

# **In the Company of the Courtesan Study Guide**

**In the Company of the Courtesan by Sarah Dunant**

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# Plot Summary

"In the Company of the Courtesan" is the story of Fiammetta Bianchini, a 16th-century Roman courtesan, told through the eyes of her loyal companion, the dwarf Bucino. The novel describes the ups-and-downs of Fiammetta and Bucino's fortunes as they leave Rome for Venice and set up shop in an unfamiliar city, with few friends and little money.

Beginning in Rome, Bucino and Fiammetta must flee, despite the conniving efforts of the courtesan to make peace with the invading religious factions. She leads the dwarf back to her hometown of Venice, where they find her dead mother's home. Summoning a healer to bring Fiammetta back to full health after the trying journey by boat, Bucino is prevented by the woman, La Draga's, disability and apparent psychic powers. Bucino, meanwhile, starts to explore the new city and use it to his advantage. He observes the patterns of courtesans being propositioned in and outside of a major church. He recognizes an old writer acquaintance of Fiammetta's, Pietro Aretino. The reader later learns that this is an old flame of Fiammetta's, disliked in Rome for his scandalous political writings.

Wanting to begin their business again, Bucino's observations help Fiammetta understand how professional courtesans work in Venice. They must move into a more central part of the city. After Fiammetta recovers, she seduces a Turkish man in the street, but does not have time to follow through with the affair. Things start to look up for Fiammetta and Bucino, especially as La Draga suggests a subtle treatment to replace Fiammetta's shorn hair, allowing her to get back to work earlier. To pay for the expensive cosmetics, Bucino goes to sell a ruby - only to find that the real ruby is gone and has been replaced by a clever glass copy. He blames La Draga for this.

Fiammetta takes her first client and steals his purse while he is asleep. She has come up with the idea of trying to work from a gondola, a cheaper idea than moving to the center of the city. However, while trying to sell a book of sonnets that they own, Bucino discovers that it is full of pornographic poems and drawings, instead - written by Aretino. They blackmail Aretino into finding them their first real patron, a soap merchant who helps Fiammetta set up shop.

Some years after this rise to prosperity, tension has arisen between Fiammetta and Bucino. However, when he gets pushed into the canal during a riot, he becomes very ill, and La Draga tends to him as Fiammetta forgives him. Later, in order to thank her and also out of curiosity, Bucino goes to see La Draga at her home, where he has never been. He discovers that she is not actually disabled, nor blind, but has been pretending all the time. Enraged, he finds scientific materials, including a bag of bones, in her home, and throws the bag of bones into the canal before leaving. When the bones wash up on shore later, La Draga is tried for witchcraft and found guilty.

Bucino goes to see her in her cell and they make amends. However, despite all of Fiammetta's high connections, they can do nothing to save her. The healer is executed for witchcraft. At the end of the book, however, the dwarf and the courtesan are offered

an opportunity to make amends, as her young daughter, also called Fiammetta, comes to them in need of rescue.



# Part 1: Chapters 1-3

## Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Summary

The story starts with a view of the city under siege and divided by religious factions, it has been invaded by both the Spanish and the Germans. To save her household, Fiammetta welcomes the Spanish in and plies them with food, drink, and luxuries; nevertheless, the German Protestants arrive and she must flee the city, taking Bucino with her. Before she does, however, she must escape from the Protestants: she does so by cutting off all of her beautiful hair and proclaiming that she has been saved and converted. Behind the Germans' backs, the two swallow as many jewels as they can, and flee the city.

Fiammetta takes them to Venice, her hometown, where she still has a home. Nevertheless, the journey has made her weary and ill - a situation further complicated by the fact that she finds her mothers' house full of lodgers, as the former maid has taken it upon herself, after the death of Fiammetta's mother, to make a profit from the house. Bucino quickly takes control of the situation, as he and Fiammetta send the lodgers away, and his mistress remembers a healer she once knew in the city: a woman called Elena, but more commonly known as La Draga.

In Chapter 3, Bucino sells some of the pair's jewels in the Jewish Ghetto, where he knows the sale will be discreet and still yield a good price. He returns to the house to find La Draga with Fiammetta, healing her. Wary of her, he is standoffish. The fact that she can describe him without seeing him (she is apparently blind) further sets him on edge. Nevertheless, her presence already appears to be of benefit to Fiammetta.

## Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

"In the Company of the Courtesan" starts in the midst of the action, as Fiammetta and Bucino must decide how to save their household - and then their own lives. This immediately establishes the characters as brave, fearless, and self-absorbed. She doesn't care so much about religion as she does about survival: this also introduces the theme of appearances versus reality, which permeates the book. The reader sees this again with the Cardinal who is supposedly one of the most pious men (and celibate by definition), yet one who visits courtesans and enjoys the pleasures of the body as much as anyone.

Fiammetta's resourcefulness is the most important characteristic that comes to light in this first section. Every idea she has, from welcoming the Spanish to escaping to Venice, provides her with a means of survival. This is the result of her difficult childhood, as we later learn, as her mother made her start prostituting herself from a very young age. In the figure of La Draga, introduced at the end of this section, there is the

possibility of a secondary mother character. However, Bucino immediately distrusts her, pointing to one of his own important characteristics - bitterness.



## Part 2: Chapter 4-6

### Part 2: Chapter 4-6 Summary

As Fiammetta gains her strength in Chapter 4, Bucino tries to familiarize himself with the city. He has a strong distaste for their surroundings, as he greatly fears water. Moreover, being so close to the ground, he feels that he can smell the stench from the canals especially strongly. However, he needs to understand the city in order for Fiammetta to survive as a courtesan. He follows the courtesans to church, where he watches them seducing businessmen with just their eyes and facial expressions.

Chapter 5 describes the aftermath of the church service, in which the courtesans and their patrons all gather in a square to make arrangements and to flirt more. Darting between them and then apart from the crowd, Bucino observes and takes notes. He also wonders if he sees a familiar face in the crowd, but the reader does not yet know who this person might be. We later discover it is the writer Pietro. Finally, in Chapter 6, Bucino and Fiammetta discuss how to set up shop again, and decide what they will need to make a successful business in the current climate.

### Part 2: Chapter 4-6 Analysis

This section demonstrates the utter dependence that Fiammetta has on Bucino. Not only does he depend on her, as we have seen in the first part, but she also needs him to gather information. As a dwarf, he goes unnoticed by a large segment of the population, and so his disability actually serves to his - and her - benefit. Here, we see how years of being ignored make him the perfect spy. This is exactly like Fiammetta in a sense: years of being a courtesan have made her conniving.

The section again underscores the hypocrisy of society, as men and women who are supposedly pious use a sacred space as the prelude to illicit relations. In terms of content, the foreshadowing of "his" arrival (who he is is not yet clear) signals to the reader that an important, and perhaps dangerous, character is about to enter the scene.



## Part 2: Chapters 7-9

### Part 2: Chapters 7-9 Summary

The pair move into a nicer part of town in Chapter 7, but still not exactly where they need to be to run their kind of business. Vastly recovered, though still with shorn hair, Fiammetta goes out on the street with Bucino and is delighted to realize that she still has her old talents, as she successfully seduces a Turkish gentleman, probably a diplomat. He leaves, and Bucino tells Fiammetta that it is sure: Pietro is in Venice. He then recalls the last time they knew Pietro, back in Rome, where the young man was a poor writer - very political and inflammatory, sometimes writing about Fiammetta herself in not-so-flattering terms.

Chapter 8 continues Bucino's thoughts on Pietro, but also expresses great hope for the future. La Draga knows of a way to combine other hair with Fiammetta's to disguise her short locks, though it will be expensive; however, this will allow Fiammetta to start working again. To fund the hair extensions, Bucino takes a large ruby to the Jew in the Ghetto he has been selling their jewels to. However, on close examination, the Jew proclaims that the ruby is a fake. His father, a master jeweler, confirms that the ruby is nothing but a clever replica in glass.

### Part 2: Chapters 7-9 Analysis

The stakes are raised in Chapters 7-9, as money is running low and Fiammetta must get back to work. However, to avoid becoming a common prostitute, she must do everything correctly, which is why she is so delighted when her tricks work on the Turk they cross on the street. There is also noted discrimination here: the Turk is not nearly as desirable a customer, and certainly not a patron, as other men who appear throughout the story.

The reader also receives more background on Pietro, who knew the pair back in Rome. This is dangerous for them on several levels, but mostly because Fiammetta needs to set herself up as a new woman - not as a courtesan running in disgrace. The fear of exposure drives this section as they attempt to avoid Pietro.

Finally, the missing ruby will provide a search that continues almost until the end of the book: it represents a great fraction of their wealth, and one of their most valuable remaining treasures. The fact that it turns out to be only glass, the real ruby disappeared, again shows how deceiving appearances can be. In a way, this mirrors Fiammetta's clothing and surroundings. She must appear to be first-rate while using only second-hand materials.





## Part 2: Chapters 10-12

### Part 2: Chapters 10-12 Summary

In Chapter 10, Bucino returns home from the jewelers', absolutely furious. He does not think the maid clever enough to steal the ruby, and blames it on La Draga. When he finds her attending to Fiammetta, he explodes into anger and curses her, accusing her of stealing and manipulating them. Later, they have a visit from Pietro, the writer, who has followed Bucino home. Surprised at the unglamorous surroundings, Pietro teases Fiammetta, who replies that they are just visiting a poor acquaintance of theirs (referring to La Draga).

Chapter 11 introduces the first client in Venice to Fiammetta. He is a bit of a buffoon, drunk and violent, and when he passes out, Fiammetta takes his purse, boosting their existing funds significantly. In Chapter 12, however, she comes across trouble when some youths start to mock her and call out names from the street below her house. Because Pietro is the only one who knows their true purpose in Venice, she is sure that he has spread the word. Worried that she cannot afford to buy or rent a proper house, Fiammetta starts considering working out of a gondola herself, making money from the novel concept.

### Part 2: Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The question of blame and guilt drives these chapters. Bucino values cleverness, but also distrusts it. Hence, he blames La Draga rather than the maid for stealing it (though he is eventually convinced otherwise). His own prejudices are beginning to emerge: though he is disabled, and seemingly disfigured, himself, he is disgusted by others with similar maladies and treats them very badly. It is as though he does not consider himself truly "one of them" but rather prefers to associate himself with the luxurious world of the courtesans. The reader sees how easily reality can be covered up with Pietro's visit. Though he doesn't believe Fiammetta's story, the truth of their circumstances can be easily hidden when necessary. Clever as ever, though, Fiammetta thinks she has solved their problems with her idea for the boat. However, the precariousness of the possibility does not sit well with Bucino, who prefers certainties, fixed places, and who hates the water.



## Part 2: Chapters 13-15

### Part 2: Chapters 13-15 Summary

Before he will see her working from a boat, Bucino decides to try to sell one of their last remaining possessions: a volume of Petrarch's sonnets that a publisher's apprentice left with them before fleeing Rome himself. However, the book has a lock on it, and he cannot break the code. He therefore takes it to the Jew to work through it, and though the man is initially hesitant to work with a possibly Christian book, he accepts the task. Nevertheless, when Bucino returns later, the man is very rude to him and thrusts the book back at him, telling him never to return. Still, Bucino gets the code from him. Opening the book, he sees that it is an illustrated pornographic text written by Pietro years ago - infamous in Rome, and thought to have been completely eradicated. Chapter 14 describes the history of the book, its creation from a series of engravings by a Roman artist, and Pietro's later combination.

In Chapter 15, Bucino returns home to Fiammetta, delighted to tell her of his discovery. He has hatched a plan that will allow them to succeed in Venice without needing to resort to such gimmicks as a boat: Pietro will not want the book to be known in Venice, and so he will have to help them out. Knowing that he is trapped, Pietro concedes that he will help Fiammetta find a new patron to help get her into business once again.

### Part 2: Chapters 13-15 Analysis

The most important idea in this section is that it is through sex that the courtesan saves herself - in order to garner the sexual clients that she needs! The volume of "poetry" has a vital importance here: it symbolizes, once more, that appearances can be deceiving. Petrarch's sonnets are classic love poems, of a romantic and idealistic type. What is actually hidden within the book proves to be far more scandalous and related to the erotic side of love. In the hands of Bucino and Fiammetta, however, the book will be put to its most efficient use. Their discussion of the books' possibilities proves their industriousness, as well as their manipulative sides: facing all of this, Pietro has no choice, should he wish the book to remain hidden, but to help Fiammetta.



## Part 2: Chapters 16-17

### Part 2: Chapters 16-17 Summary

In Chapter 16, Bucino is surprised to be confronted by La Draga, who questions him, wanting to know why he so dislikes her. Unable to give her an answer, he goes to aid his mistress with her preparations for the evening. Dressed in her finest (which is still, at this point, mostly second-hand), Fiammetta boards a gondola with Bucino, who will accompany her to Pietro's home that evening for a small party. At this party, she will choose her new patron. As she disembarks, Pietro describes his guests to her: a soap merchant, a French diplomat who is most likely diseased, a Turkish diplomat, and a painter (who is happily married and not among the potential patrons).

For most of the evening, Bucino stays out of the way. However, as the group begins to play a game about beauty, she secretly has Bucino enter the room while she plays the lute as her guests shut their eyes. Everyone agrees that the beautiful music matches the beautiful player; when they open their eyes, though, they see that Bucino has taken over and been playing for them instead of Fiammetta.

At the end of the night, Fiammetta has chosen the soap merchant as her new patron, concluding Part 2.

### Part 2: Chapters 16-17 Analysis

Bucino playing the lute perfectly encapsulates the theme of these chapters: surfaces are not always reliable. Beautiful music can be played by a "monstrous" creature, just as Fiammetta herself can be cold and even cruel. Fiammetta's practicality is ultimately revealed as she chooses the soap merchant. While the French diplomat is diseased, the Turkish gentleman is a possibility; however, Fiammetta picks the more stable, more established man. She knows as well as Bucino and Pietro do that all it will take is one patron to establish her business, and she must make a business, rather than a romantic, choice. In ways, we start to see Fiammetta as a product of the society that raised her: beautiful and proper on the outside, but calculating and even corrupt within. Nevertheless, the tone of the book treats her in a usually positive light.

## **Part 3: Chapters 18-20**

### **Part 3: Chapters 18-20 Summary**

Part 3 opens several years later, in the mid-1530s. Fiammetta is now a well-established courtesan in her mid-twenties; the soap merchant stopped visiting her some time ago, but set her up in comfortable surroundings before he left. Here, she entertains a variety of guests, some with extremely high connections. The situation she is in at the moment resembles her Roman life, before the invasions. However, Bucino is not quite as content. He is out of sorts, even when he sees his old business acquaintance, the Jewish trader, has converted to Christianity.

In Chapter 19, Bucino describes his job and role in Fiammetta's household. In short, he acts as a business manager, keeping her books, dealing with payments, and running the household. He does not seem content doing this, though, as he has a short fuse and is often ill-tempered with Fiammetta herself. Chapter 20 describes her situation, which is quite a different one from when she first arrived: she has numerous lovers, and has struck up many friendships as well. The painter who was at Pietro's party has become her friend, and is currently painting a portrait of her nude.

### **Part 3: Chapters 18-20 Analysis**

Wealth has come, but it hasn't brought happiness: at least, not for Bucino. Though the pair now have everything they desired, Bucino has a cranky attitude and can't be satisfied. He feels that their friendship is fading, one of the only real constants in his life. Therefore, though everything appears to be all right - even wonderful - from the outside, inside the house, things are different, and tensions are running high. Without these tensions, the events of the third section would be unnecessary. Therefore, they drive the novel's story forward even after it has seemingly come to a happy conclusion.



## Part 3: Chapters 21-23

### Part 3: Chapters 21-23 Summary

In Chapter 21, Bucino finally discovers a clue to the missing ruby from their arrival in Venice. The Jew comes to their home and tells him who came to sell it to them: a young woman, who said she was doing it on behalf of her employer. Disheartened, Bucino knows that the chances of ever tracking down the real jewel are almost none. Going to tell Fiammetta, though, he discovers that she is in bed with a lover: not a paying customer, but rather a young man who was at first a customer, but who is now enjoying the courtesan's favors for free.

Furious, Bucino confronts Fiammetta in Chapter 22. However, she is equally angry with him, not only for spying on her, but also for trying to exert control over her "personal" life. Angered, Bucino goes out into the streets. There, far from the house, he witnesses a street fight that slowly turns into a riot. As he is smaller than the rest of the crowd, nobody sees him and he is ignored as he falls into the water, unnoticed by the crowds.

### Part 3: Chapters 21-23 Analysis

While Bucino may be intrigued to have news of the ruby, these feelings are quickly wiped out by his discovery of Fiammetta with an non-paying lover. Here, though he never fully addresses them, questions of jealousy arise. The contrast between the dwarf and his mistress is highlighted, as her beauty entices men to her bed for a hefty sum, while only the "lowliest" women will touch Bucino, and only rarely. The jealousy that spawns his fight with Fiammetta is equaled at Fiammetta's fierce independence; she does not wish to be told what to do by anyone, let alone her "little companion." At the end of this section, as Bucino falls into the water, the earlier foreshadowing of the book is fulfilled and the reader waits to see if he will die by drowning, as the sorceress told him he would.



## Part 3: Chapters 24-26

### Part 3: Chapters 24-26 Summary

In Chapter 24, somebody saves Bucino from his death by water: as Bucino recovers, he realizes that it is the Turk, both from Pietro's party and from the street, before that. The Turk pulls him out of the water and makes sure that he is alive. However, as Bucino is very ill, the Turk leads him home so that he can recover there.

Fiammetta does not realize what has happened to Bucino, though; when he returns home, they have another terrible argument, in which she hurls insults at him and he responds in kind. Throughout this argument, though, he is struggling to keep conscious, and has trouble hearing and processing the reality around him. It appears as though he has a very high fever. Luckily, this is discovered sometime afterward. He wakes after a long illness to hear Fiammetta discussing his condition, her guilt and how she has forgiven him everything and hopes he has forgiven her. Though she is not sure he is awake, he does hear her and all is forgiven. He learns that La Draga has been constantly at his side during his troubles; she understands that the problem was caused by water trapped in his ear. His unique physiology makes it almost impossible for the water to come out as it normally would.

### Part 3: Chapters 24-26 Analysis

The value of marginalized characters comes to the fore in this section. La Draga, who has so disgusted Bucino, is the person who ends up nursing him back to health; while the Turk, unfit to receive Fiammetta's services, saves his life (and even offers to take him back to his own court, where a dwarf would be a welcome addition). These marginalized characters once more show the truly marginal quality of nearly every character in the book: even Fiammetta, after all, is a courtesan, reliant on the whims of her rich clients. Together, though, they can help and save each other, as the Turk and La Draga do for Bucino here. Moreover, Fiammetta apologizes to Bucino, without appearing to do so: the only kind of apology she knows he will accept. His pride, therefore, is equal to hers. This is the first time she treats him as her equal.



## Part 3: Chapters 27-29

### Part 3: Chapters 27-29 Summary

Almost recovered, but still weak, Bucino decides to set off to see La Draga. He is intrigued by this woman, now, who would spend so much time with him when he has been nothing but rude to her. He doesn't quite understand his motives in searching for her, but knows that it is the right thing to do. As she tells no one where she lives, he has to follow her.

Unfortunately, this requires a journey by boat, which terrifies him. He sits behind her, though realizes that he has little to fear, as she is blind and could not see him following her in any case. After disembarking the boat, she goes to church to pray; Bucino follows her, always staying in the background. After she returns home, he knocks on the door and asks to see her. She does not come out but says that she will meet him on the steps of the church in a short time. There, he tries to thank her for all that she did for him during his illness; but she seems uncomfortable with his thanks and awkwardly leaves.

He waits some time in the village, which is known for making mirrors, and thinks about his own life history: how his father was always ashamed of him, and after his death, how Bucino went to live with a cruel uncle, from whom he finally ran away when he was 15 and the uncle tried to engage him to a disabled girl. As he wanders the town, however, he sees a girl who looks familiar. Looking up, he sees a woman who resembles him: La Draga, but young and with no disabilities. Most importantly, her sight is clear.

### Part 3: Chapters 27-29 Analysis

This journey represents an important character development for Bucino. Though he is terrified of the water, he crosses it nonetheless to talk to La Draga, a woman he once found so hideous he could hardly look at her. This shows his growing profundity, as well as his open-mindedness. As we read more and more of his own history, we come to understand the disgust of deformity that so colored his early life, explaining in part his dislike for the healer.

The irony of the mirror-making city is not lost on Bucino; however, as he goes through the crowds, ultimately entertaining them, he sees both a "new," younger, and more beautiful version of La Draga as well as her daughter. Playing off of the classic trope of fairy-tale transformations, this scene is meant to confound the readers' expectations, just as it does Bucino's.



## Part 3: Chapters 30-32

### Part 3: Chapters 30-32 Summary

Confused, but knowing he has been deceived, Bucino decides that it must have been La Draga, after all, who took the ruby, though he is not simply angry at her for that but also for her years of deception. As she is in town with her daughter, Bucino goes to La Draga's home and breaks in. Though he is initially searching for the ruby, he soon realizes that he won't find it. Instead, he discovers many notebooks of scientific notes, drawings, potions, and other herbs for healing, and more occult items as well. Most disturbingly, he finds a bag of baby's bones beneath the floorboards. Knowing that these most likely come from women who have had miscarriages or abortions, he decides to cause La Draga distress by removing them from her house: this way, she will know that someone else knows her secret. However, as he falls out of the window trying to leave, the bag falls into the canal and is lost to him.

He returns home to Fiammetta and explains what happened. He also has realized that the book of "Petrarch's Sonnets" has been gone for some time, and worried that La Draga took that, as well. She is forgiving of La Draga - more so than Bucino - and confesses that it was she who took the book while he was ill, to keep it safe. They apologize to one another.

However, later on, the bag of bones washes up on shore, and villagers claim to have seen a big black dog escaping from La Draga's window, who they believe was the devil in a different form. It was, of course, Bucino. Nevertheless, La Draga is to be executed for witchcraft.

### Part 3: Chapters 30-32 Analysis

This section demonstrates the darker parts of both Bucino's character and the society that they live in. Though he has been ready to overlook La Draga's deformities, begging her forgiveness, speaking to her as an equal, her deception makes this impossible for him as his rage (one of his defining characteristics) takes over. Loyalty also defines Bucino throughout the novel; however, when angered, this turns to revenge. Hence, his raiding of the healer's home.

Fate also plays a hand here, as he does not mean to drop the bones but merely remove them to frighten the woman. However, his actions have set off a chain-reaction he can no longer control, and the suspicious, darker aspects of Venice society turn on La Draga. Despite the truth and all of the good she does in the community, La Draga is on trial for witchcraft.





## Part 3: Chapters 33-35

### Part 3: Chapters 33-35 Summary

Fiammetta and Bucino are at a loss for what to do. They worry that La Draga will be tortured, for she is in prison awaiting her trial. Later, she will be sentenced. Fiammetta tries to use her influence with one of her clients, a Senator, to free La Draga; however, the case is so public and such a hot topic for the community, that the Senator's hands are tied. One of the things that he can help them with, however, is smuggling food to their friend in prison. They send food regularly, but worry that it is not making it through. Finally, though La Draga has been sentenced to death, the Senator has enough influence to allow one of them to visit her in jail and to bring her food. Fiammetta decides that it must be Bucino, and so he sets off on his own.

### Part 3: Chapters 33-35 Analysis

Even within the confines of the strictest society, money can always buy a way in, especially combined with influence. This section demonstrates the main tools of power that the characters in the novel use: sex (which gives them the money they need to bribe the guards, as well as the help of the Senator), political power (as represented by the senator), and persuasion (such as Bucino uses with the guards). On their own, these "tools" only have so much power. They provide limited help to the protagonists as Bucino still has to go alone to the jail cell.



## Part 3: Chapters 36-37

### Part 3: Chapters 36-37 Summary

Conditions in the jail are horrifying, and La Draga is only a shadow of her former self. However, she has brought comfort to her comrades in with her, with what few remedies she is still capable of making. Bucio brings her food, but also potions to sleep and to ease pain, hoping that she will be able to take it before she is killed. He tries to explain to her what happened, but she does not want excuses; instead, the two of them just hold each other. When they awaken, the guards make Bucio leave before he can be caught.

Later, La Draga is executed and Bucino and Fiammatta are both beside themselves. Soon after, however, a little girl appears on their doorstep. It is La Draga's daughter, who Bucino recognizes from his journey to the village. Although she does not want to enter at first, he soon entices her to come in. She has the same name as the mistress of the house: Fiammetta.

### Part 3: Chapters 36-37 Analysis

After all of the conniving, thievery, deceit, and corruption of the previous chapters - even from our hero and heroine - the last few chapters offer the possibility of hope for the future, in the form of the young Fiammetta. The fact that she has the same name as the courtesan, yet is young and pure, inspire the reader's confidence. At the same time, however, we must question what lies in store for her as she drinks from the goblet with her name on it: will she meet the same fate as the courtesan? Be raised in such surroundings? After the darkness of the earlier story, though, she represents light, and an uncorrupted hope for the future. Now that Bucino has grown as a character, the reader can hope that he will protect the young girl in a way that the elder Fiammetta was not taken care of, back when she was a girl.



# Characters

## Fiammetta Bianchini

The courtesan of the title, Fiammetta Bianchini is a young, seemingly independent, woman. At the beginning of the story, she lives in a rich house in Rome, under the auspices of one of the Pope's cardinals. The reader later discovers that she was brought to Rome by her mother when she was sixteen, so that her virginity could be auctioned off to the highest bidder. After that, she began work as a high-class courtesan, and continued to do so even after her mother returned to Venice several years ago. Fiammetta is extremely fierce and conniving, and appears to welcome the Spanish soldiers who invade her home to save herself. Later, when the Germans come, she pretends to convert to Protestantism and even cuts off all of her hair to prove her devotion. Nevertheless, she and Bucino escape to go to Venice, swallowing jewels to store their fortune in a portable way (another example of her cleverness). Only in her early twenties during the time of the story, Fiammetta still begins a new life in Venice, where she finds that her mother has died. With the help of an old "friend," whom she and Bucino blackmail, she sets herself up in business and is soon one of the most known courtesans of the region. However, at the end of the book, with the arrival of the "young" Fiammetta, we see that her fierce ambition may need to be tempered somewhat as the household must raise the girl.

## Bucino Teodoldi

The narrator of the story, Bucino is a dwarf who lives with Fiammetta. He works as her business manager, overseeing appointments, balancing accounts, and taking care of the other day-to-day necessities of the house. Nevertheless, when needed, he can call upon his early days as a street performer to juggle and otherwise entertain clients. The bond between Bucino and Fiammetta is quite strong, though their equally fierce personalities can clash from time to time. Bucino is also ambitious and protective of Fiammetta, and gets upset when she falls in love with a young client, fearing it will damage the business (and, perhaps, slightly jealous himself). A horror to his father, Bucino went to live with an uncaring uncle as a child but ran away when he was required to become engaged to a deformed woman. Though a dwarf himself, Bucino is disgusted by others with disabilities, and is often surprised by his own appearance in the mirror, when he comes across it. Furthermore, he is terrified of water, because of something a fortune-teller once told him: this fear turns out to be well-founded when he nearly drowns in one of Venice's canals. Bucino is a proud, courageous, and sometimes obstinate character who does all he can to protect those he loves.



## **Elena Crusichi/La Draga**

La Draga is a healer that Fiammetta brings to their house in Venice. An old friend of the family, La Draga is a seemingly disabled woman with a stoop and blindness, who can heal nearly anyone with her "magic" potions and cures. When Fiammetta falls ill after their travels, La Draga nurses her back to health; later on, she helps her to procure false hair to hide her baldness and obtain clients. Later, after Bucino nearly drowns, La Draga also cures him. Despite her good works, La Draga is never entirely trusted by Bucino, who follows her home one weekend after he is well. There, he finds that she is not disabled at all. Going through her home, he discovers a pair of contact lenses that she wears to make herself seem blind. Moreover, she keeps various notes and bones in her house, making her look like a witch. Furthermore, she is the one who stole a ruby from Fiammetta. Eventually arrested for witchcraft, she and Bucino finally make peace when he goes to visit her in her jail cell.

## **Baldesar**

This is a member of the Roman household.

## **Zaccano**

This is a member of the Roman household.

## **Giacomo**

This is a member of the Roman household.

## **Adriana**

This is a member of the Roman household.

## **Ascanio**

This is the publisher's assistant who inadvertently leaves his copy of "Petrarch's Sonnets" behind.

## **The Cardinal**

This is the Fiammetta's Roman patron, who finally can do nothing to save her.



## **Meragosa**

This is the household maid in Venice.

## **Old well man**

This is a man who helps Bucino acclimate to Venice by telling him stories and giving directions.

## **Abdullah Pashna**

This is a Turkish diplomat who is kind to Bucino.

## **Pietro Aretino**

This is an old nemesis of Fiammetta with whom she still has romantic chemistry. This is also the author of the pornographic verses in the forbidden book.

## **The Jew**

This is a trader in the Ghetto to whom Bucino goes to sell various jewels and later the book. Finally, he converts to Christianity, though his reasons are unclear.

## **Giulio Romano**

This is the illustrator of the pornographic book.

## **Mario Treviso**

This is a soap merchant who becomes Fiammetta's first real patron in Venice.

## **Guy de Ramellet**

This is a French diplomat who desires Fiammetta and because he is diseased, she does not accept him as a lover.

## **Tiziano**

This is a painter who creates a portrait of Fiammetta.



## **The Senator**

This is Fiammetta's most powerful patron in Venice.

## **Foscari**

This is a young man from a powerful family, who falls in love with Fiammetta (and whose feelings are reciprocated). His family eventually sends him away.

## **Fiammeta (the younger)**

This is the daughter of Elena/La Draga, who comes to live with Fiammetta and Bucino after her mother's death.



# Objects/Places

## Rome

This is the city from where Fiammetta and Bucino flee and to Venice. In Rome, they are a well-established household and wealthy, but must leave due to the riots and invasions of their city.

## Venice

This is Fiammetta's hometown, where she brings Bucino so that they may begin a new life. Set along canals, the city frightens Bucino.

## Medicis

This is a powerful Roman family.

## Spanish soldiers

This is a group that invades Fiammetta's house. Her 'hospitality' to them initially appears to save their lives.

## Germans

These are the subsequent invaders of Fiammetta's house; Fiammetta pretends to convert to Protestantism to save herself.

## Juggling

This is a hobby of Bucino's, which he still performs when needed.

## Petrarch's sonnets

This is a book left in Bucino's hands by a publisher's assistant. The book is actually not sonnets, but rather a pornographic text with illustrations and a lock.

## Jewels

These represent Fiammetta's wealth in Rome. Fiammetta and Bucino swallow the jewels to avoid losing everything. Later, the money gained from their sale is what saves them.

## **Water**

This is Bucino's greatest fear. He nearly drowns in the book and has an almost superstitious fear of the water both before and after the experience.

## **The Ghetto**

This is the Jewish quarter, where Bucino goes to sell the jewels and later tries to sell the pornographic book.

## **Church**

This is a meeting-place for the courtesans and their patrons. Later, this is also where Elena/La Draga and Bucino meet.

## **Fiammeta's hair**

This is one of her greatest beauties, which she must cut off to convince the German Protestants of her sincerity when 'converting.'

## **La Draga's Eyes**

Though La Draga appears to be blind, Bucino finds that she wears a rudimentary form of glass contact lenses to make people believe this. She can, in fact, see.



# Themes

## Power

The book's primary theme is that of power. This takes different forms, showing the sexual power of Fiammetta; the political power of the Cardinal and the Senator; the healing power of La Draga; and even Bucino's own powers. Nearly every transaction in the story can be read as relating to power: for example, when La Draga and the housemaid steal the ruby, they are stealing money and therefore freedom from Fiammetta and, accordingly, from Bucino. Fiammetta's main power, however, is her sexuality. Throughout the book, we see her use her sexuality to rise in society (the society of the courtesans) twice: in retrospect, when she is sixteen, under the auspices of her mother; and in the present-day, where she and Bucino arrive nearly destitute, except for their jewels, and basically trade sex for possessions as she climbs the social ladder. This is most apparent in the pornographic book, which gives her some hold over Pietro Aretino. Because she has it and knows that he contributed to it, she literally is able to use it as blackmail, convincing him to bring her more powerful patrons. Like every other kind of power in the book, though, this sexual power is limited: Fiammetta needs various material possessions to use it within society's conventions, and must get set up with a suitable home and wardrobe before she can proceed. Moreover, it cannot work to save her in any political sense with the Cardinal (when Rome is under siege) or the Senator (when La Draga is sentenced to death). Bucino's own powers are severely limited: when present, they can be seen mainly as an extension of Fiammetta's own, as it is her body and jewels from which he profits.

## Politics

The book also treats politics, insofar as they relate to the activities of day-to-day life. In fact, one of Dunant's greatest strengths as a writer is making historical events and places come alive through her characters. The reader learns of the powerful Medici family, as well as the political structures of Rome (with the Pope and the Cardinals below him), as well as the fragility of these structures, and how connected they were to the religions of the time. Similarly, the laws of Venice constrict the lives of the characters to a certain extent, as La Draga is tried and found guilty of witchcraft. The city, which prides itself on being less corrupt than Rome, carries out the penalty despite the influence of powerful people, such as Fiammetta's patron, the Senator. In this way, the reader can see the overlaps - and disparities - between politics and actual power. Importantly, the book also shows the influence of forces outside the government (the courtesans, bribery, etc.) as influencing the political system somewhat, even in Venice - here, Bucino is finally allowed to see La Draga, though it is technically outside the law. Throughout the novel, the political is presented less as an absolute fact, but rather as something to be subtly manipulated when possible.



## Appearances Versus Realities

The difference between appearances and realities runs throughout the book. This theme is most visible in the juxtaposition of Bucino and Fiammatta: on the one hand, a deformed dwarf; on the other, one of the country's most beautiful courtesans. Yet, as the story continues, the reader begins to see just how similar the two are in their personalities: both stubborn, sensuous, proud, and defiant, they are independent except when it comes to one another. The juxtaposition of appearance versus reality is also incarnate in La Draga herself. Though she appears to be a haggard old woman limping around Venice, Bucino discovers that she is, in fact, a younger woman who can see, with no apparent disabilities, who has a daughter of her own. The appearance everyone in the city knows is not her "true" appearance; and yet, Bucino discovers, her personality is much the same no matter what she looks like. Her semblance of disability is simply the mask that she dons to fool the world and to become more "invisible" from onlookers. Though most apparent in the characters themselves, the theme of appearance versus reality is visible in other aspects of the novel as well, especially in the hypocrisy of government officials, Fiammetta's use of second-hand clothes and her lies, and the idea of good versus bad, which is never quite clear.



# Style

## Point of View

"In the Company of the Courtesan" is told through the eyes of Bucino, the dwarf who tells of his life with the courtesan Fiammetta. As the story is told through the first-person perspective, the reader sees the events unfold as Bucino sees them. Interestingly, Dunant does not choose to share the character's identity with us or even his gender until mid-way through the first lengthy chapter. Thus, the reader begins the book expecting a traditional narrative and is surprised to identify with a character who would usually be dubbed an outsider. Similarly, Bucino can be seen as a mostly reliable narrator as far as the events of the story are concerned: he describes things with passion and intensity, though we believe his version of the tale. Nevertheless, this does provide a one-sided view of the action, and other characters' responses are the only hints we have as to how they view the same situations. Very infrequently, the novel slips into a third-person point of view to describe action taking place involving Bucino, which he is not privy to: for example, when he is saved from the canal. All the same, the reader can view these lapses as Bucino's own imaginings, part of his tendency to make his own life into a narrative (as he does for Fiammetta). As the title implies, the story tells about Fiammetta; nevertheless, it never tells anything from her perspective, though she is privy to the darkest secrets of the novel. Nevertheless, the fact that his disability means that most people ignore Bucino allows him to act as an excellent observer.

## Setting

The rich settings of the novel act almost as characters in the narrative. The story begins in Rome in the 1520s, when the city is under threat from both Spanish and German invaders. Seen from inside Fiammetta's house, the city appears rich, glamorous, crowded, and corrupt; however, this kind of lifestyle appears to suit perfectly the main characters, the courtesan and the dwarf, and they are loath to continue on once it appears they will have to leave Rome. Returning to Venice, Fiammetta's hometown, they find a beautiful city of canals. Nevertheless, the city does not please Bucino, who finds it filthy and odorous, as well as terrifying due to the prevalence of water. However, the two spend several years here and seem to be settled in the city when the novel ends in the mid-1530s. As the story continues, Bucino learns to master the city: first with the help of an old man who spends his days next to a well, and eventually on his own. Whether on the narrow canal-side roads or on boats, the narrator eventually learns how to get around on his own. His vengeance at La Draga's house, however, when he throws the bones he finds into the mud outside, has a literal effect on him almost immediately, as he falls into the water shortly thereafter and cannot, for the moment, make his way home.



## Language and Meaning

Though the language might have been more complex, given the setting and the time period of the novel, the characters speak in simple, if lyrical, prose. Bucino narrates in a direct way, though he can sometimes go between hesitation, using ellipses, and bluntness, when he uses short, concise sentences. In his speech, however, he more or less limits himself to this latter form of expression, never displaying the hesitancy that lies beneath his surface. Fiammetta, on the other hand, can be much more poetic, especially when she is with her clients. Her music is a natural extension of this lyricism. This beautiful expression is mirrored in her relationship with Pietro Aretino, the writer, who is also a wordsmith. As the novel continues, however, Bucino peppers his narration with more and more rhetorical questions, allowing the reader to see his growing hesitancy. In this way, we can see how the language of the book demonstrates a "softening" of the character. In Venice, the hardness of his character is being changed by his experiences and friendships, for better or for worse. Archaic expressions are rarely used. Italian expressions are not either. This lends a sense of realism to the book and allows the reader to understand the foreign and far-away setting as much as possible.

## Structure

The book is divided into three sections: Parts One, Two, and Three. Part One takes place in Rome in 1527 and describes Fiammetta and Bucino trying to cope with, then escape from, their invaders. It is the shortest of the three sections and ends with their safe arrival at Fiammetta's childhood home, where they send for the healer to cure Fiammetta of a sickness acquired en route. Part Two describes their early struggles setting up housekeeping and business in the new city: problems and troubles dominate this section, until Bucino discovers what is really inside the book of Petrarch's sonnets he has brought with him. Then, the section takes a more positive note as they blackmail Pietro Aretino into finding patrons for Fiammetta. The section ends as she decides to take the soap merchant for her patron. In the final section, set in the mid-1530s, still in Venice, the reader learns of Fiammetta's success, as well as La Draga's real identity. It concludes with the arrival of the young Fiammetta on the courtesan's doorstep.

Each section is divided into smaller chapters, sometimes no longer than three or four pages. Part One encompasses Chapters One through Three; Part Two, Four through Seventeen; and Part Three, and Eighteen through Thirty-Seven.



## Quotes

"Italy was a living chessboard for the ambitions of half of Europe in those days" (Chapter 1, p. 4).

"Loyalty is a commodity that grows more expensive when times get bloody..." (Chapter 1, p. 7).

"Yet, strangely, it was not all awful. Or perhaps it was not all awful precisely because it was so strange. In places there was almost a sense of wild pageant to it" (Chapter 1, p. 29).

"Don't worry. I will not let the water consume you" (Chapter 1, p. 38).

"I am not lost, though you may be. You are certainly half starved and infected with melancholy and melodrama" (Chapter 2, p. 54).

"Whether this is his fancy or fact I do not know, but it suits me well, for now I see Venice as a series of bigger and smaller circles, coalescing and overlapping, each one a filigree of land and water..." (Chapter 4, p. 69).

"Venice turns out to be no more virtuous or more imaginative than the Holy City itself" (Chapter 4, p. 75).

"You are a dwarf who waddles with a grin like an imp from Hell, yet you'd be the first to skewer anyone who read the Devil in your deformity" (Chapter 6, p. 89).

"It is a shame they ended up as enemies, for they had much in common" (Chapter 8, p. 111).

"Your ruby. She is made of glass" (Chapter 9, p. 124).

"My poor, sad-eyed Jew. How long did it take him to realize" (Chapter 14, p. 167).

"...I know why I do not like her. It is because in some way she makes me feel smaller than I am" (Chapter 16, p. 191).

"'You will be welcome.' I shrug. And why not? We cater for all people. Well, all people except Jews, that is" (Chapter 18, p. 226).

"So tell me, Fiammetta. What do you think your mother would say to all this" (Chapter 22, p. 262).

"La Draga, it seems, not only is an able-bodied young woman with no hunch or spine defect. She can also see" (Chapter 29, p. 333).



## Topics for Discussion

Religion plays a vital role in "In the Company of the Courtesan." What is Bucino's presentation of the institution? What other religions do we see and how are they compared to one another?

Several characters are subject to discrimination of various kinds in the book. Discuss these forms of discrimination and the coping mechanisms the characters use to evade or better deal with their aggressors.

The novel is narrated by Bucino, in the first person. Is he a reliable narrator? Why or why not?

The move between Rome and Venice plays a vital role in the story. Compare and contrast the courtesan and Bucino's lives in the two cities. In your view, which one is better? Justify your answer using examples from the book.

In both Rome and Venice, Fiammetta ends up with a powerful patron. Do these patrons end up protecting her? Discuss their relationships and their ultimate outcomes.

Fiammetta has strong chemistry with the young writer. Would they make a successful couple? Why can they not be together, in terms of their world's moral codes?

What role do the arts (music, dance, song, visual art) play in the book? Discuss their importance and the relationship of major characters to them.

The novel deals extensively with the idea of Fate. At the end of the novel, does Bucino believe in Fate? Why or why not?