

Giovanni Boccaccio
THE DOWNFALL
OF THE FAMOUS

New Annotated Edition of
The Fates of Illustrious Men

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another Florentine auxiliary fighting for King Edward. This auxiliary cut his throat. And so the man who wallowed in the blood of the Florentines, lost his life at the hands of a Florentine. The murderous, crafty, and evil Walter was overthrown, put to flight, and killed on that day, a death that came more quickly than it should.

AN EXCUSE BY THE AUTHOR FOR PHILIPPA OF CATANIA

Why a woman of ordinary birth is admitted into this company.

At the very end of this work, by leave of the kings and illustrious persons, I will write of a woman of ordinary birth, but one whom they should not disdain. For, although her parents were of obscure ancestry and her end was very dreadful, yet in the midst of her prosperity Fortune was so flattering that she led a life among kings and royal ladies. Philippa of Catania, her hair disheveled, showing all the blows of Fortune on her wracked body, begged with a trembling voice to follow after kings at least as a lady-in-waiting, if she could have nothing else. As I declared that I wished to describe the famous, not just the nobility; then, without injury to anyone, I could receive this supplicant. However, I thought I had good reason to include her. For I wish to point out that all this work, by its parts, seems to be arranged in some form: it started in happiness and will end in misery. It seems that the work began with the most noble of men, so it should end with a common and degenerate woman.¹⁶

Therefore the success of the unhappy Philippa will follow as well as the remainder of her life. Since the novelty of her story is known to a few, they will be interested not in the story itself but in the way it is told. I have thought it not unsuitable to entwine the explanation with the story, so that the excessive brevity that is elsewhere a part of the narration does not take away from the purpose of the telling. I described what

16. This episode has been analyzed in Musto (2013), 274–78.

I saw with my own eyes, and I know that I was not deceived. In what I have heard, I have related the more truthful, and so I will not come to be refuted, I have sought out those who were more truthful. Now we will leave the other mourners, and for her beginning, let us go a little higher.

ABOUT PHILIPPA OF CATANIA

*The daughter of a fisherman became queen in everything but name, though still she died in misery.*¹⁷

While I was still a boy and employed at the court of Robert, king of Jerusalem and Sicily, Marinus of Bulgaria (an old man with keen memory originally a slave, and from his youth skilled in the art of sailing) was there. With him was Calaber Constantine da Rocca, a man as old as he was worthy of respect. These recounted the antiquity and nobility of the courts. Among other things they told how Robert, then duke of Calabria, on the order of his father, King Charles, led an expedition against Frederick of Sicily, who was occupying the island.¹⁸ After a while he had set up camp at Trapani, and here his wife, Violanta,¹⁹ gave birth to a son. Because of the lack of women, it happened that Philippa, whose story we have started, was made nurse of the little child. She was attractive in manner and appearance, but had been the daughter of a poor fisherman. Only a few days before she had been washing the clothes of the foreigners. And when she had obtained the good graces of the duchess, she came back to Naples and remained among the other servants, though the young child had died.

These two men told me that at that time there was a certain Raymond of Cabanni, an Ethiopian, whose appearance

17. See Ingeborg Walter, "Filippa da Catania," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 47 (1997). Online at: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/filippa-da-catania_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/filippa-da-catania_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

18. Frederick III (r.1295-1337).

19. Violanta or Yolanda of Aragon (1273 - August 1302).

did not detract from his character. He had been purchased from pirates by Raymond de Cabannis, the prefect of cooks for King Charles. Because of his remarkable abilities, he was baptized, provided with Raymond's Christian and family name, and given his freedom. To him almost all the duties of the kitchen were assigned. Not long after, Raymond (the patron) went away to war, and the freedman was chosen to take his place. After that he had servants, horses, a house, and all the necessities. He began to attract the favor of the king and the nobles and to amass wealth. He was promoted from the kitchen to be guard of the king's wardrobe.

Meanwhile the duchess wished to reward Philippa for her long service. Philippa was known as a widow, and since no one more suitable than Raymond was discovered, she was given to him as a wife. So that he might celebrate the marriage more joyfully and brilliantly, this audacious man asked that he be given a royal military command. When this was granted, the African soldier joined the marriage bed of this Sicilian washerwoman. According to the story of these old men, this was the beginning of her renown and nobility (or let me say more correctly, I have heard that this was Philippa's start).

Now we have nearly come to the things that I myself saw. Raymond, then, out of the service of the kitchen, had been made a soldier and enjoyed a famous marriage to Philippa, the Catanese. Among the soldiers Raymond conducted himself not inferior to any. He accomplished his missions and managed many commands. Above all he strengthened his own personal affairs with the greatest diligence. By this time Violanta had died, and Philippa, coming to Naples, with the greatest care submitted herself to Sancia, wife of King Robert,²⁰ and to Maria,²¹ the wife of Charles, son of King Robert. She helped them, served them, and showed herself ever ready for their commands. She

20. Queen Sancia of Majorca (1286–1345). See Musto (1985); Musto (2013), 204–17.

21. Marie de Valois (1309–31).

prepared and took care of their ornaments and various lotions and demonstrated that she was a perfect mistress.

Thus affairs went. She exceeded in age the other women in the court, and was now the mother of three manly sons by Raymond, the soldier, and it seemed by long habit she had learned the customs of the court. She was appointed by the mother to be mistress and guardian to Giovanna, daughter of Charles, duke of Calabria.²² At this time Raymond²³ was made master of the royal household, and a short time after Charles and Maria died,²⁴ and Philippa was honored as Giovanna's mother. Raymond was made royal seneschal. What a ridiculous thing to see an African from a slave prison, from the vapor of the kitchen, standing before Robert, the king, performing royal service for the young nobleman, governing the court and making laws for those in power!

What does this mean, then? Just this. Fortune raises up whom she wishes. Thus a husband and wife are raised up; two of their children were married illustriously and decorated with military honors. Also they had acquired towns, estates, villas, horses, numerous servants, rich clothes, and all goods in abundance. You would think they were the children of a king rather than of a slave. Finally when Raymond died,²⁵ he was buried with almost regal rites, and his sons, who were soldiers, began to carry on his duties. Then after several years, when the youngest died, Robert, the third son, threw off his clerical habit for that of a soldier.²⁶ After some

22. Queen Giovanna 1. See Musto (2013), 256–98; Casteen (2015).

23. See Ingeborg Walter, "Cabanni, Raimondo de," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 15 (1972). Online at: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/raimondo-de-cabanni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/raimondo-de-cabanni_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

24. Charles on 9 November 1328; Maria on 23 October 1331.

25. In October 1334.

26. He was named count of Eboli and was promoted to grand seneschal of the Regno. See Ingeborg Walter, "Cabanni, Roberto de," *Dizionario Biografico*

more years the days ceased for the eldest son.²⁷ Sancia,²⁸ the daughter, was left, just grown up, whom, from the time she was a child, a grandmother had brought up with Giovanna as all of the same family. Robert, alone, assumed the duties of his father and brothers.

When her husband and her sons were taken away, Philippa's happiness was shaken, but with the passing years her splendor glowed with greater brilliance. For Giovanna was given in marriage to Andrew, son of Carobert, king of Hungary,²⁹ and when King Robert died,³⁰ Sancia, the queen, went into a convent. Disputes arose between Giovanna and Andrew by the wicked urging of certain persons. Andrew was despised, for the nobles of the kingdom had sworn oaths to Giovanna when Robert was alive.³¹ By Giovanna, Robert, from being the seneschal of the court, was made grand seneschal of the kingdom, and Sancia, his niece, was married to Charles, count of Marcone.

These extraordinary successes came to these Africans, however, not without some spots on their honor. Though it may not be right to believe it, it was said that the pandering of Philippa was responsible for putting Giovanna into Robert's embraces. This crime requires a lot of faith, for nothing serious, arduous, or great was accomplished unless it was approved by Robert, Philippa, and Sancia. No others except these must have known Giovanna's secret. But what then? We must leave these and throw suspicions to the winds.

degli Italiani 15 (1972). Online at: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/roberto-de-cabanni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/roberto-de-cabanni_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

27. That is, Carlo, who died some time before 1340.

28. The notoriously vilified Sancia de' Cabannis.

29. The couple was married 27 August 1342.

30. On 20 January 1343.

31. Per Robert's last will and testament. See Musto (2013), 234-54.

When there is the least familiarity of any sort with a man, disgrace easily stains the most honorable woman.³²

But we must return to our story. Philippa had now been raised to these titles and preferment, and it seemed to all that she had achieved everything except the name of queen. For Fortune was no respecter of years. This exalted woman, now decrepit, could expect only a little more time. In an unexpected change of affairs she was covered with such calamity that all her former splendor and honor seemed to turn to her shame. Lewis, king of Hungary, scarcely endured that his brother Andrew be treated with such indignity by Giovanna and her associates because the former intention and last wish of King Robert was that Andrew be given the crown of Sicily and Jerusalem by Pope Clement VI.³³ And now those who bore the order came to Gaeta.

But some of the nobles of the kingdom, already knowing the severity of the royal youth, feared that perhaps his anger was deserved, and if he were made king, they saw they might be punished. Conspiring secretly against him, they laid plans to prevent his being crowned. Who they were and how they progressed against the boy is not our present business. We have enough that pertains to our purpose. By the stealth of the conspirators one night in the city of Aversa, the boy was called from the royal bedroom and ended his life in a noose.³⁴ In the early morning this accursed crime was discovered, and swift Fame spread anger and outcry against the murderers in

32. These rumors and slanders against Giovanna arose from the beginning of her reign. See Casteen (2015). Boccaccio's casting doubt on these slanders is consistent with his epideictic treatment of the queen as the last biography of his *De mulieribus claris*. The parallel, if contesting, treatment of living women in *De casibus* and *De mulieribus* is also of note.

33. This contradicts the explicit terms of Robert's will and may reflect both Hungarian propaganda and Florentine historiography as represented by Villani. See Musto (2013), 234–54.

34. On 18/19 September 1345. See Musto (2013), 274–75; Casteen (2015), 29–66.

all the city and the realm. In the first fury of revenge certain young Calabresi, once chamberlains of Andrew, were killed cruelly and dishonorably. Not satisfied with these innocent lives, Hugo, count of Avellino, by the consent of all the nobles, was commissioned to investigate what was known of the crime and to bring to judgment whoever was discovered. For what reason I do not know, he put into jail Robert de' Cabannis, count of Eboli, (until that time grand seneschal of Sicily); Sancia, countess of Marcone; and the elderly and unhappy Philippa of Catania, as well as certain others.

Nor was there any delay. An immense oak barge was built in view of the city of Naples in the midst of the gulf, and while the people were observing, he tortured the unfortunate Philippa, Robert, and Sancia. What he drew from them is not known. However, it is held as reliable that they were guilty of the death of Andrew. After some days Philippa, Robert, and Sancia, nude, were bound to three poles, and in wagons were led through the city. The people gathered from everywhere and cried out against their shame. They were tortured with fire and pincers, and what was left of their miserable life ended in the flames.³⁵

This, therefore, was the end of Philippa. Indeed it would have been better to maintain her poverty by labor in the sea than to seek a better existence in luxury by criminal means. When condemned to the fire she lost her life and all that she acquired.

A LAST FEW MOURNERS AND THE END OF THE BOOK

The author's final advice on how to be a good ruler and achieve happiness.

Many readers think as I do that I will never bring my pen to rest nor come to the end of my book. Many princes arrived after the calamitous death of Philippa, and the new ones wanted me

35. This is a heavily edited version of Boccaccio's account, omitting several gruesome details that Boccaccio had included.

to join their stories with those others, if I were willing. Among them was Sancio, king of Majorca, who complained that he had been deprived of his kingdom by his maternal cousin, the brother of the king of Aragon. After a disastrous battle, his power had been smashed and he was taken prisoner; by the order of the king of Aragon his head was cut off.³⁶

Then John, king of France, condemned his great misfortune. His kingdom had been lain waste far and wide by fire and slaughter; it had been drained by plunder and diminished by the occupation of the English, without valor and fearful, the most cowardly of men.³⁷ After an ill-fated battle, John's forces had been disorganized, broken, and put to flight, and many of his nobles had been killed; he, himself, had been made a captive of King Edward, and was deported to England.³⁸

John was followed by innumerable others, all complaining of their afflictions, but I decided to let them go, for the time had come for rest. By God's goodness, we have come through dangers, tears, and the ultimate fates of many kings in our little bark. Sailing through the wide sea, we have arrived at the port toward which we first directed our prow.³⁹ If, however, here and there, we have crossed either more or less of the sea than we should, and have deviated from the path of truth, I leave it to the correction of the wise. If, on the other hand, by this my labor, I have led anyone to the recognition of what he really is, and to humility, then I wish that any praise should be given to the bountiful grace of God.

36. Boccaccio may have confused King Sancho, who died of an asthma attack in 1324, with his nephew Jaime III, who lost the kingdom and his life to Pedro IV of Aragon at the battle of Lluçmajor on 25 October 1349.

37. An opinion generally held on the Continent in the fourteenth century, because of the English use of massed longbow men in warfare, a weapon regarded as unknighly.

38. At the battle of Poitiers on 19 September 1356.

39. The metaphor is directly from Dante. See above, 215 n. 9.

You rulers, who have very great power in your hands, open your eyes and ears so that the sleep of death does not catch you by surprise. See how many of Fortune's spears, what different kinds, your body bears. And with your power do not refuse human counsels. No matter how strong something may be, it can be broken; no matter how piercingly bright, it can be obscured by a cloud. From the fates of others realize how perilous your state is. Avoid avarice, lust, wrath, boasting, and ambition, and be moderate in your pleasures. When your mind is filled with joy and something disturbs you, remember that you have risen by the same law as others, and that you too will fall into insignificance and be punished for your offenses, if it so pleases Fortune. And so you are not deceived by any kind of belief in the stability of satisfaction, fix this in your mind: Whenever anyone's situation seems to be taken for granted by ever-turning Fortune, then in the midst of this unfortunate credulity, she is preparing a trap. Far as we seem to be carried up to the stars, in the same way our hopes are very carefully planted in the depths.

So that you may have something to rejoice about in success, and something to alleviate your sadness in adversity, remember to give God the greatest veneration, and honor him with all your emotions. Follow after wisdom and embrace the virtues. Honor those who are worthy of honor, and serve your friends with great loyalty. Take advice from those who have shown wisdom, and show kindness to those who are beneath you. Let yourself overflow with mercy and justice. Search for honors, praise, glory, and reputation, and show yourself worthy of the majesty you have acquired. And if it happens that you are overthrown, then know it occurred not because of your gift, but rather by the iniquity of changing Fortune.