

The Exceptional Jewess and the Foolish Jews

Karina Feliciano Attar
Assistant Professor of Italian
Department of European Languages and Literatures
Queens College, CUNY

My paper is drawn from work-in-progress, which explores how Jews and Muslims are represented in 15th and 16th century Italian novellas, and considers the contemporary anxieties about religious, racial, sexual, and/or social identity reflected in these depictions. I became attracted to this material because I love reading novellas, but I'm struck by the cultural fault lines that run through them, the ways in which different traditions - courtly love and making fun of Jews, for example, or motifs drawn from the epic tradition and grotesque representations of Moorish slaves, bump into each other uncomfortably. My research into this area became a way of looking more deeply into these narrative problems, and I also became interested in why they have gone largely unnoticed by critics for so long, although that's not the immediate subject of my talk.

In 1555, Pietro Fortini, a Siennese real estate investor, vicar, and paper industry entrepreneur began composing his two-part collection of novellas *Le giornate delle Novelle de' Novizi* and *Le piacevoli e amoroze notti de' novizi* (initiate). The collection is closely modeled on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and all the narratives elaborate on characteristic motifs of the genre, such as adultery, anti-clericalism, and the 'beffa,' or practical joke. Two of the tales, both set in Bologna, recount sexual and romantic encounters between a Christian youth and a Jewess, and offer significant insights into the ways in which Christian writers perceived Jewish identity. Today I will talk about the

novella entitled “el nuovo messia” The New Messiah, but I will be happy to tell you about the other narrative if you have questions later. In the handout you will find all the excerpts I will cite, plus a few more that I will skip over in the interests of time.

Jews, especially money-lenders, had been attracted to Bologna in large numbers since at least the mid-fourteenth century for its geographical position, its thriving economic life, and the protection afforded them by the city’s rulers, though documented Jewish communities date back to the fourth century. According to a 1387 census, there were 35 Jewish families in Bologna in that year, approximately 200 individuals. In 1555, when Fortini began writing his collection, Bologna included eleven synagogues, a significant Jewish silk weaver’s guild, and several Jewish loan banks. The Jewish community of Bologna flourished in relative peace until 1555, when Pope Paul the Fourth’s bull, *Cum nimis absurdum*, marked a radical reversal of the traditional papal policy towards the Jews. The bull reproduced several ancient laws ordering Jews to wear distinguishing clothing, and prohibiting them from marrying Christians, having Christian servants, or socializing with them. The 1555 bull added that Jews should live separately from Christians and should not own any real estate. Within six months, all Jewish real estate in the Papal States had been sold for one fifth of its value. The Rome ghetto was erected the same year, the Bologna one in May 1556, and in 1569 Pope Pius the Fifth’s bull, *Hebraorum Gens*, expelled all Jews from the Papal States except for Rome and Ancona. 800 Jews left Bologna - most went to Ferrara and Mantua, taking with them the bones of their dead to bury them in the then more welcoming Este lands. They were allowed back into Bologna in 1586, but were expelled again in 1593, and did not return until the end of the eighteenth century. Fortini died in 1562, leaving his collection

unfinished, seven years before the Jews were expelled from Bologna, but six years after Paul the Fourth's bull established the Bologna ghetto. While Fortini is no social historian, his narratives of Christian-Jewish relations strongly suggest that he was aware of the bull, of the institution of the ghetto, and that he had some knowledge, albeit not always accurate, of Jewish life and traditions.

The tale entitled *The New Messiah* is initially offered, in the **first** passage on your handout, as a case of Jewish foolishness (*una sciocheza ebraica*), a simple madness (*una semplice follia*) that will give its listeners much to laugh about. At first, however, the individual Jewish protagonists of the tale are portrayed in very positive terms. The parents of the Jewish heroine, Maestro Raffaello and his wife, are described as poor, but very good, wise, pious, and saintly people. Their learned and beautiful young daughter, who remains nameless throughout the narrative, is such a good student that in a few days she learns the first book of the Psalms, which, according to Fortini, begins, in your **second** passage: "Tora ziva lami mosce morasa che lad iacou" (170). The line is in fact drawn from Deuteronomy ch.33, v.4, not the Psalms, and can be roughly translated as: 'the Torah that Moses commanded us is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.' Fortini's rendition is only partially correct although the inaccuracies seem simply to be the result of erroneous transliteration into an Italianized Hebrew, rather than an explicit intent to portray the Hebrew tongue as gibberish, as at least one other sixteenth century author did.

Fortini points out that the equal education of boys and girls was commonplace in Jewish homes. Although we know that literacy rates were higher among Jewish women than Christian ones, it would have been highly unusual for a sixteenth century Jewish girl

from a poor family to receive a thorough education in the scriptures. The depiction of this learned Jewess may serve more to set her up as a fitting match for the Christian youth she is about to meet, rather than as a comment on the actual education of Jewish women.

The Christian hero, Alfonzo, is described as equal in beauty, virtue, and magnanimity to the Jewess. However, while she is poor, he is rich and noble, and his magnificent house towers above her modest home, lording over it, as we can see in passage **three**. One day, when the Jewess is sewing in her yard, Alfonzo stands at one of his windows, playing the lute, reciting madrigals, and singing moving arias. The young Jewess is attracted by his music precisely because it does not come from her own cultural traditions. His rhymes are described, in passage **four**, as more pleasing to her than “any of those sing-songs of theirs of those *nenazeb* that were recited in her home every day when they sing at the dinner table, when they say a certain song that begins: *Lamenazech bighinot mismor, sur eloim heloeno veir pannau*, and so follows this sing-song of theirs; or shall we say when they sing for amusement, when they say another song that begins: *Ascir gambani*; and similar songs that even they do not know what they are saying.”

Fortini’s transliteration is once again only partially accurate. The principal phrase translates as “For the choirmaster of the Psalm. May G-d favor us and bless us,” a stock phrase used at the beginning of several religious songs. Fortini also uses the word *nenazeb* to define dirges. While it is not an identifiable Jewish word, it is similar in form to some Hebrew verbs in the future tense, but could also recall the Italian word for dirges, *nenie*. As for *ascir gambani*, ‘*ascir*’ is a conjunction meaning ‘that,’ ‘which,’ or ‘who,’ while ‘*gambani*’ seems to be an invented word. The final assertion that even the Jews do

not know what they are saying once again signals Fortini's lack of knowledge of Hebrew culture and language, but here also reads like a dig at Jewish identity.

When Alfonzo drops a handkerchief filled with coins from his balcony, the Jewess is initially compelled to keep these gifts by a “certain womanly greed.” Her greed is not associated with her Jewishness, as we might expect from the common stereotype, but is credited to her identity as a woman, reflecting the undercurrent of misogyny at play in Fortini's society. Following the rules of the courtly love tradition, where the beloved should reject the lover's advances before succumbing, the Jewess initially refuses his gifts and entreaties. However, her refusal is framed in an entirely unexpected way. She recalls, in the **fifth** passage, a ‘nice Jewish saying,’ *un bel detto ebraico*, and tells the youth: ‘Don’t you know that it is not well for Jews to be with Christians?’ He replies: ‘so you avoid me because I am Christian?’ No, she says, but you would flee from me because I am Jewish.’ Finally she agrees to meet him, ostensibly in order to return his gifts, but only as long, she repeats, in number six, as he is not repulsed because she is Jewish.

Alfonso, on the other hand, does not explicitly respond to her reservations about social prohibitions. From his point of view, the only obstacle to their love is a wall that separates their homes. The astute Jewess, however, remembers a secret opening and instigates their first sexual encounter. Their inter-religious encounter is prompted by Alfonzo’s performance of what are, to the Jewess, exotic rhymes, it proceeds through a dialogue about Jewish and Christian proscriptions against inter-religious relations, notes that Christians avoid Jews because they find them repulsive, and ends with the protagonists’ complete violation of all prohibitions. If Fortini is here commenting on the contemporary climate following Paul the Fourth’s bull, and if as I suggest the wall

between their homes represents the ghetto wall, it is curious that the Jewess is the mouthpiece for both Jewish and Christian anxieties about inter-religious contact.

The Jewess soon becomes pregnant. Confronted by her parents, the wise girl tells them that one day she was visited by a beautiful, young, angel-like man, dressed in white. Although her story clearly recalls the annunciation, Fortini claims that it derives from the Old Testament. Her parents are easily fooled into believing their daughter has conceived the new Messiah. When her father Raffaello communicates the news to the rest of the Bolognese Jewish community, they gather, in number **seven**, in their “synagogue or shall we say mosque” to give thanks. The confusion between the Jewish and Muslim places of worship may reflect Fortini's fuzzy knowledge of each culture and religion, but it may also reflect a desire to associate Jewish and Muslim identities with each other, as the two enemy faiths of Christianity.

The Jews of Bologna then travel across Italy to spread the good tidings to all their coreligionists. While the Jews are said to see themselves as learned and esteemed, according to the narrator they are mad, foolish, wicked, and so drunk with excitement that they think they can hear a voice announcing the new Messiah's arrival. The Jews are heard shouting, in number **eight**: “What will the Christians do? They won't overcome us as they have done until now.” They are portrayed, in passages **eight and nine**, as believing they have already ‘made themselves Lords and Princes of all cities, in their vain and silly thoughts,’ and as finally able to send the Christians into perdition. The story should be read within the context of the messianic fervor that gripped many European Jewish communities during the sixteenth century. Fortini's choice of language also echoes Paul the Fourth's bull, which argued that Jews should be put in their place and

segregated from Christian society because they commonly treated Christians with scorn and ingratitude, attempting to dominate the very people whose servants they should be.

When the Jews finally gather for the birth, however, they are shocked to discover that their new Messiah is a girl! Dumbfounded and half dead, the Jews are publicly scorned and ridiculed by the Christian population. When Raffaello forces his daughter to confess her sin, Alfonzo rescues his lover and baby from her family, baptizes his daughter and raises her as though she were legitimate, instilling in her Christian and noble values. The Jewess then realizes that she should not live 'in sin' with her lover, and decides to convert to Christianity and enter a nunnery. Two motivations are given for her decision to convert: the fact that she was spurred to it by God and the fact that she had grown to admire the Christian way of life more than the Jewish one. We know she had preferred Alfonzo's rhymes to the religious songs she heard at home. He was also depicted as a good neighbor, rich, handsome, and a gentleman. Presumably, she also enjoyed having sex with him, though the text does not explicitly say so. Fortini's other tale of Jewish-Christian relations, which portrays Christian men as more satisfying to both Christian and Jewish women than circumcised Jewish men, offers a precedent for this. In their final commentary to the story of the new messiah, the frame characters commend the Jewess for her uncommon intelligence and quick wit, for her initial refusal to accept her lover's gifts, and for her great and splendid magnanimity.

In this tale several genres collide: the sexual escapade, the theme of conversion, the motif of the practical joke, courtly love, religious difference. The novella is premised as a case of Jewish foolishness, but the overwhelming emphasis on the inter-religious romance calls into question Fortini's intent. Which, in the end, is his major goal: to

ridicule the Jews? To comment negatively or positively (?) on the institution of the Bologna ghetto? To write a love story in which a Jewess turns out to be the paragon of Christian virtue? The birth of a baby girl instead of a 'new messiah,' and the concluding double baptism of mother and child serve to assert the truth of Christianity above the 'blind' Jewish faith. At the same time, can we read Fortini's positive depiction of the Jewess and of her family's piety and learning as intended to redeem Jewish identity in general, or simply as a necessary preamble to her ultimate conversion? Fortini's tale offers us an important and unique insight into sixteenth century notions of Jewish identity and anxieties about Christian-Jewish contact. I am very interested in your sense of which way the story breaks, of what Fortini's intentions may have been, and hope to get some helpful feedback on this work in progress during our Q&A session. Thank you.