

CONCERNING FAMOUS WOMEN

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BOCCACCIO'S PREFACE

ALONG time ago some ancient authors wrote brief works on the lives of famous men, and in our own times that renowned man and great poet, my master Petrarch, is writing a fuller work in a loftier style.¹ This is fitting. For assuredly, those who have given all their energy, substance, and (when the occasion required it) their life's blood in order to surpass other men with their illustrious deeds have deserved that their names be forever remembered by posterity. But I have been quite astonished that women have had so little attention from writers of this sort that they have gained no recognition in any work devoted especially to them, although it can be clearly seen in the more voluminous histories that some women have acted with as much strength as valor. If men should be praised whenever they perform great deeds (with strength which Nature has given them), how much more should women be extolled (almost all of whom are endowed with tenderness, frail bodies, and sluggish minds by Nature), if they have acquired a manly spirit and if with keen intelligence and remarkable fortitude they have dared undertake and have accomplished even the most difficult deeds?

Lest, therefore, they be cheated of their just reward, the idea came to me to honor their glory by bringing together into one book those women whose memory is still alive, adding to them some of the many whom daring, intellectual power, perseverance, natural endowments, or Fortune's favor or enmity have made noteworthy. To them I have added a few who, although they performed no action worthy of remembrance, nevertheless offered very great inducements for the performance of mighty deeds.

Nor do I want the reader to think it out of place if together with Penelope, Lucretia, and Sulpicia, who were very chaste matrons, they find Medea, Flora, and Sempronia, who happened to have very strong but destructive characters. For it is not my intention to give the word 'famous' so strict a meaning that it

¹ Boccaccio is referring to Petrarch's *De Viris Illustribus*.

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will always seem to signify 'virtuous,' but rather to give it a wider sense, if the reader will forgive me, and to consider as famous those women whom I know to have become renowned to the world through any sort of deed. For I remember reading about the Leonidas, the Scipios, the Catos, and the Fabricii, who were splendid men, often together with the seditious Gracchi, sly Hannibal, treacherous Jugurtha, Sulla and Marius stained with the blood of civil war, Crassus as avaricious as he was rich, and others of similar character. But since I have extolled with praise the deeds deserving of commemoration and have condemned with reproach the crimes, there will sometimes be not only glory for the noble, but opprobrium for the wicked. I have pulled back the reins a bit from evil but I have restored² what seems to be missing from the disgrace of certain women's loveliness. I have also thought that at times I would include among these stories some pleasant exhortations to virtue and add inducements to avoid and detest wickedness, so that by adding pleasure to these stories their value would enter the mind by stealth.

Lest it seem that according to ancient custom I have touched only on the high points of what I could learn from trustworthy authors, I have lengthened them and broadened them into more extensive histories because I think it both useful and necessary that the accomplishments of these women please women no less than men. For as women for the most part are not acquainted with history, they need and enjoy a more lengthy discussion. It will also seem that with the exception of our first mother I have neglected to include almost all Hebrew or Christian women among these pagans. But this was done because it seemed that they could not very well be placed side by side and that they did not strive for the same goal. In order to attain true and eternal glory Hebrew and Christian women did indeed steel themselves to endure human adversities, imitating the sacred commandments and examples of their teachers. But these pagans through some

² The Latin is very difficult here. The words *but I have restored* do not appear in the 1539 Latin text which is the basis of this translation but have been added from the Latin edition published at Louvain in 1487 by Egidius van der Heerstraten.

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natural gift or instinct, or rather spurred by desire for this fleeting glory, reached their goal not without great strength of mind and often in spite of the assaults of Fortune, and they endured numerous troubles. Moreover, not only do Christian women, resplendent in the true, eternal light, live on, illustrious in their deserved immortality, but we know that their virginity, purity, saintliness, and invincible firmness in overcoming carnal desire and the punishments of tyrants have been described in special books, as their merits required, by pious men outstanding for their knowledge of sacred literature and for their venerable greatness. The merits of pagan women, on the other hand, have not been published in any special work up to now and have not been set forth by anyone, as I have already pointed out. I have, therefore, begun to describe them in order to give them some reward. May God, the Father of us all, be present during this pious work, may He lavish His favor on what I am about to write and grant that I write to His true glory.

HYPSIPYLE, QUEEN OF LEMNOS

HYPSIPYLE was a woman famous for the devotion she showed toward her father, as well as for her unfortunate exile, the death of her ward Archemorus,¹ and the aid she received from her sons, whom she found again at an opportune moment. She was the daughter of Thoas, the king of Lemnos, who reigned at the time when women were seized by madness and withdrew their untamed necks from the yoke of men. Scorning the old king's rule and taking Hypsipyle with them, they unanimously decided that the following night they would turn their knives against all the men. They did not fail to carry out their plan. While all the others were cruel, Hypsipyle made a more merciful decision, because she thought that it would be inhuman to sully herself with a father's blood and told him of the others' crime. After putting him on a ship so that he could avoid public wrath and flee to Chios, she immediately made a great pyre and pretended that she was performing the last rites for her father. Everyone believed this, and Hypsipyle was placed on her father's throne and substituted for him as queen of the wicked women.

The devotion of children toward their fathers is certainly very holy. What is more proper, more just, and more praiseworthy than to reward with humaneness and honor those from whose labor we received nourishment when we were weak and who watched over us with solicitude, brought us to maturity with continuous love, taught us manners and gave us knowledge, enriched us with honors and abilities, and made us strong in morals and in intellect? Since Hypsipyle solicitously repaid this debt to her father, it is not without reason that she is placed among noble women.

While Hypsipyle was queen, Jason, on his way to Colchis with the Argonauts, either brought by the winds or arriving deliber-

¹ The child's name was either Archemorus or (as Boccaccio calls him later in this chapter) Opheltes.

ately, landed on the shore while the women resisted in vain, and he was received by the queen in her house and into her bed. When he had left, she gave birth to two sons at one time. Since, as some would have it, she was forced by the laws of Lemnos to send them away, she ordered that they be taken to Chios to be brought up by their grandfather. By this act it became known that she had deceived the others by saving her father, and her subjects rose up against her. Boarding a ship, she saved herself with difficulty from the common fury. While seeking her father and her children, she was seized by pirates and made a slave. After enduring many hardships she was given as a gift to Lycurgus, the king of Nemea, and she undertook to care for the king's only son, a small boy named Opheltus. While she was watching over him, Adrastus, the king of Argos, passed through the country with his army. He was marching against Thebes with his soldiers and was perishing of thirst because of the heat. At his request Hypsipyle showed him the spring of Langia, leaving her ward in a meadow among the flowers. At Adrastus' request she told her past history and was recognized by Euneus and Thoas, her sons, who were already grown and in the king's army. Hypsipyle, moved to hope for better fortune, found her ward dead, killed by a blow from a serpent's tail while playing in the grass, and she moved almost the whole army with her tears. The army and her children took her away from Lycurgus, who was mad with grief, and she was preserved for a fate and death unknown to me.

MEDEA, QUEEN OF COLCHIS

MEDEA, the most cruel example of ancient wickedness, was the daughter of Perseis' son Aeetes, the famous king of Colchis, and Hypsea his wife.¹ She was quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing. No matter by what teacher she was taught, the properties of herbs were so familiar to her that no one ever knew them better. By intoning enchantments, she knew perfectly how to disturb the sky, gather the winds from their dens, cause tempests, hold back rivers, brew poisons, make artificial fires for all kinds of conflagrations, and all other things of this sort. Far worse, her soul was not in discord with her arts, for, if those failed, she thought it very easy to use steel.

Captivated by his excellence, she ardently loved Jason of Thessaly, who at that time was a youth of marvelous prowess. His uncle Pelias, who was jealous of his virtue, had sent him to Colchis under the pretext of a glorious expedition to acquire the Golden Fleece. Medea, in order to merit his love, acted so that discord broke out among the people of the country, war was made against her father, and Jason had time to fulfill his desire. What sensible man can imagine that the destruction of a wealthy king could occur in the twinkling of an eye?² Having committed that crime and having gained the embraces of her beloved youth, she secretly fled with him, taking along all her father's wealth. Not content with this great offense, her cruel soul turned to worse. Thinking that Aeetes would follow them when they fled, she took along her brother Sbsyrtus, or Aegialeus, who was a small child. To make her father delay on the road, she had her brother dismembered and scattered the parts of his body in the fields of the island

¹ The wife of Aeetes is usually called Idyia.

² Boccaccio was fascinated by the sudden downfall of the mighty, which he saw as an example of the destructive power of fortune. His *De casibus virorum illustrium* is devoted to this subject.

of Tomi in the river Phasis, through which he had to pass in following her, so that her wretched father would linger to gather together the body of his son, bury him and cry over him, thus giving the fugitives more time. She was not deceived in her expectation, for so it happened.

Finally, after much wandering she arrived in Thessaly with her Jason, where she made her father-in-law Aeson so happy for his son's return, as well as for his victory, his booty, and his noble marriage, that he seemed to regain his youth. Wanting Jason to acquire the kingdom, Medea spread discord with her arts between Aeson's brother Pelias and his daughters and armed those wretched girls against their father. Then with the passing of the years she became hateful to Jason, who replaced her with Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Angry and unable to bear this, Medea contrived many plots against Jason. Using her craft, she burned with swift fire Glauce, daughter of Creon, Creon, and the royal palace, and in Jason's sight she killed the two sons she had borne him. She then fled to Athens, where she married King Aegeus and bore him a son who was called Medus after her. After attempting in vain to poison Theseus, who was returning, she fled for the third time. Restored to Jason's good graces, she was turned out of Thessaly with him by Aegialeus,³ the son of Pelias. She returned to Colchis with Jason and restored to the throne her father, who was old and in exile. I do not remember having read or heard what she did later, nor in what land and how she died.

Not to stop here, I will say that we must not give too much freedom to our eyes, because as we look we perceive beauty, become envious, and are attracted to concubines. By means of the eyes audacity is aroused, beauty is praised, squalor and poverty are unworthily condemned, and since they are not learned judges, the eyes believe only in the outward appearance of things. Often they place the shameful ahead of the sacred, the false ahead of the true, and impropriety ahead of blessing, and, by praising things which should be condemned and which seem sweet for a short

³ Acastus, and not Aegialeus, was the avenger of Pelias.

time, they sometimes stain the soul shamefully. These ignorant eyes are captivated, attracted, seized, and held by beauty even if dishonorable, by lascivious motions, by youthful wantonness, and by corroding vices. And since the eyes are the gates of the spirit, through them lust sends messages to the mind, through them love sighs and lights blind fires. Through them the heart sends sighs and shows its shameful affections. If one knew them well, he would either keep them closed or turn them heavenward or fix them upon the ground. No other ways but these are safe. And if one must use them, they should be restrained lest they become wanton. Nature gave them lids not only so that they may be closed while sleeping, but also that they might resist evil. Certainly, if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she fixed them longingly on Jason, her father's power would have been preserved longer, as would her brother's life, and the honor of her virginity would have remained unblemished. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes.

THE TYRIAN DIDO OR ELISSA,
QUEEN OF CARTHAGE

DIDO, who early in her life was called Elissa, was both the founder and the queen of Carthage. I should like to speak somewhat more at length in her praise, if with my modest remarks I may, perhaps, partly remove the infamy undeservedly cast on the honor of her widowhood. To start rather far back, the peoples of Phœnicia, famous for their industry, as is well known, came from almost the farthest part of Egypt to the shores of Syria, and there they built many famous cities, of which Agenor, famous in our times as well as in his, was king. It is believed that the glorious line of Dido descends from him. Her father was King Belus of Phœnicia, who died after conquering the island of Cyprus. At his death he left Elissa, still a young girl, and her brother Pygmalion, almost an adult, in the care of the Phœnicians. They set Pygmalion on his father's throne and gave the extremely beautiful Elissa as a wife to Acerbas (or Sychæus or Sicharbas as some call him), who was the priest of Hercules and among the Tyrians enjoyed the greatest dignity next to the king. Dido and Acerbas loved each other with great purity. More than all other men, Pygmalion had an insatiable desire for gold, and Acerbas was very wealthy. Although, knowing the king's avarice, he kept his treasures hidden, he was unable to keep the fact that he was wealthy from being known. Pygmalion, drawn by greed and hoping to take his treasure, treacherously killed his brother-in-law when he was off his guard.

When Elissa learned this, she took it so much to heart that she almost died. Having spent much time in tears, and having often called upon her beloved Acerbas in vain, she called down every frightful curse on her brother's head. She then decided to flee, either because she was warned in a dream, as some say, or because she planned it herself, lest her brother's greed bring about her

death also. She cast aside womanly weakness and hardened her spirit to manly strength, and for this she later deserved being called Dido, which in Phoenician means 'heroic.' First of all, she joined forces with some princes of the cities who she knew hated Pygmalion for various reasons. She seized her brother's ships, which had been readied either to send her away or for some other reason, and had them immediately manned by friendly sailors. At night she took her husband's treasure, whose hiding place she knew, and whatever she could take from her brother, and secretly had it placed on shipboard. With deliberate shrewdness she had many packages filled with sand and tied, pretending that they were Sychaeus' treasure, and had them loaded on board with everyone watching. When they were out on the high seas, she ordered that these packages be thrown into the water, to the surprise of those who did not know of the trick. In tears she vowed that after throwing Acerbas' treasure into the sea she would also find the death which she had long desired. But she said that she felt pity for the sailors, who, she had no doubt, would be cut to pieces together with her by the avaricious and cruel king if they returned to Pygmalion. But if they wanted to flee with her, she would not fail to take care of their needs. On hearing this, the wretched sailors, although they were sorrowfully leaving their homes and the country where they had been born, readily consented to go into exile for fear of cruel death. They changed course and sailed to Cyprus under her direction. There, as a solace to youth and to bring forth children, she carried off some girls who were on the shore making their customary sacrifice to Venus. She took as companion on her voyage the priest of Jupiter and all his family, who foresaw great things from that flight. Leaving Crete behind and Sicily on her right, she headed for Africa and the Massylian's shores and finally entered the gulf which later became well known. There she found a safe harbor for her ships and decided to allow the weary sailors some rest.

The inhabitants of the vicinity came, wanting to see the foreigners, and some brought food and goods, according to their custom. They began to speak together and make friends. Since it

seemed to please the inhabitants that they remain there, and since ambassadors from the people of Utica, who also had previously come from Tyre, came to persuade them to remain, Dido bought from the landowners of the vicinity only as much land on the shore as could be encircled by the hide of an ox for establishing her settlement, so that it would not seem that she was injuring anyone, and so that no one would suspect she was doing something of great importance for the future. She did this without fear, in spite of the fact that she had heard that her brother was threatening war. Now, this was a woman's slyness, for at her orders the hide of the ox was cut into very thin strips, which when joined one to the other encircled much more land than the sellers had thought. Here she built a warlike city under the auspices of a horse's head which had been found; she called it Carthage and named the fortress Byrsa, after the ox hide. She showed the treasure which she had slyly kept hidden and encouraged her companions who had fled with her to high hopes.

They built city-walls, temples, a forum, and public and private buildings. She gave the people laws and regulations for living, and, as the noble city grew rapidly, Dido became famous throughout Africa for her great beauty such as had never been seen before and for her unheard-of virtue and chastity. Because of this, and since the people of Africa are greatly inclined towards sensuality, it happened that the king of the Muscani¹ desired her and asked her in marriage from the elders of Carthage, threatening to wage war and destroy the growing city if she were not given to him. The citizens, who knew the widowed queen's sacred and inflexible intention of chastity, feared greatly that they would be destroyed in war if the king's request were denied. When she questioned them, they did not dare to tell Dido what the king desired, and so they decided to deceive the queen and make her accede to their wishes through her own decision. They told her that the king wanted to bring his savage, barbaric people to a more civilized way of life through their instruction, and for this reason he was

¹ This was Hiarbas or Jarbas, the king and priest of the Gaetulians in Northern Africa.

requesting some teachers and threatening to wage war if they were not given to him. And they said that they knew not who would be willing to undertake that task, leaving his country to go and live with so harsh a king. The queen, who did not realize the deception, turned to them and said: "O noble citizens, what laziness, what negligence is this? Do you not know that we were born for father and country? Can he be said to be a true citizen who rejects death or other hardships if circumstances require them for the public weal? Go forth quickly, then, and with a little danger to yourselves repel the great fury of war."

It seemed to the princes that with these reproaches of the queen they had obtained what they desired. They therefore revealed to her the king's true demands. When she heard them, the queen realized that with her statement she had approved the request for marriage, and she grieved to herself, not daring to oppose her people's treachery. Remaining firm in her intention, she immediately came to a decision which seemed necessary to her honor and said that she would marry if she were given some time. This was granted her. At the time when the Trojan Aeneas, who had never been seen in that country, arrived, Dido had decided to die rather than forego her chastity, and so she built a great fire in the highest part of the city, which the citizens believed was to placate the soul of Sychaeus. Having performed various ceremonies and having sacrificed many animals, Dido, dressed in mourning, climbed onto the pyre in the presence of a great number of citizens, who were watching to see what she would do. When she had finished all these things, Dido, because of her vow, took out a knife that she had under her dress, placed it against her completely chaste breast, called out to Sychaeus, and said: "My citizens, I go to my husband, as you desire." As soon as she had uttered these few words, she let herself fall onto the knife, to the great sorrow of all the onlookers. Having pierced a vital spot, she died shedding her chaste blood, as they rushed to her aid in vain.

O inviolate honor of chastity! O venerable and eternal example of constant widowhood! O Dido, I wish that widows would turn their eyes to you, and that especially those who are Christian

would contemplate your strength. And if they can, let them consider with attentive mind you who shed your chaste blood, especially those who lightly go, I will not say to a second, but to a third wedding or more. And I ask, what will they say who are marked with the emblem of Christ, when they see this pagan to whom Christ was completely unknown, proceed with such firm spirit to win fame and go with such firm determination towards a death given not by others, but by her own hand, rather than consent to a second marriage and allow her sacred wish to respect widowhood to be broken? Since our women show great finesse in excusing themselves, I believe that someone will say: "I had to do this: I was abandoned; my parents and my brothers were dead; suitors pressed me with flattery; I could not resist, for I am made of flesh and not of iron." How ridiculous! On whose aid could Dido count, who was in exile and whose only brother was an enemy? Did Dido not have many suitors? Was Dido made of stone or wood more than the women of our time? Certainly not! But having at least a brave heart, by dying she escaped in the only way she could the lure which she did not think she could resist with force. But we, who say that we are so abandoned, do we not have Christ as a refuge, the holy Redeemer Who is always present to those who place their hopes in Him? Do you think that He Who saved the children from the fiery furnace, Who saved Susanna from false accusations, cannot save you from your enemies' hands if you so desire? Lower your eyes to the ground, close your ears, and hurl back the oncoming waves like a reef, be firm and let the winds howl, and you will be safe.

Perhaps another woman will rise and say: "My domains stretched far and wide, I had a beautiful house, royal furnishings, and great wealth. I wanted to be a mother so that so much wealth would not go to strangers." O insane desire! Did Dido not have a kingdom without children? Did she not have a king's wealth? Certainly! She refused to become a mother because she very wisely thought that nothing is more foolish than to ruin oneself to aggrandize another. Shall I then put a blot on my chastity in order to give birth to an owner for my fields, my splendid house,

my furnishings, when as so often happens he may prove to be a wastrel? And if you have great wealth, you certainly should spend it and not throw it away. The poor of Christ are many, and when you give to them you build eternal palaces for yourself; when you give to them you make your chastity shine with another splendor. In addition we have friends who are more suitable heirs than anyone else, because they are as we choose them; but children are not as we would like them, but as Nature grants.

A third woman will come and say that she had to marry again because her parents ordered her, her relatives forced her, her neighbors encouraged her, as if we did not know that if her unbridled lust had not spurred her — in fact commanded her — she would have overcome everything with a single denial. Dido was willing to die in order not to live dishonorably, but this woman could not refuse marriage in order to live honorably.

Another will present herself, who in her own opinion is more shrewd than the others, and will say: "I was a young woman. As you know, youth is ardent; I could not remain continent. Saint Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn, and I followed his advice." How well spoken! As if I commended chastity only to children, or as if Dido had not been a young woman when she determined to remain chaste. How wicked it is that Paul's advice, uttered in such a saintly way, should often be brought forward by shameless people in defense of a foul deed. We can restore lost strength with food, but we cannot diminish superfluous strength with abstinence. That pagan woman, for the sake of vain glory, was able to master her ardor and curb it. Cannot a Christian woman master it in order to acquire eternal glory? Alas! Thinking that we can deceive God in this way, we forego transitory glory, not to speak of the eternal, and place ourselves in danger of eternal damnation.

Let those who consider Dido's dead body be ashamed then, and, thinking of the reason for her death, let them bow their heads, and let Christian women grieve at being surpassed in chastity by that woman who was a limb of Satan. Let them not think that by mourning and dressing in black they have fulfilled all their duties

to the dead. Love must be kept whole until the end if they want to fulfill the duties of widowhood, and they must not think of adulterously contracting another marriage, which some do more to avoid the blemish of lewdness and to satisfy their ardor under the false name of marriage, than to obey its sacrament. And what is looking for the company of so many men and being joined to so many if not entering brothels, following the example of Valeria Messalina? But I shall speak of this at another time. For I confess that I have greatly exceeded the limits of the work I have commenced. But who is so much master of himself that he is not occasionally drawn away from his purpose by his fervor? I beg the reader's pardon and return to the point where I digressed.

Well then, Dido's countrymen, amid public wails and sadness, accorded her not only human but divine honors and exalted her as much as they could with a magnificent funeral. And they honored her not only as their common mother and queen, but as a goddess, their protector, and they revered her with altars, temples, and sacrifices as long as Carthage stood.²

² This version of Dido's story is very different from that which is familiar through Virgil and Ovid, in which Dido succumbs to love for Aeneas and kills herself in despair when he leaves her. Boccaccio defends her and champions her cause especially against Dante, who placed Dido among the souls of the lustful and stresses the fact that she had not remained true to her husband's memory (*Inferno* V, 61, 62).

CONCLUSION

AS can be clearly seen, I have reached the women of our time, in which the number of illustrious ones is so small that I think it more suitable to come to an end here rather than proceed farther with the women of today, especially since this work, which began with our first mother Eve, concludes with so great a queen. I know that there will be many who will say that I have omitted numerous famous women, and others who will reprimand me for things for which I may perhaps be justly reproached.

To answer the former in all humility, I confess willingly that I have omitted many. First of all, I could not mention all of them, for time which triumphs over fame has destroyed their names. Nor was it granted me to read about all those whose fame has survived, and memory did not serve me as I wished for all those of whom I had knowledge. Lest they deem me forgetful in everything, however, I want them to believe that I have knowingly omitted many, barbarian as well as Greek and Latin, and wives of emperors and kings. In truth, I considered innumerable women and learned their deeds, but when I took up my quill I did not do so with the intention of writing about all of them. Rather, as I stated at the beginning of this book, I intended to put into it and speak of only a few among the great multitude. As I think I have done this sufficiently well, the objection is unnecessary.

To the others I say that it is possible that some things have been improperly included, and I will easily believe it, for it often happens that a writer is deceived not only by ignorance of the matter but by the excessive love he has for his work. If I have done this, I am sorry, and I ask, for the glory of honorable studies, that wiser men tolerate with kindly spirit what has not been done properly. And if anyone has a charitable soul, let him correct what has been improperly written by adding to it or deleting and improve it so that the work will flourish for someone's benefit, rather than perish torn by the jaws of the malicious without being of service to anyone.