**Chapter 1**

**The Polyphony of Consolation in Boccaccio’s *Filocolo***

One of the striking features of Boccaccio’s early vernacular epic, *Il* *Filocolo*, is the repetition of scenes of lament and consolation throughout the narrative.[[1]](#footnote-1) Time and again, suffering characters are portrayed using the defining features of the elegiac style (the declamations “deh” or “oimè,” the uncontrolled weeping, the call upon death); their laments then elicit the compassion of another figure, who is moved to offer lengthy speeches of consolation to the beleaguered. In Book 1, the pagan knight Ascalion consoles Giulia, the Roman-Christian wife, who is mourning her husband’s death in battle; throughout Books 2, 3, and 4, several figures offer lengthy consolatory speeches to the unfortunate lovers Florio and Biancifiore; and finally, in Book 5, Florio himself is transformed into a wise consoler, offering verbal aid to those in need. Showing compassion to the beleaguered and offering them solace, thus, emerges as a central ethical obligation in Boccaccio’s epic, a duty that is taken up by Christians and pagans, Romans and non-Romans alike, within the *Filocolo*. Furthermore, scenes of consolation construct one of the basic literary units that undergird the overall structure of the work. The *Filocolo*, as a whole, can be understood as an ongoing unfolding of the emblematic scene that opens Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which the author’s elegiac lamentation is followed by the appearance of Lady Philosophy, who comes to cure his malaise and offer him solace.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All of the scenes of consolation that fill the *Filocolo* are framed by an overarching consolation – that which the author-narrator himself offers his readers through the writing of the work. The Boethian triangle of a lamenting protagonist, a consoler, and a text of consolation, thus, is embodied not only by the literary characters, but also by the relationship between reader, the author-narrator, and the literary text.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the introductory section of the *Filocolo*, the author-narrator explains to his readers how the reading of the story of Florio and Biancifiore might serve as a source of consolation for them:

Adunque, o giovani, i quali avete la vela della barca della vaga mente dirizzata a’ venti che muovono dalle dorate penne ventilanti del giovane figliuolo di Citerea, negli amorosi pelaghi dimoranti disiosi di pervenire a porto di salute con istudioso passo, io per la sua inestimabile potenza vi priego che divotamente prestiate alquanto alla presente opera lo ‘ntelletto, però che voi in essa troverete quanto la mobile fortuna abbia negli antichi amori date varie permutazione e tempestose, alle quali poi con tranquillo mare s’è lieta rivolta a’ sostenitori; onde per quanto potrete vedere voi soli non essere sostenitori primi delle avverse cose, e fermamente credere di non dovere essere gli ultimi. Di che prendere potrete consolazione se quello è vero, che a’ miseri sia sollazo d’avere compagni nelle pene; e similemente ve ne seguirà speranza di guiderdone, la quale non verrà sanza alleggiamento delle vostre pene. (1.2.1-2)

Therefore, O youths who have directed the sails of your yearning spirits toward the winds stirred and fanned by the gilded wings of Cytherea’s young son, while you linger in the seas of love and desire to come safely to port by your charted course, by that same inestimable power of love I beg you to turn your attention to this present work, since you will find in it how changing Fortune has given various stormy permutations to loves of old, and yet subsequently returned her victims to calm seas. By this you will be able to know that you are not the first to bear such setbacks, and you may surely believe that you will not be the last. Thus you may be able to take consolation here, if it is true that misery loves to find companions in its sufferings; and similarly there will follow for you expectations of recompense, which cannot fail to lighten your burden. (p. 5)

Addressing mostly his male readers who have been wounded by love, the author-narrator specifies two ways in which the reading of the work may offer them *consolazione*: first, by reading about the tribulations of Florio and Biancifiore, the reader will realize that he is not the only one who has suffered, a realization that is comforting in the author-narrator’s view; second, by reading about the ultimate comic ending of the two lovers’ misfortunes, the reader will be filled with hope for a similar reward – *guiderdone* – in return for enduring the hardships of love, a fact which will provide him with solace through hope. While offering an “affective-diversionary” type of consolation,[[4]](#footnote-4) the solace promised by the author-narrator also entails an educative-exemplary dimension. The story encourages the reader to implement this lesson in his or her own life: to remain steadfast in love regardless of the troubles that may accompany it, to patiently wait for future recompense.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Even a brief glance at the lengthy narrative of the *Filocolo* shows that it undoubtedly contains ample tragic material with which to fulfill the author-narrator’s consolatory promise. The story lingers at length on the many hardships endured by the two central protagonists. Furthermore, the comic ending of the lovers’ tale – their ultimate attainment of both earthly and divine love – is no doubt an ideal storyline to fulfill the promise of instilling hope for the fulfillment of love. Yet when we look closely at the many scenes of consolation that fill the work and the examples of coping with misfortune offered by the various protagonists, particularly Florio, the nature of the consolation expressed in the *Filocolo* becomes much more complex. The many intra-diegetic scenes depicting suffering and consolation, as this chapter will show, challenge the author-narrator’s consolatory position in significant ways and provide the reader with alternative consolatory pathways to consider and follow. The result is a polyphony of consolation, which ultimately indicates that for Boccaccio there is no one universal solution to hardships, no one remedy for all maladies. Different situations require different solutions according to the *Filocolo*, and the task of the reader is to weigh his or her own particular situation and to determine how to use the work as a source of solace – a task for which the very act of reading a complex work such as the *Filocolo* may serve as training. Whereas previous scholarship has often critiqued the *Filocolo* for its inconsistent and muddled nature, this chapter will argue that this inconsistency is a direct outcome of its rejection of universal assertions regarding love and consolation; it argues that people ought to be attuned to their particular context when deliberating about the appropriate path to follow.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To demonstrate the polyphony of consolatory strategies within the *Filocolo*, this chapter will begin with an exploration of the elaborate speeches of consolation offered to the figure of Florio in Book 3 of the work. While these scenes of consolation echo and reinforce the consolatory message that was introduced by the author-narrator, they also highlight the limitations of the passive reliance on the consolatory words of others. Accordingly, a consolation that champions only emotional relief and the passive hope for the future fulfillment of one’s desires appears ineffectual by the end of Book 3; the very repetition of consolatory speeches underscores their impotence. This kind of solace is temporary and bound to lead to ever renewed cycles of tears and lamentations.

Given this limitation, an alternative form of consolation begins to emerge at the end of Book 3. At this turning point, Florio is transformed into an epic hero, who actively and astutely confronts his bad fortune and embarks on a mission in pursuit of his beloved – a journey that will ultimately end happily with the recovery of his love and eternal salvation. True consolation, the second half of the *Filocolo* thus suggests, resides in heroic action; and the consolatory message of the work now comes to inhere not in the momentary relief of reading, but rather in the story’s ability to motivate action through powerful example. Florio’s transformation into an exemplum of active heroism entails an elaborate inter-textual dialogue with several central works of the epic tradition – particularly those of Virgil, Ovid, and Dante – and establishes a new type of an epic hero for the reader to look up to.

The exemplum of Florio, however, is in itself challenged over the course of the *Filocolo*, as will be shown in the final section of this chapter. Throughout the work, and especially in the closing Book 5, we encounter examples of figures who have no prospects for happiness in love. They find salve for their hardship in the *disavowal* of love, not by remaining steadfast in their hope for an eventual happy conclusion. This perspective is even expressed in Florio’s own words of consolation, in monologues he speaks towards the end of the narrative after he has become a wise consoler. His audience, ironically enough, are characters who serve as the author’s doubles within the story. The *Filocolo*, as a result, ultimately addresses the reader in at least three distinct consolatory voices and, therefore, leaves it to the reader to make the final decision as to how to use the work as a source of consolation.

**Love, Interpretation, and the Limits of Consolation**

In the beginning of Book 3 of the *Filocolo*, we encounter Florio, the Prince of Marmorina (Verona), in a joyful and merry mood. He has just secretly rescued his beloved Biancifiore from being burned at the stake and has returned her safely to his father's palace. Even though he was forced to save her from the machinations of his own parents who wish her ill, he trusts in the goodwill of the gods, and believes that he will soon be reunited with her. Yet the joy does not last long and Florio’s mood suddenly takes a turn to the worse. His sorrow is renewed when he sees a beautiful white flower in a garden surrounded by brambles. The sight reminds him of his own Biancifiore (literally meaning “white flower”) and he interprets it as a sure sign of her tenuous condition; he reproaches himself for leaving her behind, prone to the malicious intents of his parents: “Io veggio ciascuna punta delle circunstanti spine rivolta al fresco fiore, e quasi ognuna è presta a guastare la sua bellezza. Queste punte sono le insidie poste dal mio padre e dalla mia madre alla innocente vita della mia Biancifiore… Oimè, perché dopo la disiderata diliberazione ti lasciai io al mio padre?” (3.2.4-5) [“I see every point of its surrounding thorns turned toward the fresh bloom; each of them is ready to destroy its beauty. These points are the traps which my father and mother have set against the innocent life of my Biancifiore… Alas, why did I leave you to my father after the longed-for rescue?” (pp. 133-134)]. Lovers, this opening scene suggests, see signs of their condition everywhere and are constantly attempting to decipher their significance. Reminded by the brambles of the dangers that surround his beloved, Florio encloses himself in his room and, recalling Boethius of the opening section of the *Consolatio* and Dante of the *Vita nuova*, bitterly bewails his condition.

Following Florio’s decent into despair, his host and companion, the Duke of Montoro, offers him a lengthy consolation – the first in many speeches of consolation in Book 3. Struck by Florio’s grief, the Duke first echoes Lady Philosophy’s opening admonitions to Boethius,[[7]](#footnote-7) telling Florio to desist from his shameful weeping: “lascia il piangere, il quale è atto feminile e di pusillanimo cuore” (3.3.5) [“leave off your weeping, which is a womanish act and one showing a pusillanimous heart” (p. 135; translation slightly modified)]. Nonetheless, while urging Florio to stop his “effeminate” crying, the Duke’s following arguments are aimed mainly at convincing Florio to remain hopeful and patient that his love will eventually be fulfilled. In the course of his arguments, he even invites Florio to imitate the emblematic female model of patience – Penelope: “A Penolope parea dolce appressarsi alla morte, sperando che ogni domane dovesse tornare Ulisse prima da Troia, e poi non sappiendo da che luogo” (3.5.15) [“to Penelope it seemed sweet to face approaching death, hoping that every new day would bring Ulysses home first from Troy, and then not knowing from where” (p. 139, slightly modified)]. Inadvertently, the Duke’s overall message of patient trust in the future fulfillment of love thus links Florio to the passive, expectant beloved, a point to which we shall return.

The Duke’s elaborate consolation at the beginning of Book 3 – the mid-point of the work –rehearses the central aspects of the type of consolation offered by the author-narrator to his readers in the beginning of the work. The Duke too invites Florio to find ways to bear his grief and remain hopeful, specifically, by trusting in a future fulfillment of his desire. While his words echo Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, as he admonishes Florio to drive away grief and “unmanly” tears, the Duke does not urge Florio to dismiss the root cause of his grief, namely love. In contrast to Lady Philosophy, the Duke – like the author-narrator – encourages the beleaguered lover to remain resolute in his worldly desire.

When the Duke finishes his consolation, Florio feels some relief and both men climb on their horses and go hunting to while away the time. Yet the distraction proves itself to be fleeting, as soon afterwards Florio returns to his usual lamentations. This time, as we learn, Florio’s grief does not relate to his fears about Biancifiore’s safety at his father’s palace, but rather to his “diverse imaginazioni e pensieri” (3.13.3) [“various thoughts and fancies” (p. 150)], and especially to his “gelosia” (3.13.8) [“jealousy” (p. 151)]. He now worries that Biancifiore might not remain loyal to him. If at first the image of the brambles surrounding a white flower indicated for him the objective dangers to Biancifiore’s life, now it comes to stand for the many suitors that court Biancifiore at the palace: “molti giovani credo che la stimolano per la sua bellezza” (3.13.9) [“I believe that many youths are courting her because of her beauty” (p. 151)]. To justify his concern over her loyalty, Florio alludes to the *natura delle femine*, claiming that it is known that women are by nature fickle and easily manipulated by the enticements of young lovers (3.13.8).

As soon as he hears Florio’s renewed complaint, the Duke embarks upon another lengthy consolation, meant to open Florio’s eyes to “il vero conoscimento” (3.14.2) [“true understanding” (p. 152)]. To appease Florio’s anxiety over Biancifiore’s loyalty, the Duke refutes Florio’s interpretation of the nature of women, challenging his universalist position by telling him that not all women are fickle, only those women who are not wise; but it is clear that Biancifiore is wise (3.14.11-12). The Duke then tells Florio that it is a folly to believe in one’s false impressions (“il tuo non vero parere,” 3.14.14) and to worry over future events that are not yet determined: “Folle è colui che per li futuri danni sanza certezza spande lagrime” (3.14.14) [“He is a fool who wastes tears on future woes about which he cannot be certain” (p. 153)].

Yet as in the previous consolatory speech, this effort to console Florio only provides him with temporary respite. While at first Florio promises to take comfort and not to worry about things that are uncertain – “cacciando da me il dolore delle non presenti cose” (3.15.2) – his grief and lamentations are soon renewed, this time due to what appears to be a decisive proof of Biancifiore’s betrayal.

Florio’s renewed decent into despair is caused by his encounter with the knight Fileno, who arrived at the court of Marmorina unaware of the love of Florio and Biancifiore. Fileno fell deeply in love with Biancifiore and tried in various ways to seduce her. Biancifiore, however, remained steadfastly loyal to Florio, thus corroborating the Duke’s claim that not all women are fickle. Nonetheless, the Queen maliciously convinced Biancifiore to give Fileno her veil to carry with him during a public joust, a manipulative move that will bring the problem of interpretation to a head and will have dire consequences for all those involved.

Not long after the joust, Fileno meets Florio in Montoro. He reveals to Florio his own love for Biancifiore and states that he is certain that Biancifiore loves him back. Florio inquires about the source of this certainty, and Fileno brings forth three proofs: “La prima si è il timido sguardare con focosi sospiri… appresso… Le ricevute gioie… La terza cosa… si è l’allegrezza della quale io veggo il bel viso ripieno d’ogni felice caso che m’avvenga” (3.17.8) [“The first is her timid glance and burning sighs… next, the favors I have received… And the third thing… is the joy that I see filling her lovely face at every good fortune that comes to me” (p. 156)]. Florio is not satisfied with these proofs, and inquires further about the “ricevute gioie” Fileno had referred to. Fileno tells him about the veil he received from Biancifiore, describing it as a “manifesto segnale” (3.17.13) [“a most clear sign” (p. 157)]. Hearing about the veil, Florio becomes greatly troubled and seems to accept this gesture as a conclusive proof of Biancifiore’s love for Fileno. Just like Fileno, Florio judges incorrectly and emerges at this point as a bad reader because he failed to dig beneath the surface of the matter. This mistake, of course, exacerbates his own heartache.

At the height of his despair, Florio sees Biancifiore in a dream sent to him by Venus, in which Biancifiore reassures him that she is loyal (3.19.13). When he wakes up, Florio decides to inquire further into the truth of the matter by writing Biancifiore a sorrowful letter; he mentions the veil she gave Fileno and beseeches her to continue to love him (3.20.17-32). In her written response, which itself is a type of consolation, Biancifiore assures Florio that she loves him no less than he loves her and reproaches him for believing that she might have been unfaithful to him. She is especially critical of his failure as a reader and interpreter of the signs of love: “Né è però da credere che in un velo o in altro gioiello si richiuda perfetto amore: solamente il cuore serva quello” (3.22.19) [“Nor is it moreover to be believed that a veil or some other favor can contain perfect love; for only the heart can do that” (p. 172)]. No piece of clothing, Biancifiore states, can serve as a sure proof of love; only the heart is a true sign of perfect love, criticizing Florio for failing to recognize this simple fact.

While the heart might indeed be the only true token of love, it must always reveal itself through outward signs; and so Florio's suspicions are not assuaged even by the letter. Affected by the machinations of the goddess Diana and her handmaid Gelosia, Florio refuses to accept Biancifiore’s written confession, stating that writing enables one to lie and deceive: “Fermamente ella m’inganna, e quello ch’ella mi scrive non per amore, ma per paura lo scrive” (3.25.1) [“Surely she is deceiving me, and what she writes me she writes not from love but from fear” (p. 175)]. Neither the oral consolation of the Duke, which attempts to convince Florio of his beloved’s unfailing love, nor the dream or the written letter from Biancifiore are able to fully calm Florio’s suspicious mind and provide him with certainty. The beleaguered lover, as we learn, is bound to give the most pessimistic interpretation to the signs he encounters and is simply unable to be wholly convinced by the comforting words of others.

The demonstration in Book 3 of the limited curative power of verbal consolation that aims to offer relief and instill hope and certainty – whether oral or written – has important implications for the consolatory message offered by the work. While the repeated consolations echo the author-narrator’s opening invitation to his readers to find refuge in reading about the sorrows of others and take solace in the hope that their love will eventually be fulfilled, Florio himself is not consoled and his condition only appears to deteriorate. The troubled lover who is forced to wait for the fulfillment of his love will always be overcome by renewed anxiety, a fact which is underscored by the very repetition of the scenes of lament and consolation throughout Book 3. True and lasting consolation, the *Filocolo* therefore suggests, should be sought elsewhere.

**The Consolation of Heroism**

Towards the end of Book 3, the character of Florio undergoes a decisive transformation that has crucial implications for the consolatory message of the work as a whole. Florio has been tricked into thinking that his love has died, but when he threatens to commit suicide, the Queen reveals that Biancifiore has been sold off to Italian merchants and is not dead. This revelation serves as an important turning point in the development of Florio’s character. Up to this point, as we have seen, Florio has mostly been a passive and timid figure, fearing to stand up to his father and mother. Instead, he gave in to lamentations, sought refuge in the consolations of others, and patiently waited for his fortune to change, as advised by the Duke. Even during his heroic rescue mission at the end of Book 2, Florio was prompted by Venus and Mars to perform his task; he refrained from revealing his true identity to Biancifiore and brought her back to the palace after his rescue mission, still fearing to disobey his father.

His mother’s confession, however, changes everything. Florio angrily accuses his mother of “crudeltà” (3.65.1) and states that he intends to go sail the world in search of Biancifiore – directly disobeying his parents for the first time. The narrative particularly stresses the personal change undergone by Florio at this point: “Ma Florio, cambiato viso e mostrandolo meno dolente, lasciò la madre piangendo nella camera, e, rivestito d’altre robe, venne nella gran sala…” (3.67.2) [“But Florio had changed his appearance and seemed less sad, and left his mother weeping in her chamber; dressing in other garb, he came into the great hall…” (p. 217)].

With changed face and clothes, Florio fetches his companions – among them his longtime teacher Ascalion and the Duke – and urges them in an elevated speech to join him on a journey in pursuit of his love. In highly eloquent rhetoric, he convinces them of the virtuous and glorious aspects of such an expedition: “noi non ci nascessimo per vivere come bruti, ma per seguire virtù, la quale ha potenza di fare con volante fama le memorie degli uomini etterne, così come le nostre anime sono” (3.67.12) [“we were not born to live like beasts, but to follow virtue, which has the power by means of soaring fame to make the memories of men eternal, just as our souls are” (p. 218, translation modified)].

Florio's statement is clearly based on Ulysses’s celebrated speech in Dante’s *Inferno* 26: “non vogliate negar l’esperïenza / di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente. / Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza” (*Inferno* 26.117-120) [“you must not deny / experience of that which lies beyond / the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled. / Consider well the seed that gave you birth: / you were not made to live your lives as brutes, / but to be followers of virtue and knowledge”].[[8]](#footnote-8) This reliance on Dante’s Ulysses directs our attention to the intertextual strategies Boccaccio employs in order to fashion his epic hero; from the elegiac weeper – which recalls Boethius of the beginning of the *Consolatio* or Dante of the *Vita nuova* – Florio grows into a hero similar to Ulysses, endowed with the same captivating eloquence and noble soul that actively pursues virtue and glory.

At the same time, we should note how Boccaccio makes sure to redeem his hero from the negative aspects that Boccaccio perceived in Dante’s depiction of Ulysses.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the *Amorosa visione*, written a few years after the *Filocolo*, Boccaccio describes Ulysses as the one who “trespassed the boundary”: “Per voler veder trapassò il segno / dal qual nessun potè mai in qua reddire” (*Amorosa visione*, redaction A, 27.86-87) (“in his desire to see he trespassed the boundary from which no one has ever been able to return”).[[10]](#footnote-10) As Barolini has argued, Boccaccio here conflates Dante’s portrayal of Adam in the *Paradiso* – the one who is guilty of “il trapssar del segno” (*Paradiso* 26.117) – and his depiction of Ulysses in the *Inferno* – the one who journeyed “di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente” in pursuit of knowledge.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Boccaccio of the *Amorosa visione*, Dante’s Ulysses is a transgressor in the manner of Adam, a pursuer of forbidden knowledge.

It is highly significant, then, that in Florio’s allusion to Ulysses’s speech quoted above, Boccaccio omits the statement Dante put in Ulysses’s speech, namely that man was born to pursue “virtute e canoscenza;” instead he declares that man is required to follow “virtute,” leaving aside the “canoscenza.” By this omission, Boccaccio appears to stress that his own hero is not driven by a similar transgressive passion, which ultimately brought destruction upon Ulysses and his companions. Furthermore – and no less important – whereas Dante’s Ulysses is a traveler who does not return to his beloved because he embarked on his destructive voyage instead, Florio’s mission is aimed at *regaining* his true love. Boccaccio’s Florio is thus presented as a perfected version of Dante’s Ulysses.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Florio’s transformation into an epic hero on a voyage in pursuit of his love, over the course of Book 4 of the *Filocolo,* is symbolically accompanied by his decision to take on a new name – Filocolo – and to disguise his true identity so as to avoid unnecessary dangers. Florio, in other words, begins to dissimulate and exercise wit – again highly Ulyssean traits – in order to be reunited with his beloved. Whereas in the Duke’s first consolation, he compared Florio to Penelope, the passively waiting wife, now Florio clearly turns into a (corrected) version of Ulysses, a master of dissimulation, sailing the world in pursuit of his love.

This metamorphosis is also evident in Florio’s use of language. When he arrives in Naples and encounters the figure of Caleone – to whom we shall return – the latter asks him to reveal his identity. In response, Florio-Filocolo only briefly describes himself as a “povero pellegrino d’amore” (4.16.9) [“a poor pilgrim of love” (p. 243)] in search of his beloved. The author-narrator then refers to Florio’s brief autobiographical narrative as a “coperto parlare” (4.16.10) (“deceptive speech.”) A similar use of such “deceptive speech” recurs in Florio’s encounter with Sisife in the island of Sicily later in Book 4. When Sisife inquires after Florio’s identity, he again declares only that he is a “pellegrino” and an exile who left his father’s house in search of his *sister* Biancifiore (4.76.5-4.77.1). Whereas in the past Florio saw such meetings as opportunities to bewail his misfortune and seek compassion from his listeners, now his use of language is governed by strategic planning aimed at advancing his goals.

The transformation of Florio into a Ulyssean-like master of dissimulation, over the course of Book 4, is significantly accompanied by the gradual development of his self-reliance and self-control; now he becomes an epic hero in the manner of Virgil’s Aeneas as well. The growth of Florio’s self-control becomes especially apparent in his reaction to the final blow that fortune inflicts upon him. After Florio finally manages to find his beloved in a harem in Alexandria to which she was sold and the two finally consummate their love – a reunion that includes a makeshift wedding ceremony[[13]](#footnote-13) – the two are caught and sentenced to death by fire. The portrayal of the two lover’s distinct reactions to this final blow is significant: “Piangendo Biancifiore così col suo amante sospesa, Filocolo con forte animo serrò nel cuore il dolore, e col viso non mutato né bagnato d’alcuna sua lagrima sostenne il disonesto assalto della fortuna” (4.128.1) [“While Biancifiore was weeping at being suspended in this way with her lover, Filocolo determinedly locked up his grief in his heart; and with his face unchanged and unbathed with any tears of his own, he bore this unjust blow from… Fortune” (p. 344)]. In the beginning of Book 3, as we have noted, the Duke criticized Florio for his uncontrolled crying, claiming that such tears are not worthy of a manly soul. His markedly steadfast reaction to this last blow of fortune – strategically contrasted with Biancifiore’s weeping – underscores Florio’s transformation into a Stoic-like epic hero, who has attained full control over his emotions and tears. Such Stoic self-control was often associated in the Middle Ages with Virgil’s Aeneas. In *De civitate dei* 9.4, for example, Augustine presents Aeneas as an embodiment of the Stoic sage and alludes to the famous line from Virgil’s *Aeneid* 4: “Mens inmota manet, lacrimae uoluuntur inanes” [“His mind remains unmoved; tears roll down to no effect”].[[14]](#footnote-14) Following the fulfillment of his love-quest, Florio thus becomes an exemplum of manly self-control, comparable to the steadfast and heroic Aeneas.

Yet, while Florio is transformed into an epic hero in the manner of Aeneas, it is important to stress that – as in the case of Ulysses – Florio is also described from the outset as the anti-Aeneas, the one who avoided Aeneas’s grand error. Whereas Aeneas’s fulfillment of his destiny of founding Rome required him to give up on his desire for Dido and break the pledge of marriage he made to her, Florio’s own task is to reunite and remain with his lost love. The narrative of the *Filocolo* repeatedly underlines this discrepancy between Florio's and Aeneas's stories; already the opening lines of the *Filocolo* refer to Juno’s ongoing resentment towards the descendants of the Trojans due to Aeneas’s original sin – the breaking of his pledge to marry Dido. From the beginning, Florio is poised to correct Aeneas’s mistake. Similarly, in Book 4, when Florio finds himself in a terrible storm at sea (one which recalls the storm in the *Aeneid* 1.81-123), he addresses Aeolo in the following words: "apri gli occhi, e conosci ch'io non sono Enea, il gran nemico della santa Giunone: io sono un giovane che amo" (4.11.10) [“Open your eyes, and see that I am not Aeneas, the great enemy of holy Juno: I am a young man in love” (p. 237)]. Florio thus explicitly presents himself as the anti-Aeneas, the epic hero who loves.

The portrayal of Florio, in Book 4 – an ideal hero like Aeneas, and yet, a lover – demonstrates the uniqueness of Boccaccio’s vernacular epic, which weaves together Virgilian, Homeric, and Ovidian aspects to create an epic hero who combines love, wisdom, and self-control. The Ovidian undertones are explicit from the beginning of the story of Florio and Biancifiore, as the author-narrator describes how the two fell in love as young children while reading “il santo libro d’Ovidio” (1.45.6), the *Ars amatoria*. The connection between reading and *innamoramento* clearly alludes to the scene of reading in Dante’s *Inferno* 5, though Boccaccio also highlights the discrepancies between the two stories. In contrast to Paolo and Francesca, Florio and Biancifiore did not pursue anything beyond “honest embraces” over the open book. Both love and the Ovidian literature of erotic love are thus immune to Dante’s condemnation of such literature in Boccaccio’s *Filocolo*. Works that inflame amorous passion, according to Boccaccio, may lead to noble and chaste types of love.

Explicit allusions to Ovid return at another crucial point in the narrative, during Florio’s final hesitation before embarking upon his mission to save Biancifiore from the harem. After cleverly winning the trust of the castellan of the harem in which Biancifiore is being held by letting him win in Chess, Florio has to reveal to him his true intentions and ask for his aid. As he debates whether to do so, Florio recalls “un verso già da lui letto in Ovidio” (4.101.8) [“a verse he had once read in Ovid” (p. 325)], which states that “La fortuna aiuta gli audaci, e i timidi caccia via” (4.101.8) [“Fortune aids the bold, and refuses the timid” (p. 325)]. This line recalls *Ars amatoria* 1.608, in which Ovid advises the lover to be bold in his amorous advancements, stating: “audentem Forsque Venusque iuvat” [“Fate and Venus help the brave”].[[15]](#footnote-15) The recollection of this line secures Florio’s resolve to embark upon the final step towards saving his beloved (4.101.8). As in the scene when Florio and Biancifiore fall in love, Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* is again presented as the motivating force behind the pursuit of a noble love, further underscoring Boccaccio’s efforts to fashion an epic hero who brings together the Ovidian lover, the self-control of Aeneas, and the wisdom of Ulysses.

But this is not all. Florio’s declaration, “io non sono Enea,” in the scene of the storm not only establishes a contrast between Boccaccio’s hero and Virgil’s, but also creates a connection between Florio and Dante the Pilgrim of the *Commedia,* as Florio is presented as a devoted lover. Near the beginning of the *sacro poema*, Dante the Pilgrim declares“Io non Enea…sono” (*Inferno* 2.32), a declaration which reflected Dante’s initial doubts regarding his journey to the underworld. This link between Florio and Dante the Pilgrim is further developed in Book 4. After the famous discussion of love in the garden in Naples, Florio experiences a vision in which he sees a ship at sea carrying seven beautiful women. The attributes of the seven women clearly link them with the seven virtues – the first four representing the classical virtues and the latter three the theological ones of faith, hope, and charity. At first, Florio, currently a pagan, fails to recognize the last three virtues. Among the seven women, he also sees Biancifiore, but as he runs towards her, a sudden storm prevents him from reaching her. When the sea calms down again, he sees Biancifiore among the four cardinal virtues, and before him appears also a man “di grandissima eccllenza e autorità” (4.74.15) [“of great excellence and authority” (p. 302)], who teaches him about the nature of the three unknown women, which fills him with a desire to know them better. Then another beautiful woman appears, carrying a chalice of gold full of precious water. She washes him with the water, and when she finishes, he understands perfectly the nature of earthly and divine things, loving each according to its worth: “e meglio conoscere e le mundane cose e le divine che prima, e quelle amare ciascuna secondo il suo dovere” (4.74.17). At this point, he sees Biancifiore among the three women who represent the theological virtues.

Florio’s vision, as Victoria Kirkham has argued, allegorically represents the future unfolding of his story and portrays his love for Biancifiore as having important spiritual and salvific aspects.[[16]](#footnote-16) The entire vision, as Quaglio notes in his edition, is based on the final cantos of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which Dante encounters his beloved Beatrice, accompanied by her seven beautiful companions, who represent the virtues.[[17]](#footnote-17) Beatrice at first chides Dante for being led astray by the allure of earthly things following her death: “imagini di ben seguendo false, / che nulla promession rendono intera” (*Purgatorio* 30.131-132) [“he followed counterfeits of goodness, which / will never pay in full what they have promised”]. Her reproach leads Dante to confess his sins – “Le presenti cose / col falso lor piacer volser miei passi” (*Purgatorio* 31.34-35) [“Mere appearances / turned me aside with their false loveliness”] – and he expressed a deep sense of remorse. The scene culminates with his baptism in the waters of the Lethe by Matilda (*Purgatorio* 31.91-102), a purification which prepares the way for his entry into Paradise.

Just like Dante, Florio’s vision portrays his purification and salvation through the mediation of his beloved. On their way back home following their marriage, Florio and Biancifiore pass through Rome, the city of Biancifiore’s forefathers. There Florio enters a Church, sees for the first time a sculpture of the crucifix and is instructed on the elements of the Christian faith by a certain priest named Ilario, as was foreshadowed in his vision. Florio is then baptized by the Pope himself, which secures his eternal salvation. The happy ending of his story – and the fulfillment of the ultimate consolation – is thus completed through the attainment of both earthly and divine love. The arch of Florio’s development, thereby, echoes that of Dante’s over the course of his works; Florio turns from an elegiac mourner, similar to Dante in the *Vita nuova*, to an epic hero on the path to eternal salvation, like the hero of the *Commedia*.

While establishing a clear parallel between Florio and Dante the Pilgrim, we should note that Boccaccio also departs from this model in a crucial way. In contrast to Dante, Florio manages to enjoy both worlds – loving Biancifiore *both* carnally and spiritually – combining earthly love with salvation. The important lesson he learns, as expressed in his vision, is to love earthly and divine things according to their worth [“amare ciascuna secondo il suo dovere” (4.74.17)]. The figure of Florio, at the end of Book 4, thus comes to embody the earthly love of Ovid, the divine love of Dante, the self-control of Aeneas, and the wisdom and eloquence of Ulysses, all at the same time. Through the figure of Florio, Boccaccio thus fashions a new hybrid type of epic hero – the Stoic hero of the Christian epic of love.

The elaborate portrayal of Florio’s transformation into the hero of the epic of love, a transformation through which he overcame grief and obtained his beloved, demonstrates that to cope with sorrow one should not passively rely on the consolatory words of others and patiently hope for fortune to change; rather, one must take active control over one’s fortune and pursue boldly and astutely the object of one’s desire. Accordingly, the consolation offered by the *Filocolo* comes to consist not only of inviting readers to find comfort and hope in reading about and identifying with the tribulations of others and their ultimate bliss, but it also urges them to overcome heartache by imitating Florio’s heroic model. The consolation of literature, in other words, comes to inhere, in this respect, in its rhetorical powers, its ability to motivate virtuous and wise action.

**Florio as Consoler and the Disavowal of Love**

Both forms of consolation that we have encountered thus far in the *Filocolo* suggest that love is a benevolent force that promises just reward for those who are steadfast in pursuing it. Yet the *Filocolo*, and especially the final Book 5 of the work, also presents alternative examples of love and suffering, ones that indicate that there are instances in which the consolation for heartache resides in finding ways to cure love. This alternative position emerges from Boccaccio’s use of autobiographical rhetoric in Book 5 and is significantly advanced in the consolation provided by Florio himself, who, on his way back to his realm after winning back his beloved, becomes himself a consoler of others. In fact, he seems to console the author himself, who now looks to his own hero for advice, via his doubles in the story.

It is through Florio’s encounter with two characters who double for the author – Idalagos and Caleone – that we can refocus the question of the *Filocolo*’s view on consolation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Scholars have traditionally considered the autobiographical accounts of the two characters to be veiled autobiographies of Boccaccio himself, and they have used them to reconstruct his life-story. While these positivistic efforts have been widely (and justly) criticized – mainly due to the fact that it is simply impossible to reconstruct a coherent autobiography out of Boccaccio’s fiction[[19]](#footnote-19) – it is nonetheless clear that Idalagos’ and Caleone’s accounts do bear resemblance to details from Boccaccio’s life. Boccaccio then invites his reader to consider these characters as alter-egos of the author, embodying different potential outcomes for his own love story.

The figure of Caleone was first introduced in Book 4, when he encountered Florio as the latter passed through Naples during his journey in pursuit of his beloved. At their first meeting, Florio, still a melancholic “pellegrino d’amore” at this point in the story, congratulated Caleone for his apparent good fortune and peaceful condition. Caleone attributed this condition to the impact of the lovely lady, whose good graces had also impressed Florio earlier in the narrative. When Florio inquired about the identity of this lady, Caleone introduces the woman thus: “il suo nome è da noi qui chiamato Fiammetta, posto che la più parte delle genti il nome di Colei la chiamino, per cui quella piaga, che il prevaricamento della prima madre aperse, richiuse” (4.16.4) [“Here we call her Fiammetta, though most people call her by the name of her by whom that wound was closed that was opened by the misbehavior of our first mother” (p. 243)]. This statement closely mirrors the author-narrator’s description of his own beloved, Maria-Fiammetta, whom he describes in the introductory section of the work: "lei nomò del nome di colei che in sè contenne la redenzione del misero perdimento che avvenne per l'ardito gusto della prima madre" (1.1.15) [“he… gave her as a first name that of the woman who contained in herself the redemption of that sad loss which resulted from the hungry appetites of our first mother” (p. 3)]. The obvious parallels between the two descriptions invite the reader to identify the figure of Caleone with that of the author-narrator and consider him a version of the Boccaccio himself, who frequently alludes to Maria-Fiammetta as his beloved over the course of his works.

When Florio meets Caleone again on his way back from Alexandria in Book 5, their situations have flipped: while Florio’s fortune has turned out well, Caleone is bitterly grieving, stating that duplicitous fortune has turned against him; now all he wishes for is to die (5.30). Similar to earlier scenes of consolation between Florio and the Duke, now Florio asks Caleone for more details about his condition. Caleone describes himself as a shipwreck tossed about at sea – the exact same metaphor used by the author-narrator in the beginning of the work to describe the turbulent state of lovers: “io misero nocchiero rimaso in mezzo mare sono d’ogni parte dalle tempestose onde percosso, e i furiosi venti, a’ quali niuna marinesca arte mi dà rimedio, m’hanno le vele, che già furono liete, levate, e i timoni, e niuno argomento m’è a mia salute rimaso” (5.30.3) [“I the poor helmsman am left in mid-ocean, buffeted by stormy waves from every side, and the furious winds, which no maritime skill can help me escape, have taken my formerly happy sails, and my rudders, and there is no strategy left for my rescue” (p. 402)]. It is therefore clear that a similar agony of unrequited love affects Caleone as well.

 Hearing Caleone’s complaint, it is now Florio’s turn to be filled with compassion for the suffering of another [“di Caleon divenne pietoso” (5.31.1)] and to offer consolation. In Florio’s first consolation, he urges Caleone to reflect on how Florio himself was lost at sea not so long ago, stranded among the tempestuous waves and furious winds, until he finally found himself in a safe harbor: “quando subitamente in porto di salute mi vidi con tranquillo mare” (5.31.2). Through such reflection, according to Florio, Caleone should realize the vicissitudes of fortune and maintain hope for his future arrival in a similar calm port: “e spero con quella arte che io a salutevole porte pervenni, te delle pestilenziose onde trarrò quando ti piaccia” (5.31.3) [“and I hope, by that art which enabled me to come to safe harbor, that I shall draw you out of the pestilential waves, if it may please you” (p. 403)]. Florio’s initial attempt to console Caleone in Book 5, thus, closely mirrors the consolation that the author-narrator offered his readers in the introductory section of the work; he urges Caleone to find comfort and hope in the story of Florio’s vicissitudes and ultimate bliss. Caleone, in this respect, becomes not only the double of the author, but also of the work’s intended reader.

Yet, not long after Florio offers Caleone this first consolation, he provides him with another, very different consolation. On the way back to the Spanish realm, Caleone joins Florio’s entourage. When they arrive in Tuscany, Florio entrusts Caleone with the task of presiding over the formation of the future city of Certaldo; his task includes bringing together the two warring savage tribes who live in the region. This arduous mission, according to Florio, will serve Caleone as a means of curing his soul from the disease of love, which evidently continues to plague him. The hard work will bring reason and order not only to the tribes, but also to Caleone’s warring passions: “Se tu il vuoi prendere, la sollecitudine tua converrà essere molta, e in molte cose e diverse, la quale avendo, la vaga anima per forza abandonerà gli amorosi pensieri, e quelli abandonando, metterà in dimenticanza, e, dimenticati, potrai dire te essere dalla infermità che sostieni liberato, e fuori delle mani dell’amore della crudele donna” (5.47.4) [“If you are willing to take it, your diligence will have to be great, and in many different matters, and having it your vagrant spirit will necessarily abandon amorous thoughts, and having so will forget them; and once they are forgotten you can say that you are liberated from the infirmity that you suffer, and out of the hands of the love for the cruel lady” (p. 419)]. The formation of a well-ordered city, an image which was used since Plato’s *Republic* as a metaphor for the formation of a well-ordered soul, thus becomes in the *Filocolo* a literal means of self-formation and true consolation for the hardships of love – a way to forget the “crudele donna.”

This second consolation is significant, as Florio introduces an alternative type of healing; rather than urging Caleone to remain steadfast and active in pursuing his love, following his own example, Florio’s second consolation offers Caleone practical advice on how to curb his desire altogether and thus overcome grief. The safe harbor he had promised Caleone now turns out to be not the fulfillment of love, but its disavowal. Caleone, on his part, happily takes up this advice and it is successful. This type of remedy for love-gone-wrong recalls the cure for love offered by Ovid in the *Remedia amoris*, where he advises the miserable lover to engage in laborious activities that will distract the person and erase his love (*Remedia amoris* 169-212).[[20]](#footnote-20) Whereas in the beginning of the work, Florio fell in love while reading Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* – described as a “holy book” – now it is Ovid of the *Remedia amoris* who guides Florio the consoler. At the same time, the task of forming a city and its association with the disavowal of love brings to mind the example of Aeneas, the ultimate city-builder in the epic tradition. Whereas Florio is presented in the work as the anti-Aeneas, the epic hero who loves, Caleone in fact ends up adhering to the model of Aeneas.

Florio’s encounter with the author’s second character double, Idalagos, further challenges the author-narrator’s consolation as well as the heroic example of Florio. Idalagos remains steadfast in his love, but this only leads to his destruction. Florio’s encounter with Idalagos takes place at the beginning of Book 5, immediately before his second meeting with Caleone. While engaged in a hunt in a forest on the outskirts of Naples, Florio accidently hits a tree trunk with a dart. To Florio’s amazement, the tree begins to speak, bewailing his wound. Hearing the tree’s lament, the stupefied Florio asks him for pardon and invites the tree to tell him the story of his metamorphosis. According to Florio, sharing his story of misfortunes will raise the pity of his hearers and will lead them to pray to the gods on his behalf and thus perhaps provide him with some relief (5.7.1).

Idalagos’ story of misfortune, narrated as a pastoral, describes how he moved at a young age from Tuscany to a forest near Naples and there fell in love. However, deceived and betrayed by his cruel lady, who mercilessly abandoned him for another lover, Idalagos spent his time in vain endless supplications.[[21]](#footnote-21) Taking pity on his plight, Venus transformed Idalagos into a pine tree, though he continues even in his current state to lament his condition and hope in vain for the compassion of his lady. His perpetually green leaves demonstrate outwardly the abundant moisture that nourishes his roots – a metaphor for his tears and hope, which are still very much alive and will never dry up (5.8.44). The imagery of the talking tree trunk, of course, recalls Dante’s description of the souls of the suicides in Canto 13 of the *Inferno* – thus suggesting that Idalagos’s bitter fate may be associated with suicide.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Between the stories of Idalagos and Caleone, as Janet Smarr has pointed out, there are striking contrasts, [[23]](#footnote-23) and we should follow her lead by comparing the two reaction to failed love as well. Whereas Idalagos moves from the area of Certaldo to Naples and there falls in love, Caleone takes the opposite route, from Naples to Certaldo, and is there cured from love; whereas Caleone transforms the savage foresters of the area into civilized city-dwellers, Idalagos is himself transformed into a tree within a forest, symbolizing his loss of humanity and reason. We can add to Smarr’s comparison that the two characters stand for two completely opposite reactions to the hardship of love: Idalagos remains steadfast in his longing only to find his doom, but Caleone learns under Florio’s guidance to overcome his passion and attain freedom.

Boccaccio’s character doubles, who act out his autobiographical theatre at the beginning of Book 5, thus serve an important rhetorical role: they present alternative examples of love and consolation to that of his hero Florio. Whereas Florio’s story represents the earthly and celestial reward that awaits those who are steadfast and heroic in love, the examples of the author’s alter-egos show that sometimes one must choose between utter destruction and the complete disavowal of love. Apparently, Florio’s happiness is not always an option. Confronted with the model of Florio, on the one hand, and that of Boccaccio’s doubles on the other, the reader is now faced with the dilemma: which perspective of consolation to follow.

The split between the fortunes of Idalagos and Caleone is closely echoed in another encounter between two unfortunate lovers, a scene which again involves a scene of consolation. Recorded earlier in Book 3, a young stranger consoles the exiled knight Fileno, who was in love, as noted, with Biancifiore and ultimately fled Marmorina out of fear of Florio’s ire. The encounter between these two men takes place on a hill in Tuscany – the exact same spot on which Florio will later found the future city of Certaldo (the task entrusted to the grieving Caleone). Arriving at this desolate spot, Fileno begins, in loud sobs and cries, to lament his hopeless love and unwarranted exile. A young man who passes there by chance hears his lament, becomes filled with compassion, and, as expected, offers him consolation.

In his consolation, the *giovane*, who arrives from the area of Sulmona – significantly Ovid’s hometown[[24]](#footnote-24) – declares that he was once in an even worse situation after his beloved abandoned him for another; yet he managed to cure himself through the counsel of reason: “l’utile consiglio della ragione” (3.36.10). It is a similar rational consolation that he now offers Fileno, providing arguments through which he might learn to conquer both his grief and his love. One of these arguments involves the fickle nature of women – a notion that was raised earlier by Florio himself and then refuted by the Duke, as we have seen. As the *giovane* declares, given that women are by nature unstable, there is no point in lamenting the vicissitudes of their love; one cannot alter nature. Continuing with his reasoning, the young man then tells Fileno that he should also not cry about his exile, mentioning the Cynic and Stoic argument that for the virtuous man all the world is one city: “A’ virtuosi ogni paese è il loro” (3.36.15) [“For virtuous people every land is home” (p. 190)].

Hearing these consolatory admonitions, Fileno commends the young man for the greatness of his soul and the “pazienza” with which he bore his torments; yet he declares that overcoming his tears is beyond his power. He asks the *giovane* to leave him to his laments, alluding to Dante’s lament for Beatrice’s death in the third canzone of the *Vita nuova*: “lasciarmi con continue lagrime sfogare il mio dolore” (3.36.17) [“[leave] me to give vent to my grief with continual tears” (p. 191)].[[25]](#footnote-25) Not long afterwards, Fileno is transformed into a fountain, literally embodying his tears. The encounter between the mournful elegiac lover and the wise consoler, thus, ends with the futility of philosophical consolation, showing the inability of rational arguments to eradicate the passions of love and grief – a point that will be central, as we shall see in the following chapters, to Boccaccio's subsequent works such as the *Filostrato* and the *Elegia*.

Similar to the pair of authorial doubles Idalagos and Caleone, Fileno and the *giovane* represent two opposing reactions to the vicissitudes of love: whereas Fileno and Idalagos lose their humanity as they give themselves over to tears and laments, as they seek a modicum of solace through elegiac lamentations, the *giovane* and Caleone found ways to overcome their love altogether. In both pairs, the consolation of hope and heroic action embodied in the story of Florio is not an option; there is no prospect for future happiness in love for these four young lovers. Among all the unfortunate lovers depicted in the *Filocolo*,Florio is the *only* one whose love-story ends in bono. Instead of the norm, his amorous triumph emerges as unique – a fact that further problematizes the consolation of hope that emerges from Florio’s character, thereby intensifying the message that the wise solution to amorous torments may reside in an Ovidian *remedia amoris*.

The narrative thread in the *Filocolo* that suggests that true solace resides in the disavowal of love is eloquently supported by Fiammetta’s speech during the discussion of love in Book 4. This discussion takes place in a garden in Naples under the auspices of Fiammetta, and it consists of thirteen questions addressed to her, all dealing with the nature of love. The seventh – and middle – question is raised by Caleone, who inquires whether loving is good or bad for the lover and should be pursued or avoided: “io disidero di sapere se a ciascuno uomo, a bene essere di sè medesimo, si dee innamorare o no” (4.43.16) [“I desire to know if every man, for his own well-being, ought to fall in love or not” (p. 275)]. In her response, Fiammetta differentiates between three types of love: “amore onesto,” the love of God for his creatures and vice-versa; “amore per diletto,” love for pleasure, which is the kind of carnal human love all of her listeners are subjected to; and “amore per utilità,” a deceitful kind of love, which seeks gain and which should really be called hatred in her view. Specifying that it is about the second type of love that Caleone is inquiring, Fiammetta declares that it should be utterly avoided by all those who wish to live virtuously and happily. *Amor*, Fiammetta asserts, is inevitably a source of disgrace, vice, endless worry, and complete loss of freedom: “egli è d’onore privatore, adducitore d’affanni, destatore di vizii, copioso donator di vane sollecitudini, indegno occupatore dell’altrui libertà, più ch’altra cosa da tenere cara” (4.44.8) [“it takes away honor, brings troubles, awakens vices, abundantly provides vain worries, and unjustly steals the liberty of the other person, which ought to be treasured more than anything else” (p. 276)].

Unwilling to accept Fiammetta’s harsh verdict, Caleone objects to her judgment and goes on to defend the good effects of *Amor*, describing love as a source of virtue, civility, and goodness: “egli d’ogni superbia spoglia il cuore e d’ogni ferocità” (4.45.3) [“it strips the heart of all pride and all ferocity” (p. 276)]. To support his position, Caleone lists several examples: love was able to tame bellicose Mars; it lead Medea to dedicate her arts and honor to Jason; love encouraged Paris and Menelaus to “alte cose” (4.45.4) and it was able quiet the rage of Achilles. It is love, he adds, that brought about the “santi versi” of Ovid and Virgil and allowed Orpheus to move wild beasts and the infernal furies with his sweet lyre.

Fiammetta, however, rejects his arguments one by one. She begins her elaborate refutation with a description of love as an irrational appetite – “inrazionabile volontà” (4.46.3) – and then refutes the awkward collection of exempla listed by Caleone: Mars was not made humble by love, as Caleone claimed, but rather he became an adulterer; Medea’s love did not allow her to perform benevolent acts, but it brought about her “vile fine” (4.46.6); Paris was not moved by love to “high undertakings” but to rash action that caused utter destruction for both himself and his city. While Fiammetta is willing to grant that love makes great poets, animating their lyre with “tanta dolcezza…e tante lusinghe” (4.46.11) [“such sweetness and such supplication” (p. 279; translation modified)], she also describes such love poetry, and its inherent element of supplication (“lusingare”), as shameful: “ma di vile uomo è atto il lusingare!” (4.46.11) [“but supplication is the act of a vile man!” (p. 279)].

In the conclusion of her speech, Fiammetta reasserts that love is inevitably a source of shame, suffering, sorrow, and endless lamentation (4.46.19). It would be much better for her and the other interlocutors, she adds, to do without it. However, given that they are already caught in its net, they have no choice but to follow the ways of love, until "quella luce, la quale trasse Enea de' tenebrosi passi, fuggendo i pericolosi incendii, apparisca a noi, e tirici a' suoi piaceri" (4.46.20) [“that light, which led Aeneas from the dark paths, as he fled the perilous flames, may appear to us and lead us to its joys” (p. 280)].

This last line refers to a passage from Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, in which Venus appears before her mortal son Aeneas amid the burning ruins of Troy; she is described as "pura per noctem in luce refulsit" (2.590) ["pure light gleaming through the night"].[[26]](#footnote-26) This bright light ultimately leads Aeneas out of the wrecked city. According to both Robert Hollander and Luigi Surdich, this allusion to Venus of the *Aeneid* highlights a distinction Fiammetta establishes between the "good" Venus, the goddess of chaste love and marriage, and the “evil” Venus of lustful carnal love.[[27]](#footnote-27) For Hollander and Surdich, the ideal of good love established by Fiammetta is embodied in the love of Florio and Biancifiore.[[28]](#footnote-28) This reading limit’s Fiammetta’s critique of love only to lust, giving sanction to carnal love in the context of marriage.

What this interpretation overlooks, however, is that there is real tension between Fiammetta’s view of love and the model of love embodied by Florio. Whereas Florio represents, as we have seen, the value of remaining steadfast in love at all costs and the possibility of bringing together earthly and divine love, Fiammetta insists that it would be better to do without earthly love altogether, even in marriage. Her explicit mention of Aeneas at the close of her speech takes us back to the other allusions to Aeneas throughout the work. Several times the Virgilian hero is presented as the opposite of Florio, the hero who loves, in contrast to the hero who conquers love, as we noted. In Fiammetta’s speech, as a result, it is the model of Aeneas – one who overcomes his earthly love – which is presented as the ideal.[[29]](#footnote-29) Yet at the same time – and this is a crucial point – Fiammetta’s assertion that they must wait for “quella luce” to save them from the submission to love suggests that in her view one does not have the power to disavow love by oneself, but needs outside miraculous assistance, such as that embodied by Venus in the *Aeneid*.

The debate between Caleone and Fiammetta in Book 4, which takes place at the mid-point of the discussion of love, has important implications for the consolatory message that emerges from the work as a whole. While Caleone’s opinion reinforces the author-narrator’s position that love is a benevolent power to which the reader should adhere at all costs, Fiammetta’s speech intensifies the alternative, that love is an inevitable source of heartache and sorrow, one that is best left behind. It is ironic or telling, that Caleone will turn out miserable due to unrequited love later in Book 5, and, at Florio’s urging, will adopt the model of Aeneas, renouncing his love.

In sum, the lengthy, complex, multifaceted – even self-contradictory – narrative of the *Filocolo* introduces and contrasts at least three main ways in which the reader can find consolation within the work: in his introductory statements, the author-narrator invites his (male) readers to obtain an “affective” type of consolation, suggesting that reading about the hardships of his protagonists and the ultimate happy ending of their stories will provide his readers with emotional relief. This invitation to find consolation in reading about the fates of others is however challenged by two exemplary models central to the work: the first is that of Florio, who learns to renounce his futile reliance upon the consolatory words of others, takes active control over his destiny, and ultimately wins both earthly and divine love. The model of heroic action embodied in the figure of Florio is however tested by a contrasting exemplary model – presented through the figures of the author-double Caleone and the mysterious *giovane* – who realize the doomed nature of their love and manage to engage in a successful *remedia amoris*. This model of disavowal, however, is in itself questioned by Idalagos and Fileno, who declare that giving up on love is simply beyond their powers. All that they can do is continue to hope and to weep, finding some respite in elegiac lamentations – an affective mode of consolation that recalls, again, the perspective of the author-narrator offers readers in the beginning of the work.

The *Filocolo*’s attitude towards the proper consolation for the hardships of love is thus left ultimately open-ended, as it speaks to the reader in diverse consolatory voices. This multiplicity, I would argue, indicates that for Boccaccio there is no one universal solution to amorous heartaches: different circumstances require diverse remedies and necessitate the consoler (and the one seeking solace) to be sensitive to the sufferer’s particular situation. Whereas Florio benefitted from the love and loyalty of Biancifiore, Caleone apparently had no prospects for happiness in love; for Caleone, the arduous *remedia amoris* was the preferable path. At the same time, while Caleone or the *giovane* were able to renounce their love, Idalagos and Fileno suggest that there are instances in which such disavowal is simply beyond the sufferer’s capacity, and, hence, all they can do is weep.

The diversity of characters’ experiences forces the reader to question universal philosophical tenants. Concerning universal assertions regarding the nature of women, as we noted, various references to the negative tradition of *natura delle femine*, in the work, are refuted by the example of Biancifioreand in the words of the Duke. And, in the case of consolation for love, the *Filocolo* rejects the possibility of catch-all universal solutions, parting from the universalist attitude to consolation presented in the works of Boethius and Dante.

Confronted with the *Filocolo*’s oscillations between these different modes of consolation and examples of confrontations with hardship, the reader seeking solace, ultimately, must decide how to use the work as a source of consolation – whether to actively pursue the beloved, to engage in a *remedia amoris* or simply to identify and weep along with the suffering protagonists. Ideally, the very act of reading a complex work such as the *Filocolo* will assist the reader in this task, making him or her more sensitive to context and its importance for such deliberations and, therefore, better equipped to interpret his or her own situation. In the Introduction, I referred to the claims of scholars such as Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Landy concerning the ethical value of literature. Within the “formative” features of literature, they argue, inheres the capacity to heighten the reader’s awareness of the particular and the concrete, thereby assisting him or her to navigate the complexities of life. Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* – with its constant oscillations between forms of consolation and examples of characters confronting hardship – embodies precisely this notion: the diverse circumstances of the characters alert the reader to the importance of context and the reading process itself sharpens his or her capacity to read one’s own situation. The “consolation of literature” within the *Filocolo,* thus, comes to inhere not only in its exemplary or affective content, but also in its polyphonic and complex *form*. Form and content are pivotal for assisting the reader to confront the vicissitudes of love.

The three forms of consolation that are laid out in the *Filocolo* – shared weeping, heroic and wise confrontation with hardship, and the disavowal of love – will continue to dominate Boccaccio’s works till the end of his life. In the following chapter, we will turn to explore the open-ended interplay between these forms in the closely related *Filostrato*.

1. The work was written probably between 1336-1338. See Andrea Mazzucchi, "Filocolo," in *Boccaccio autore e copista*, eds. Teresa De Robertis et al. (Florence: Mandragora, 2013), 67-74, 67. See also Quaglio’s Introduction to his edition in Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 1967), 47. All quotations from the *Filocolo* are taken from this edition. Translations are from Boccaccio, *Il Filocolo*, trans. Donald Cheney, with the collaboration of Thomas G. Bergin (New York: Garland, 1985), unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The relationship between the *Filocolo* and Boethius’ *Consolatio* has been discussed in Steven Grossvogel, *Ambiguity and Allusion in Boccaccio’s* Filocolo (Florence: Olschki, 1992), 33-56. His emphasis, however, is on Boccaccio’s dialogue with the Boethian philosophical themes of fate and fortune, not on consolation per se. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The centrality of consolation to the *Filocolo* is also evident from a comparison of the work to earlier versions of the story of Florio and Biancifiore. The earlier French versions of the tale, dating back to the thirteenth century, include some scenes of *planctus* (for example, lines 717-792 of the “aristocratic” version), yet Boccaccio expands them considerably and adds the accompanying extended consolations. Boccaccio also adds to the existing versions of the tale the opening consolatory address to the readers and the entire Book 5, in which Florio himself becomes a consoler. All these additions attest to Boccaccio’s preoccupation with the theme of consolation in the work, exploiting the existing story for its consolatory possibilities. The fourteenth century Italian version, *Il cantare di Fiorio e Biancifiore*, which is probably based on the *Filocolo*, also entails some brief scenes of lamentation (such as those of Biancifiore in paragraphs 35 and 73) and consolation (paragraph 82). For the French “aristocratic” version, see *Le conte de Floire et Blancheflor*, ed. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Paris: Champion, 1983). For the Italian “cantare,” see *Il cantare di Fiorio e Biancifiore*, ed. Vincenzo Crescini, 2 vols. (Bologna: Romagnoli-Dall’acqua, 1899). On the various medieval versions of the tale and the manuscript tradition, see Patricia E. Grieve, *Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The belief that having companions in grief will provide comfort was commonly held in Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages. The theme appears, for example, in Abelard’s opening address of his *Historia calamitatum*, in which he invites his unnamed friend to find solace for his troubles by reading about Abelard’s dreadful calamities: “Sepe humanos affectus aut provocant aut mittigant amplius exempla quam verba. Unde post nonnullam sermonis ad presentem habiti consolationem, de ipsis calamitatum mearum experimentis consolatoriam ad absentem scribere decrevi, ut in comparatione mearum tuas aut nullas aut modicas temptationes recognoscas et tolerabilius feras” [“There are times when example is better than precept for stirring or soothing human passions; and so I propose to follow up the words of consolation I gave you in person with the history of my own misfortunes, hoping thereby to give you comfort in absence. In comparison with my trials you will see that your own are nothing, or only slight, and will find them easier to bear.”] Edition: Abelard, *Historia calamitatum*, ed. J. Monfrin (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 63. Translation: *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1974), 57. A similar consolatory notion is also introduced at the end of Thomas' version of the romance of Tristan and Iseult. Addressing lovers, the narrator states: "Aveir em poissent grant confort, / Encuntre change, encontre tort, / Encuntre paine, encuntre dolur, / Encuntre tuiz engins d'amur!" (836-839). Thomas, *Les fragments du Roman de Tristan*, ed. Bartina H. Wind (Geneve: Droz, 1960), 163. See also Chiecchi’s comments to his edition of Boccaccio’s *Consolatoria* in Boccaccio, “Consolatoria a Pino de’ Rossi,” ed. Giuseppe Chiecchi, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 5 pt. 2 (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 615-687, at 667n41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is significant that in the *Filocolo*, unlike in the later *Decameron*, Boccaccio addresses this consolatory message to his male readers. His female readers, as the *Filocolo*’s author-narrator states, should learn from the story about the need to remain loyal to one’s lover: “udendoli, potrete sapere quanto ad Amore sia in piacere il fare un giovane solo signore della sua mente” (1.2.4) [“Hearing them, you will be able to know how much it pleases Love to make a single youth the master of one’s spirit” (p. 5)]. Such loyalty, the author-narrator declares, will secure their happiness in love, leading them to the “disiato fine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the unfavorable assessments of the work, see, for example, Salvatore Battaglia, *La coscienza letteraria del medioevo* (Napoli: Liguori, 1965), 645-657. The most elaborate attempt to refute such assessments and assert the work’s overall coherence and unified purpose is provided by Victoria Kirkham in her *Fabulous Vernacular: Boccaccio’s Filocolo and the Art of Medieval Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). For Kirkham, the *Filocolo* is designed to function as a type of a Christian literary “summa” (p. 12). Roberta Morosini, on her part, has argued that Boccaccio’s predilection for repetition in the work serves as an important literary strategy, which contributes to the work’s overall coherence and to the development of the character of Florio. See Morosini, *“Per difetto rintegrare”: Una lettura del Filocolo di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Ravenna: Longo, 2004), esp. 26-28. Luigi Surdich has pointed to Boccaccio’s attempt to create in the *Filocolo* a literary work which is at once learned and popular as a possible source of the apparent contradictions that govern it. See Luigi Surdich, *Boccaccio* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2008), 21-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Sed medicinae, inquit, tempus est quam querelae” (Book 1, prose 2.1) [“[T]his is no time for complaints, but for healing” (p. 5)]. Boethius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, ed. James J. O’Donnell, 2 vols. (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr College, 1984); translation: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dante, *La “Commedia” secondo l’antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1975). Translation: Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, 3 vols. (New York: Bantam, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the two sides of Dante’s depiction of Ulysses, a noble seeker of virtue and knowledge on the one hand and a falsifier and transgressor on the other, see the concise and illuminating account of Teodolinda Barolini in the entry “Ulysses,” in *The* *Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000), 842-846. Barolini offers also a useful summary of the extensive scholarship on the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Boccaccio, “Amorosa visione,” ed. Vittore Branca, in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 3 (Milan: Mondadori, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Barolini, “Ulysses,” in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, 845. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, as we shall see in Chapter 6, Boccaccio will praise Ulysses’ wanderings in unequivocal terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For Robert Hollander, this scene highlights the value the work places on marriage and the devout loyalty to one lover alone – what he describes as the “good Venus.” Hollander, *Boccaccio’s Two Venuses*, 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The entire passage reads as follows: “Ita mens ubi fixa est ista sententia nullas perturbationes, etiamsi accidunt inferioribus animi partibus, in se contra rationem praeualere permittit; quin immo eis ipsa dominatur eisque non consentiendo et potius resistendo regnum uirtutis exercet. Talem describit etiam Vergilius Aenean, ubi ait: Mens inmota manet, lacrimae uoluuntur inanes” (9.4.11) [“So the mind in which this conviction is firmly implanted does not allow any disturbances to prevail over reason in it, even though they impinge on the less worthy parts of the soul. On the contrary, the mind exercises mastery over them, it ensures the reign of virtue. Virgil speaks of Aeneas in these words as having a mind like that: His mind remains unmoved; tears roll down to no effect” (translation slightly modified)]. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2005-2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ovid, *The Art of Love, and Other Poems*, trans. J. H. Mozley, rev. by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular*, 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Quaglio, 887n3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The parallels between Florio and other figures of young lovers in the work – primarily Caleone – are mentioned by Francesco Bruni in *Boccaccio: L’invenzione della letteratura mezzana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990), 180-182. Bruni, however, does not discuss the relationship between these parallels and Boccaccio’s interest in consolation. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a poignant and concise critique of this positivistic tradition, see Vittore Branca, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Profilo biografico* (Florence: Sansoni, 1977), 6-8. See also Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ovid, “Remedia amoris,” in *The Art of Love, and Other Poems*, trans. Mozley, rev. by Goold, 178-233. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Idalagos’s beloved is named Alleriam – literally the opposite of Maria – and is presented as the ultimate embodiment of pride and inhumanity (5.24). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See also Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Quaglio, 915n5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Smarr, *Boccaccio and Fiammetta*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Quaglio, 839n9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the following lines from Dante’s *Li occhi dolenti*, quoted also in the Introduction: “Ora, s’i’ voglio sfogar lo dolore, / che a poco a poco a la morte mi mena / convenemi parlar traendo guai” (*Vita nuova* 31.8.4-6) [“And now, if I should want to vent that grief, / which gradually leads me to my death, / I must express myself in anguished words.”] [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1-6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. by G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Quaglio, 875-876n35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses*, 36-37, Surdich, *Boccaccio*, 18-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hollander, *Boccaccio’s Two Venuses*, 37-38, Surdich, *Boccaccio*, 18-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. It is significant that in his direct interpretation of the story of Dido and Aeneas in the *Genealogia deorum*, Boccaccio specifically presents Aeneas as an exemplum of the disavowal of carnal love: “Virgilius… sic intendit pro Dydone concupiscibilem et attractivam potentiam, oportunitatibus omnibus armatam. Eneam autem pro quocunque ad lubricum apto et demum capto. Tandem ostenso, quo trahamur in scelus ludibrio, qua via in virtutem revehamur, ostendit, inducens Mercurium, deorum interpretem, Eneam ab illecebra increpantem atque ad gloriosa exhortantem" (*Genealogia deorum*, 14.13.16) [“Virgil…represents in Dido the attracting power of the passion of love, prepared for every opportunity, and in Aeneas one who is readily disposed in that way and at length overcome. But after showing the enticements of lust, he points the way of return to virtue by bringing in Mercury, messenger of the gods, to rebuke Aeneas, and call him back from such indulgence to deeds of glory" (p. 68)]. Edition: Giovanni Boccaccio, “Genealogia deorum gentilium,” ed. Vittorio Zaccaria, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, vols. 7-8 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998). Translation: *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio’s Genealogia deorum gentilium*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956). According to both Quaglio and Kirkham, Fiammetta points in her concluding statement to the need to replace the *amore per diletto* with a Dantean-like *amore onesto*. See Quaglio’s comments in Boccaccio, “Filocolo,” ed. Quaglio, 875-876n35, and Kirkham, *Fabulous Vernacular*, 191-199. This view, however – like Hollander’s – ignores the explicit tension between Fiammetta’s speech and the model of love embodied by Florio. For a recent reevaluation of Boccaccio’s view of earthly love, see David Lummus, “Boccaccio’s Three Venuses: On the Convergence of Celestial and Transgressive Love in the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*,” *Medievalia et humanistica* 37 (2011): 65-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)