino-Jones; Wallace; Ciabattoni) do not relate the theme to the allegations of the Queen-to-be, although these are the direct cause of both the Count of Antwerp's misfortunes and his regaining of status and fortune. Cottino-Jones' summary of 2.8, which compares its narrative rhythm to that of 2.3, is representative:

> In the novella the Count of Antwerp loses his high standing at the French court and is compelled to flee, penniless and with his children, to London, Wales, and then Ireland. After having lost everything, he retraces his steps, returning from Ireland to Wales, where he finds that his son has been made a martial of the king; thence to London, where he acknowledges his daughter's marriage to the son of another martial; and finally back to France again, where he is restored to former honor and wealth. (51)

No mention is made of the woman, or of the initial accusation.

Few scholars have discussed the false accusation of rape. Among these, Toribio Fuente Cornejo considers the false accusation as a literary theme, arguing that Boccaccio rewrites in a "modern" fashion a narrative known to his contemporaries and presents the Queen-to-be as a character endowed with "double polarity" ("una doble polaridad," 233), which corresponds to a "new vision of the individual" ("una nueva visión del individuo," 237). Elsa Filosa, who reflects on the link between the literary and historical contexts in each of the four subplots of the novel — the first of which is that of the King's daughter-in-law — takes up the thread begun by Fuente Cornejo. In line with the logic of her study, she interprets the unfolding of the Queen-to-be's story and, in particular, the "highly original" ("originalísima," 182) direction taken by the narration in regard to the literary *topos* — namely, the rehabilitation provided by the Queen through her tardy confession — in relation to Boccaccio's treatment of the historical referent of Adélaïde-Blanche d'Anjou.

This lack of a critical approach contrasts with the visibility that, according to Nora Siena, the false accusation of rape has in comparison to rape that does occur in the *Decameron*. Siena, who dwells on the centrality that the false accusation has in 2.8, uses this novella to reveal how rape can be spoken about openly in the *Decameron* only when it does not indeed take place. Her analysis attempts to demonstrate that *actual* rape is artfully obscured and disguised so that it can be made enjoyable; hence, she does not question why a character-narrator like Elissa would depict a *false* accusation of rape.

The critical fortune of the preceding novella, that of Alatiel, differs vastly. Alatiel, who "alle mani di nove uomini perviene in diversi luoghi" (2.7.1) 'passes through the hands of nine men in various places'[1] until she is finally reunited with her father and returned to the King of Algarve to whom she was betrothed is the protagonist of Panfilo's illustration of the great sin committed by women, that is, their desire to be beautiful. The novella has inspired many scholars who have debated the characterization of the protagonist as a passive victim of fortune (Cottino-Jones) or of men (Samà), as a seductress (Benedetti), as a desiring and empowered woman (Willis), or all of the above (Cazalé Bérard; Ciabattoni). Among the numerous analyses of 2.7, Riccardo Samà's "Mute Lips Can Not Tell: Alatiel and Philomela" is of particular interest for the present analysis because he both questions how the figure of the narrator (Panfilo) is constructed in the novella and highlights the role played by the reader in the reception of Panfilo's discourse. Samà sees Panfilo as an unreliable narrator who uses Ovid's myth of Procne and Philomela and rewrites it, overshadowing the fact that the female character is a victim; he argues that critical readers should question the very nature of Panfilo's storytelling and, remaining cognizant of the *Metamorphoses*, fully understand what Alatiel's mute lips are trying to say.

It is in light of this interpretation of *Decameron* 2.7 that I would like to address the question of the false accusation of rape in 2.8. As I see it, everything depends on how we understand Elissa's reaction to Panfilo's story. If what Panfilo narrates is taken at face value,

[1] Unless otherwise stated, quotations are made from Branca's 1992 Italian edition of the *Decameron* and Rebhorn's English translation (Boccaccio 2013).

Elissa follows his precise direction, even adding to Panfilo's misogynistic claims: she shows how a woman can commit a sin even more serious than that described by Panfilo. However, what if Elissa is regarded as adopting a critical attitude towards what Panfilo has just narrated? Elissa's story can then be read not in conformity, but in contrast to that of Panfilo. Thus, in the pages that follow, I argue that Elissa is a character-narrator who would be sensitive to Panfilo's interpretation of the *Metamorphoses* and that she responds to him with a novella that exposes the shortcomings and the fallacies of the story he has just told. I maintain that through the juxtaposition of these novellas, Boccaccio stages a battle around Panfilo's misogynistic distortion of Ovid's tale in the context of the *Decameron*'s sex wars.

I intend to establish, firstly, that Elissa is a figure of the legendary Dido, who is particularly well-placed to identify Panfilo's manipulations of the Ovidian subtext and to empathize with the character of Alatiel. Secondly, I will look at what then transforms the character of the Queen of France into an anti-model for a narrator like Elissa, who deliberately presents her as such. Finally, I shall demonstrate that the Queen of France is an incidental character who makes the plot work according to the rules of Day 2, but also serves Elissa's own agenda, namely, by responding to Panfilo and vindicating Alatiel.

Elissa as a figure of Dido: An Ovidian character in the Mediterranean

This first section incites interrogation of the specific position held by Elissa as a recipient of Panfilo's story. The *Decameron* provides a solid clue to deciphering the narrator's personalities, especially through their names. Elissa is the original name of the Queen of Carthage, Dido, with whom Aeneas falls in love. Following Christopher Livanos' reading of Elissa as an "allegory of the tellings and retellings of the Dido legend" (138), I shall show that Elissa is, on a literary level, familiar with the mythological subtext in Panfilo's story as well as the Mediterranean setting in which it takes place, and thus particularly prone to empathize with Alatiel.

Elissa's alter ego is known primarily for her appearance in Vergil's *Aeneid*. According to Livanos, Elissa holds an "anti-Roman" and "anti-Vergilian" bias (141) that becomes manifest in Day 2 and

Day 6.[2] Livanos is perfectly justified in pointing out Elissa's sensitivity to the way in which male storytellers depict legendary female characters. This specific Boccaccian narrator-character would thus be particularly alert to Panfilo's retelling of the story of Philomela and, all the more so, since the legendary Elissa herself is also an Ovidian character. Dido appears briefly in *Metamorphoses* 14.75-84 — the world of Ovid's *magnum opus* is therefore no stranger to her — and is also one of the heroines who writes to her beloved in *Heroides* 7. The depiction of Elissa as a figure of Dido enables a dramatization of questions of literary filiation. Indeed, after portraying Panfilo as an unreliable narrator and sabotaging him at the same time (Samà 2021-22, 116), Boccaccio gives voice to a character-narrator who, as an alter ego of a re-written character, would be able to scrutinize and address the ways in which her fellow storyteller has just treated one of Ovid's myths.

As a figure of Dido, Elissa would also be very familiar with the setting of Panfilo's story. Sharon Kinoshita and Jason Jacobs have contextualized Alatiel's adventures in the medieval Mediterranean and have illustrated its relevance as a geographical matrix for the unfolding of the plot. Babylon (Cairo), Alexandria, Algarve, Majorca, Genoa, Athens, Constantinople, Cyprus: these toponyms are abundant in the novella, either because Alatiel travels there or because she encounters men who originate from these places. Dido is also a Mediterranean character who, having fled Tyre under the rule of her tyrannical brother, founded the city of Carthage (*Aeneid* 1.340-68). Tellingly, Elissa's first story in the *Decameron* (1.9) is set in Cyprus. From the outset, she clearly states her bond with the Mediterranean; it is the first place to which she refers and, one may say, the place from which she speaks.[3] It would be no surprise, then,

[2] According to Livanos, Elissa/Dido is resentful towards Vergil (who slandered her by depicting her as an irrational lover) and towards Rome (the city for which she was left behind). The reference to the *translatio imperii* at the beginning of 2.8, as well as the slightly sarcastic comment about Rome in 5.3 could be read as micro-acts of retaliation on Elissa's part. The celebration of Cavalcanti in her story on Day 6, when she reigns as Queen, would be a reference to Dante's Cavalcanti, who held Vergil in scorn, and therefore an oblique critique addressed to the Roman poet.

[3] In Justin's *Epitome* of Trogus, a text Boccaccio knew well, Elissa and her companions journey to Carthage after having fled Tyre: "Primus illis adpulsus terrae Cyprus insula fuit" (*Epitome* 18.5.1 in Justin 1876) "Their first landfall was the island of Cyprus" (in Justin 1994).

if she were upset upon listening to Panfilo take over the Mediterranean for his own agenda and sully the image of a character, Alatiel, with whom she would plausibly sympathize, especially because of their shared geographical origin.

Elissa's reaction to Panfilo's story is all the more understandable within the logic of the *Decameron* since her first story (in which a Gascon lady is assaulted in Cyprus on her return from Jerusalem) appears as an early warning of the dangers for women in encounters with men in the Mediterranean. Although, as Siena has shown, the assault itself is rendered invisible, the woman — who speaks up — is undoubtedly considered the victim, and the King hastens to take action to punish the crime. Elissa makes it clear from the beginning that women who are subject to violence deserve some sort of reparation. So too, then, does the silent Alatiel.

The Queen of France through the lens of the Queen of Carthage

Elissa constructs an antagonist who is at odds with Alatiel and who represents all that is unfamiliar to Elissa/Dido. First, Panfilo's female character is the one who is subject to Fortune and who has to endure the tragedy of passing from man to man, whereas the woman in 2.8 is the one who causes the Count's misfortune (and eventually permits his return), appearing almost as an embodiment of Fortune herself. This tension between Alatiel's passive role and the Queen's active role is particularly clear when seen through the prism of speech: if Alatiel is characterized by her deprivation of speech, the Queen-to-be is, on the contrary, a character who masters speech and whose accusatory words have the power to ostracize Gualtieri.

The Queen-to-be speaks at length after deciding to confess her love to the Count of Antwerp and her words are rendered in direct discourse. She delivers an eloquent speech including deductive reasoning. She first presents what she considers to be a general truth, namely, the fact that a "giusto giudice" (2.8.11) would not condemn "una donna […] ricca" (12) "se ella per avventura si lascia trascorrere a amare" (13) and all the more should the recipient of her love be a "savio e valoroso amadore" (13), foreclosing any possible objection by stating that no one ("niuno") would dispute this (13). Only then does she present her personal case, which would therefore fall under that general claim: "le quali cose con ciò sia cosa che

amendune, secondo il mio parere, sieno in me" (14). Hence, she would not be to blame. By mastering the word, she tries to prove to Gualtieri that her love for him, and their potential affair, would not be *that* wrong.

Nevertheless, the way in which Elissa narrates the scene appears, upon closer examination, to provide hints that the seduction will fail. When the Queen-to-be has the Count come to see her, it is clear that she is deeply in love with him and that his thoughts, on the contrary, are "molto lontano da quella della donna" (10). Gualtieri and the Queen-to-be find themselves "in una camera tutti soli" and the Count sits down beside her "sopra un letto" (10), while she remains silent for a while.[4] In a footnote to 2.8.10, Branca notes that the scene of the two characters alone is a *topos* of medieval romance and he points out the recall of Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno* 5. However, unlike what happens when Paolo and Francesca are alone and without any sense of what is to come, here only one of the characters is unsuspecting; in the rewriting of the Dantean passage; the gap between the two characters is brought to the fore. With that hypotext in mind, the scene is awkward and the way in which Elissa narrates it only stresses the tension between the characters' emotional distance and their physical proximity. When the lady, "tutta di vergogna divenuta vermiglia, quasi piangendo" (10), begins to speak, the reader is at the very least skeptical.[5]

The Queen delivers what has been described as a speech that is "retoricamente di altissimo livello" (Filosa 181) but that can also be interpreted, on account of the awkwardness of the scene, as a wry compendium of the stereotypes of French courtly love. Cottino-Jones counts 2.8 among the novellas where "we find a harshly critical description of urban society" (50). Indeed, the French court is

[4] According to the *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini,* "letto" is first and foremost a bed, but it can also be a generic term for a surface where one lies down or rests ("superficie di appoggio [dove distendersi e riposare]"). Although it downplays the contrast between the lady's intentions and the Count's resolve, the fact that Rebhorn (158) and Musa and Bondanella (128) choose to translate it as "couch" and Waldman uses the word "divan" (133) suggests the uneasiness perceptible in this scene; indeed, they all appear to be erasing its sexual dimension.

[5] Later on, there will be other stories in which unreciprocated affection turns into love (see, for instance, 2.10 or 3.6). Nevertheless, at this point, the main reference for scenes of sudden passion is that of Paolo and Francesca, to which Boccaccio makes direct reference in the preface to his work.

a corrupted space[6] in this novella, one in which a woman's lust precipitates the misfortune of a man who "embodies the idealized virtues of the perfect worldly courtier" (Mazzotta 80).

The discourse of the female character in Elissa's novella stereotypically echoes many of the precepts presented by Andreas Capellanus in the *De arte honeste amandi*. The eminently classist discourse of the character (who considers that the sin in question is more excusable because she is "una donna ricca" recalls Capellanus' taxonomy of amorous discourses based on the social class of their participants[7] and the definition of the love of peasants as "contrary to their nature" (149). The justification of her sin is reminiscent of the claim by the "woman of the higher nobility" of her right to "give her love when it is not asked for" as long as the recipient is a "worthy man" (131).

French courtly love refers to a world that, unlike the situation in the Mediterranean, would be eminently foreign to Elissa as a character-narrator and a figure of Dido. The Queen-to-be incarnates a form of otherness that functions as a counterpoint to Elissa herself – as well as to Alatiel. Furthermore, although she employs courtly rhetoric, the Queen-to-be fails to convince the Count of Antwerp to commit adultery and appears, in the end, as a somewhat *failed* courtly lady.

In addition, when her speech fails and the Count rejects her, the Queen-to-be reacts by performing the act that will shift the plot: she accuses him of trying to rape her. Branca (250), Rebhorn (881) and Lee (39) all agree that the main source for this episode is the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife narrated in Genesis 39:5-20, although a similar incident "of ancient origin" (Lee 39) also appears in the *Iliad* with the story of Bellerophon in Book 6, in Egyptian romances and in Hindu stories. According to Rebhorn (881) and Landau (118), the novella is also based on a real story, that of Pierre de la Brosse, to whom Dante refers in *Purgatorio*.

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[6] According to Ruth Mazo-Karras, French courtly love poetry has often been "connected with a positive valuation of at least some women's adultery" (139). The French Queen-to-be's attitude – she attempts to minimize adultery – could be a sign of Boccaccio's own play with this stereotypical assumption about French courts and their literary representation.

[7] For example: "A man of the middle class speaks with a woman of the same class" (107).

The sources are varied and overlapping; the false accusation of rape, being a literary theme, is in itself an object of rewriting (Fuente Cornejo 231). However, I am interested in what the Queen of France is *not* and in the way she works as a counterpoint to both the female character in the previous novella and Elissa herself; hence, I would like to discuss more fully the sources that the narrator might be recasting rather than the ones she is explicitly invoking.

The story is set in the times when "lo 'mperio di Roma da' franceschi ne' tedeschi [fu] transportato" (2.8.4). Livanos reads this reference to the concept of *translatio imperii* as an "observation that Roman power is no longer Roman" (139). Since Elissa's "ancient namesake's life was ultimately sacrificed" (139) as collateral damage in the history of Rome, this allusion would be a form of sarcastic payback. I believe the place of Elissa's alter ego in the history of Rome is important for Boccaccio's construction of the fictional character, and I would like to consider the way she, as a narrator, portrays a character whose actions and principles are eminently disrespectful to the women who were sullied at pivotal moments in the history of Roman glory.[8] In my view, the Queen-to-be can be read, first, as a counter-figure to Dido. In the Queen-to-be's reaction to Gualtieri's rejection, a series of patterns recalls the reproaches that Dido makes to Aeneas when she discovers he is going to leave her (in the *Aeneid* and in Ovid's *Heroides*). Initially infuriated, the Queen-to-be says to Gualtieri: "Since you want to be the cause of my death, I'll be the cause of yours." In both the *Aeneid* and the *Heroides*, Dido accuses Aeneas of being the cause of her death: "Nec te noster amor nec te data dextera quondam / nec moritura tenet crudeli funere Dido?" (*Aeneid* 4.307-08) ["Does neither our love restrain you, nor the pledge once given, nor the doom of a cruel death for Dido?," Fairclough 443]. Vergil's Dido asks, "praebuit Aeneas et causam mortis et ensem" (*Heroides* 7.195) ["From Aeneas came the cause of her death, and from him the blade," Showerman 99], Ovid's Dido concludes. Dido and the Queen-to-be both want revenge, but under different forms. Ovid's Dido urges Aeneas to *live* so that he suffers from his own misdeed ("vive, precor" [7.63] ["O live; I pray it!," Showerman 89]), whereas the chiasmus in the

[8] It is also worth noting that both are Ovidian characters.

Queen-to-be's discourse stresses her desire for the Count to perish. Consequently, her revenge is immediate:

> A una ora messesi le mani ne' capelli e rabuffatigli e stracciatigli tutti e appresso nel petto squarciandosi i vestimenti, cominciò a gridar forte: "Aiuto, aiuto! Ché 'l conte d'Anguersa mi vuol far forza." (2.8.22)

This staging of an assault recalls the image under which Dido promises to appear to Aeneas if he were to shipwreck ("tristis et effuses sanguinolenta comis" (*Heroides* 7.70) ["heavy with sorrow, with hair streaming, and stained with blood," Showerman 89].

However, the scene also seems to be drawn in opposition to the representation of a real — emblematic — rape: that of Lucretia, which appears in Ovid's *Fasti*. Just as the rape of the Queen-to-be *would have been*, the rape of Lucretia is that of a married woman, perpetrated by a member of the royal family — Sextus Tarquinius — who takes advantage of the husband's absence. In Ovid's recount of the scene, the emphasis on Lucretia's breast is notable ("positis urgentur pectora palmis / tum primum externa pectora tacta manu" (*Fasti* 2.803-04) ["His hands pressed heavy on her breast, the breast that till then had never known the touch of stranger hand," Fraser 115) as is the account of her state of despondency the morning after ("iamque erat orta dies: passis sedet illa capillis," *Fasti* 2.813 ["And now the day had dawned. She sat with hair disheveled," Fraser 117) which is also present in Boccaccio's depiction of a woman with her hair "completely disheveled" and her clothes "ripped apart (…) at her breast" (Boccaccio 2013 160). By feigning her reaction to purported rape, the Queen-to-be appears to be perverting this emblematic scene. While the rape of Lucretia ultimately leads to the fall of the Roman monarchy, the Boccaccian character not only does not commit suicide: she indeed becomes Queen. Her narrative arc is a complete reversal of the story of Lucretia: instead of the noble sacrifice of a chaste woman, an adulterous and slanderous woman is rewarded. The opposition is so schematic that it seems that Elissa wants to scandalize her listeners and truly embarrass the Queen-to-be.

The actions of this character not only affect the Count but also tarnish the legacy of women such as Dido and Lucretia. Thus, for Elissa, the Queen-to-be would be nothing but a despicable anti-model. The creation of a character who stands in opposition to

Alatiel and to the legacy of the Roman heroines — her own alter ego among them — serves the narrator's agenda.

Lose the Queen to win the game

In this final section, it is argued that depicting a character who embodies all of these negative values serves a very particular objective in Elissa's agenda. In *Decameron* 2.8, the female character is incidental not only as part of the plot, but also in the narrator's discourse.

Although the Queen-to-be is central to the unfolding of the story, the character seems to lack depth. Her lengthy speech contrasts with how disposable the character becomes. Firstly, she remains anonymous throughout the novella. She is referred to as the Queen's daughter-in-law" ("la nuora," 2.8.5), "la donna del figliuolo del re" (7), "la donna" (10) and later on as "la reina di Francia" (88). Lee refers to Domenico Manni's claim that Boccaccio draws his inspiration from the story of Pierre de la Broce in 13th-century France, changing the names "so as not to offend those 'in whose memory it was still fresh'" (39). However, unlike this female character, the Count of Antwerp and his children all have names: Gualtieri, Violante/Giannetta, Luigi/Perotto. The Queen of France is devoid of entity; she intervenes only to cause another character's misfortune and to restore his fortune, after which she immediately dies.

The Queen-to-be's second appearance, in which she operates as a sort of *deus ex machina*, is entirely subject to the rules of Day 2, as the misfortunes need to have a happy ending. One could say that she confesses her misdeed *because* Gualtieri needs to regain his title, not the opposite; by the same token, she accused him *because* he first had to lose his title. The traits and the specific actions of this character are subordinate to the plot, and to its normative function. The loathsome female character constructed by Elissa is, at this point, devoid of personality and is nothing but a mere piece in the machinery to ensure that the story 'works.' She simply serves the story's plot, but her profoundly negative image ultimately allows Elissa to expose obliquely the biases in Panfilo's discourse, as she reveals how very insignificant Alatiel's so-called sin is.

As argued above, Elissa, as an alter ego of Dido, can be regarded as particularly sensitive to Panfilo's manipulation of Ovid's text and to his depiction of Alatiel as a "sinful woman." Her story responds

to his by evidencing the flaws in his argument. There is a significant leap not only between Ovid's account of Philomela's myth in the *Metamorphoses* and Panfilo's interpretation of it (as Samà showed), but also between what Panfilo says he will prove through his story and what he actually narrates. As soon as he begins to speak, he announces that, having heard the women of the *brigata* talk about sins committed by men in the previous stories of Day 2, he intends to expose the great sin perpetrated by women, namely their desire to be beautiful ("disiderare di ser belle," 2.7.7). Although Alatiel *is* beautiful, she neither expresses a desire for beauty, nor is she described as showing salient traits of pride or vainglory. Panfilo's phrasing appears inaccurate in regard to Alatiel, a significant pitfall for a narrator who wishes to radically expose women's sinfulness once and for all. That said, what is more striking is the fact that, in order to represent what would be a feminine sin, he proceeds to narrate a story of male characters who kidnap women, rape them, lie, conspire, cheat on their wives and kill each other.

Elissa portrays an *actual* sin committed by a woman. The Queen employs the word "sin" when she admits being in love with the Count of Antwerp ("dinanzi a giusto giudice un medesimo *peccato* in diverse qualità di persone non dee una medesima pena ricevere," 2.8.11, emphasis mine), echoing Panfilo's subject matter. More importantly, Elissa later uses the same word when she recounts the Queen's confession to the Archbishop ("e tra gli altri *peccati* gli narrò ciò che per lei a gran torto il conte d'Anguersa ricevuto avea," 88-89, emphasis mine). Falsely accusing a man of rape would have been considered a serious matter in the Middle Ages. Kathryn Gravdal has noted that "medieval discourse suggests that men were not only aware of rape, they were also keenly conscious of its importance as a legal and social issue" (142). If, as Shulamith Shahar suggests, "most codes allowed for the possibility that a woman would falsely charge a man with raping her" (16), it is also because men's "fears of false accusation" (Higgins and Silver 2) were a culturally operative anxiety on which the narrator of this story could draw. Elissa responds to Panfilo with the representation of a kind of sin that would play on men's fears at least as much as (supposedly) unbridled female sexuality.

The Queen's actions lead to the Count's demise; they have the power to ruin a man's life and would provide grist for the mill of anyone seeking to discredit actual victims' allegations. So, *here*'s

your sin, Elissa seems to be saying to Panfilo, here's a truly serious one. Indeed, compared to what the Queen does, Alatiel's alleged "sin" is completely innocuous. The Queen of France serves as a point of contrast, offering a measure of what sin can entail and the effects it may produce. Elissa responds to Panfilo by doubling down: she sacrifices this *real* woman-sinner in order to redeem Alatiel. This counterpoint is also, then, a call for attention to the manipulative tendencies of the previous narrator and, therefore, to the distortion that Panfilo operates with respect to Alatiel's story.

Conclusion

Paying attention to Elissa's character and the literary connotations it carries may contribute to the understanding of the way she positions herself as the recipient of the story that Panfilo has just told. Elissa's familiarity with both ancient authors and the Mediterranean world allows her to unveil the distortions Panfilo introduces regarding Philomela and Alatiel. For this purpose, as a narrator, she constructs — at another literary level — a new female character who is entirely at odds with her own figure and with that of Alatiel, who functions as a contrasting pole of negativity. Even if she were not trying to defend *all* women from Panfilo's accusations, she could very well be vindicating a particular character for whom she appears to have an affinity. Either way, using the Queen appears to be a strategic move.

Elissa's story aims to refute Panfilo's misogynistic discourse in the context of the *Decameron's* sex wars. Revealing the false accusation of rape by a woman is undoubtedly a peculiar way of doing so. Ultimately, one might consider, as a final twist, that although she makes her commit a grave sin, Elissa intends to somewhat redeem the Queen. Following Fuente Cornejo (237), Filosa points out that the novella's originality with respect to the literary topic of the false accusation lies in the fact that the Queen herself brings about the turn in the plot, for she confesses of her own accord and vindicates herself (182-83). She thus becomes a character who is positively valued. Yes, a woman can sin, Elissa seems to say to Panfilo;

but despite having committed an act of the utmost gravity, she has the moral integrity to confess it and make amends. To acknowledge who the victim is and to set the narrative straight, just as she, Elissa, does.

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