

JOANNA OF NAPLES

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“A dismal cry burst from her when she recognized the place where Andrea and Charles of Duras had each died a violent death. Recovering herself, she inquired in a calm voice why they had brought her to that place. One of the barons replied by showing her a rope of silk and gold.”

Alexandre Dumas,
Celebrated Crimes



Revenge. Murder. Intrigue.

By Laura Morreale

She was, Alexandre Dumas, claimed “the third corpse to be thrown over the balcony of Aversa.” Dumas was a novelist so his comments must be taken with a grain of salt. But the real story of Queen Joanna I (or Joan) of Naples is even better than fiction. Joanna, one of the first women to rule a kingdom in her own right, lived a life of political scandal, intrigue, and great personal loss. She was

described as both a harlot and a saint, a murderer and a victim, a faithful servant of the church and a betrayer of the faithful.

But who was she really?

Joanna’s life began with great promise. Born into one of Europe’s ruling families, she was descended from Charles of Anjou. Charles had established a powerful French dynasty in

Naples, one of the great cultural centers of Europe during the late 1260s.

At the time of Joanna’s birth, her grandfather Robert of Anjou ruled Naples. Hailed as “the wisest man since Solomon,” Robert was sophisticated, cultured and a patron of both Petrarch and Boccaccio.

When Robert died in 1343,



Joanna with Catherine of Sienna. In a letter to an elderly widow, Monna Calomba, Catherine recommended that the widow avoid “conversation...with vain or dissolute women.”

Catherine had no qualms about having Joanna as a her patron.

“women are always more wavering and fickle” Giovanni Boccaccio

his direct heir, Joanna’s father, was already dead. Robert designated Joanna, who an adolescent at the time, as his heir. Joanna’s husband and cousin, Andrew of Hungary, was named Prince Consort. He was to have no power of his own. In an age when women were seen as “more wavering and fickle” than men, Robert’s decision was not well received, either by the court or his subjects.

Like most royal couples, Joanna and Andrew had married for political reasons. Robert’s decision to deny Andrew power simply exacerbated Andrew’s and Joanna’s already strained relationship.

Andrew’s and Joanna’s marriage now went from bad to worse as Joanna actively opposed Andrew’s attempts to gain power. Joanna, her enemies claimed, candidly engaged in a number of adulterous affairs, mocked her husband openly in court, and ultimately denied him the honor of being crowned

along with her at her coronation, as was the custom with all royal consorts, male or female.

On September 18, 1345, the eve of what was to be his separate own coronation as prince consort, Andrew suffered the final indignity. He was strangled to death while on a hunting trip in Aversa. His body was then savagely mutilated and thrown from an open window to the ground below.

Joanna’s behavior before the murder made her an immediate suspect. In arranging the marriage, Andrew’s family had expected him to be a king, not a do-nothing prince consort. Louis of Hungary, Andrew’s brother, now seized the opportunity to revenge his brother and gain some territory. In November of 1347, he set off to invade Naples. Rejecting Joanna, the Neapolitans and their neighbors to the north welcomed the Hungarian invasion and in the winter of 1347, Louis seized the throne, claiming that he was the rightful heir of his assassinated brother.

By early 1348, Joanna, who had lost her throne, was desperate. Because Naples was a papal fief (a territory controlled by the pope), Joanna's only hope was to secure support from Pope Clement VI. That January, she fled to Avignon, where the pope was then living.

Joanna did not travel alone. Her close confidant, Enrico Caracciolo-Rosso, a Neapolitan nobleman, who was suspected of being her lover accompanied her. Before her flight, Joanna had illegally married her first cousin, Louis of Taranto, and when she appeared before the pope, she was carrying Louis' child. Joanna's husband followed her and Caracciolo-Rosso to Avignon shortly. With the help of their well-connected advisors, Louis and Joanna joined forces to convince Pope Clement to validate their marriage and re-instate Joanna as the rightful queen of Naples.

While Joanna and Louis pled their case, conditions in Naples had deteriorated. In 1348, the Black Death (bubonic plague) had erupted in Europe. The plague, which scholars speculate killed about 1 in 3 Europeans, caused chaos in its wake. Louis of Hungary escaped the plague-ridden city and the Neapolitans came to despise the strident Hungarian

overlords whom their fleeing king had designated as rulers in his absence.

When Joanna and her husband returned to Naples in August of 1348, they were warmly welcomed as the kingdom's rightful heirs. Joanna accorded Louis the status of co-ruler. But over the course of the next decade, Louis marginalized Joanna to such an extent that the pope chastised him for treating her more like a servant than a wife.

Perhaps Joanna had been right to deny Andrew power when she was a teenager.

Louis proved to be an unpopular leader, and when he died in 1362, the Neapolitans recognized Joanna as the true heir to the throne.

Joanna proved to be a capable ruler. Despite her scandalous past, she served as a protector of the church and a patron of saintly women, including Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna. Joanna's reign as queen from Louis' death until the Great Schism of 1378 was a period of great cooperation between Naples and the papacy.

Joanna married twice during this period, but each time, she managed to keep her husband in the background while still maintaining control of her

Joanna fled to plead her case before the pope in his palace in Avignon.



of her realm.

Joanna's downfall came with the Great Schism of the Western Church in 1378. The schism had begun when two rival popes, Urban VI and Clement VII, were both elected to the papal seat. Joanna had initially backed Urban, a Neapolitan by birth, but changed her allegiance to Clement for reasons that remain unexplained. In response, Urban took his revenge, by excommunicating Joanna, removing her from power, and replacing her with her cousin, Charles of Durazzo.

Charles imprisoned Joanna in the fortress of San Fele in 1381, where she remained for less than a year before she was killed at his command, reportedly smothered with pillows (or, alternatively, strangled) as revenge for the murder of Andrew.

Joanna's life was exciting, tragic, and above all extraordinary for a woman living in the fourteenth century. Contemporaries remembered her as the embodiment of both good and evil, and she has been depicted as victim, criminal, saint and sinner by succeeding generations of historians and poets, all of whom were fascinated by her remarkable life.

For Further Reading:

Nancy Goldstone, *The Lady Queen: The Notorious Reign of Joanna I, Queen of Naples, Jerusalem, and Sicily*

Dr. Laura Morreale is an independent historian. Her dissertation, *Chronicle and Community in Northern Italy, 1270-1360*, explored the introduction of vernacular Italian into local historical writing. She has recently written about the interaction between French and Italian vernacular traditions in thirteenth-century Florentine historiography (*Speculum*, October, 2010), and has produced an English translation of Martin da Canal's Old French history of Venice, *Les Estoires de Venise* (Unipress, 2009). She edits Fordham's French of Italy website.