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Caterina Sforza: the shifting representation of a woman ruler in early Modern Italy

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Caterina Sforza's fame as ruler of the small territories of Imola and Forlì in the late fifteenth-century has persisted over the centuries. Yet her fame has shifted and changed with the Niccolò Machiavelli's comments on her life greatly affected her reputation. Her powerful Medici descendants further tempered her legend without diminishing her fame. The various levels of archival traces for Sforza's life and legend present a remarkable example of how accretions of information and interpretation become history.

Caterina Sforza's fame as ruler of the small territories of Imola and Forlì in the late fifteenth-century has persisted over the centuries, with good reason. Despite her gender, Sforza successfully ruled these small but vital territories in northern Italy for a dozen years, marking her as an unusual, if not exceptional character. The fascinating connections between her public and private life, which included several marriages to prominent Italian men, many children, and several assassinations and conspiracies, added to her fame among her contemporaries and those that followed. Most notoriously, Sforza's reputation was bolstered by Niccolò Machiavelli, who reported that she bared her genitalia during a stand-off over the rule of Forlì. Yet Sforza's fame has shifted and changed with the times. What we know about the past, and certainly about early modern women in power, is informed by the relatively scant records and materials left behind for scholarly exhumation. Choices made across the centuries, about what to preserve and how to prioritize and analyze these remnants, leave significant, if often unacknowledged, trails in biographies and other accounts. The accretions of information and interpretation layered into the archives reappear in writings and scholarship in ways that can overshadow the original documents and color our view of the past. Sforza's reign and its archival traces, along with the literary and archival accounts added in the decades after her death in 1509, present a remarkable example of this process and underscores the way legend blurs into history.

Any number of biases work to obscure women rulers' achievements in the historical record. Beginning with the prescriptive literature of the early modern era and continuing well into more modern times, writers and scholars condemned, dismissed, or ignored these women, or promoted versions of their life that either emphasized more "traditional" feminine roles or played up their exceptional, almost aberrant masculine qualities. For instance, the significant literature on the "monstrous regiment of women," which began in the sixteenth century, chastises women rulers as threats to the patriarchal social order; at the same time, its popularity calls attention to the growing reality of women in power.

Despite this backlash, some female rulers, including Caterina Sforza (1462/63–1509), have never been far from historical consciousness. The long monarchies of Elizabeth I in England and Isabella of Castile are likewise hard to ignore. Examples on the Italian peninsula are not quite as august as those beyond the Alps; Italy was broken smaller city-states and principalities, and so queens of vast lands were rare and virtually non-existent in the early modern era. Yet Sharon Jansen, in her review of the many women rulers in early modern Europe, heralds Sforza as the "mother" of other Italian women in power¹. Indeed, with the rise of women's and gender studies, scholars have uncovered numerous examples of powerful women in early modern Italy. Many noble women served as regents, most often for short, temporary terms, while some maintained longer regencies or were outright rulers or governors. Recent archival work has similarly revealed instances of women who took on leadership or entrepreneurial roles in other arenas, such as in spiritual or business endeavors. Without going back to the original empirical evidence, with new questions in mind, these women's lives would have remained obscure.

Even so, our understanding of these women remains fundamentally linked to fragmented and often slanted archival records. A close look at the archival traces left first by Sforza and then by contemporary humanists and her descendants opens a window onto how she shaped her own power and how others subsequently adjusted it to serve their varying notions of women's leadership. Sforza stands out due to her own actions and iconography and, equally important, because of how her legend was shaped through writings and images in the decades immediately after her death. She emphasized her own fame and success during her regency and challenged notions of appropriate gender roles for women in power, themes picked up by Niccolò Machiavelli, whose analysis of her actions boosted her fame and crystalized her notoriety. Later, her Medici descendants, who gained the rule of Florence and Tuscany, tempered her legend without diminishing her fame. These three layers of archival accretions—Sforza's, Machiavelli's, and the

¹ Sharon L. Jansen, *The Monstrous Regiment of Women: Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe*, London 2002, p. 52. See also Lisa Hopkins, *Women Who Would be Kings; Female Rulers of the Sixteenth Century*, London 1991; Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Suzuki, eds., *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, Urbana and Chicago 2009.

Medici's—have fundamentally shaped our knowledge of who she is and her significance in Italian history.

Caterina Sforza and the Constraints on Women's Rule

Violence, courage, and audacity punctuate Caterina Sforza's rule of the small but strategically located territories of Forlì and Imola in the Romagna region. She came to power in a stunning coup at the Rocca di Ravadlino of Forlì after the murder of her husband, a triumph that later generated a popular fable of how she lifted her skirts and exposed her genitals to shock her enemies into submission. Her rule ended after her personal defense of the same fortress failed against the onslaught of Cesare Borgia, whose siege of the Papal States had caused most of her peers to flee to safety².

Prior to her regency, Sforza had fulfilled social expectations as a noble daughter and wife: she married the man to whom her father betrothed her, then bore her husband numerous children and supported his rule. She was the daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan (r. 1467–76), and his mistress Lucrezia Landriani. She grew up in the ducal court, largely under the tutelage of Galeazzo's consort, Bona of Savoy. In 1477, Sforza married Girolamo Riario (1443–1488), nephew of Pope Sixtus IV and ruler of Imola, which he had acquired as part of the betrothal negotiations in 1473. The couple resided in Rome, where Riario was Captain General of the papal armies, until Sixtus's death in 1484. The family then retreated to Forlì, which Riario had gained possession of in 1480. Over the years, Sforza bore Riario eight children, six of whom survived infancy, and she periodically served as regent and ruler when her husband was ill or away in battle. In an extension of these womanly duties, she then also claimed and maintained political power after her husband's death.

When Riario was violently assassinated by his political enemies in April 1488, Sforza successfully fought to become regent for her eldest son Ottaviano (1479–1533), who was too young to rule on his own³. She survived several local conspiracies and international threats against her rule of Imola and Forlì in the 1490s, and cultivated a princely lifestyle, with lavish living quarters, luxurious clothing, hunts and banquets, and more. She was deposed when Cesare Borgia (1475/76–1507) invaded the Romagna region in late 1499. Taken prisoner in early 1500, she was eventually released in July 1501. Sforza moved to Florence, where she plotted with her sons to retake

²The most reliable and thorough biographies of Caterina Sforza's are, in English, Ernst Breisach, *Caterina Sforza: a Renaissance Virago*, Chicago 1967 and, in Italian, Pier Desiderio Pasolini, *Caterina Sforza*, 3 vols., Rome 1893. For a more recent account, see Elizabeth Lev, *The Tigress of Forlì: Renaissance Italy's Most Courageous and Notorious Countess, Caterina Riario Sforza De' Medici*, Boston 2011.

³For the assassination and the events that followed, see Joyce de Vries, *Caterina Sforza and the Art of Appearances: Gender, Art, and Culture in Early Modern Italy* Farnham, Surrey 2010, pp. 38–43; Breisach, pp. 96–102; Pasolini, *Caterina Sforza*, vol. 3, doc. 1355, vol.1, pp. 195–262.

the Riario territories. These efforts were unsuccessful, and she died after a long illness in 1509. She was buried in the Murate convent in Florence, where she had maintained a cell for spiritual retreat⁴.

Sforza has often been considered as an exceptional woman because of her long rule, her political cunning, and her willingness to personally fight against her enemies. Her talents and achievements certainly stand in contrast to what late medieval and early modern prescriptive literature often says about the female character, namely that it is irrational, inconstant, unintelligent, and thus incapable of leadership⁵. These negative notions of character aside, women did serve as regents, most often for short periods, as Sforza did when Riario was still alive but otherwise unable to govern directly. Other examples of this type of short-term regency include Eleonora of Aragon, Isabella d'Este, Beatrice d'Este, Lucrezia Borgia, Eleonora of Toledo, and many more. Sforza's notoriety in comparison seems more to do with her abilities to weather conflict and maintain her power.

A female regent wielded more power if she served a longer term after her husband's death, when she then acted on the best interests of the heir, usually her son. Male relatives and advisors and local governors typically offered counsel, but the female regent was particularly vulnerable to the machination of others who wanted control of the state. She could easily be usurped under the accusation that she was jeopardizing the future of the heir or was somehow disloyal to her marital family; this was the case of Bona of Savoy, Sforza's step-mother. Economic factors that favored men further hindered women's rulership. In Italy, the most successful princes earned the bulk of their income from professional military contracts. Federico da Montefeltro collected so much money from his military commitments that he canceled local taxes in his territories and could walk the streets without an armed guard, which alludes to the perils faced by a ruler who relied too much on taxes to pay for a luxurious lifestyle. Women could not accept military contracts, and were thus excluded from these crucial financial means. As regents, they could draw upon their dowries and the inheritances of their charges as well as taxes and tariffs to support their rule; but their personal money could run out and raising taxes was potentially unpopular. In any case, the female ruler needed to be creative in financing her rule and not draw too heavily from her subjects. In sum, the successful female regent

⁴ Sforza's will can be found in Archivio di Stato Firenze, Fondo Mediceo avanti il Principato (ASF, MAP), Filza 99, n. 38, cc. 112-42; published in Pasolini, cit. vol. 3, doc. 1355, pp. 537-47. For analysis of the will, see de Vries, *Caterina Sforza*, cit., pp. 227-33.

⁵ See, for instance, Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. R. N. Watkins, Columbia 1969; Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. G. Bull, New York 1967; and Lodovico Domenichi, *La Nobilita delle donne*, Venice, 1549. See also Sheila Folliott, *Catherine de' Medici as Artemisia: Figuring the Powerful Widow*, in *Rewriting the Renaissance*, pp. 227-41; Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, Chicago-London 1991; Merry E. Weisner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1993; Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (eds), *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (London and New York, 1998); and Cindy L. Carlson and Angela J. Weisl (eds), *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* New York 1999.

had to maintain a proper balance between her feminine virtues of loyal and dutiful mother and the more masculine requirements of political and financial acumen required of her position. Sforza excelled in both realms, and handily balanced the masculine and the feminine, as the archival traces she left behind reveal.

Caterina Sforza's iconography of rulership

The statecraft of appearances was fundamental to all nobles of this era, including Caterina Sforza, and portraiture played a large role in self-presentation. A noble woman, and especially one who ruled, would typically be commemorated in several portraits during her life. Isabella d'Este is well known for her many portraits, which were usually heavily idealized, as most images of women were at this time. Unfortunately there are no firmly identified, extant painted portraits of Sforza that predate her death; all the surviving paintings of her are posthumous. What does survive are portrait medals, produced during her Riario marriage and regency, and they, as primary sources in the archive Sforza produced, can tell us much about the iconography of her rulership.

The earliest medal of Sforza was likely commissioned c.1480-84, that is, during the Roman years of her Riario marriage and after Girolamo acquired Forlì, which is included in the inscription. No documents have come to light to explain whether she or her husband ordered the medal; the artist who designed it also remains unclear, although it has been tentatively attributed to the Venetian Vettor di Antonio Gambello, based on stylistic similarities to his other work. On the medal, Sforza adheres to the visual codes of virtuous feminine behavior within a humanist context—her profile portrait is beautiful and idealized in a classicizing way⁶. Signaling her married state, her hair is bound up in a style that recalls that of Livia, the wife of Augustus. Sforza wears draperies instead of a contemporary dress to further underscore the classicism. The inscription spells out her name and title, «Caterina Sforza Visconti de Riario, mistress of Imola and Forlì» (CATARINA SFOR VICECO DE RIARIO IMOLAE FORLIVII DNA). The emblem on the reverse depicts a female personification of Fortune, an almost nude and nubile figure balanced with one foot on a globe, a smaller globe in her left hand and a rudder in her right. The motto reads: «To you and to virtue» (TIBI ET VIRTVTI), with *you* possibly referring to Sforza or Fortune, or, more likely, both. This confident allusion to fortune and virtue further suggests that the medal was executed during a time of prosperity, when Sforza was the proper and fecund wife to her powerful husband in Renaissance Rome.

Sforza transformed her iconography when she became regent for her son in 1488. A new portrait medal, likely made by Niccolò Spinelli, called

⁶ De Vries, cit. pp. 32-35; see also George F. Hill, *A Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini*, 2 vols, London 1930, vol. 1, p. 296.

Fiorentino, emphasized her victory and her status as Riario's widow, which was fundamental to her rule⁷. Sforza is less idealized in this portrait; she is heavier, more imposing, and instead of classicizing drapery, she wears contemporary dress. She now wears a veil to indicate her widowhood, and her covered hair distances her from notions of feminine beauty. The inscription spells out her name and titles in a slightly different way than on the earlier medal, «Caterina Sforza de Riario of Forlì and Imola» (CATHARINA SF DE RIARIO FORLIVII IMOLAE). The name of her natal family is abbreviated, but her marital name is spelled out in full and positioned in front of her face. The implicit message from this portrait is that Sforza is the loyal Riario widow and regent. She eschewed idealization and overt symbols of female beauty because she was not on the marriage market. The emblem on the reverse more forcefully celebrates her triumph as regent. The inscription, «Fame will follow victory» (VICTORIAM FAMA SEQVETVR), celebrates Sforza's success in the power struggle after Riario's assassination. A winged personification, with a palm in one hand and the reins to winged two horses in the other, rides in a wheeled cart. The figure is ambiguous enough to refer to both Fame and Victory, and it draws upon the iconography of both virtues. If the Sforza name was downplayed in the inscription encircling her portrait, the family's coat of arms, the *biscione*, appears on the cart and reminds the viewer of her natal family and its continuing support of her. Sforza chose her motto well: «Fame follows Victory» has become the key theme in her life and legacy.

It is not surprising that Sforza drew upon masculine imagery for the emblem on the victory medal. Women rulers had been doing this for centuries, since rulership was gendered a masculine endeavor because of its associations with physical and military strength as well as familial and political authority. In ancient Egypt, for example, Queen Hatshepsut fashioned herself as a man so she could rule as Pharaoh after her husband Thutmose II's death⁸. Sforza understandably drew upon more recent trends for the specifics of her iconography. She adopted the classicizing motif of the victory cast, popularized by Petrarch in the fourteenth century, and soon seen in portraits and paintings accompanied by appropriately gendered virtues or symbols. The allegories on the reverses of the well-known portraits of Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro by Piero della Francesca (c.1467-72) are a case in point. The personifications of the feminine virtues of Chastity, Modesty, Charity, and Faith ride in Battista's triumphal cart, while the masculine virtues of Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance ride in Federico's. Furthermore, Federico is crowned by a winged personification of Fame, a figure quite similar to Sforza's figure of Victory/Fame. On her second portrait medal, Sforza offered a combination of these virtues: the widow's veil and her husband's family name suggest her

⁷ De Vries, cit. pp. 43-45; and Hill, cit. vol. 1, p. 265.

⁸ See Joyce Tyldesley, *Hatchepsut: The Female Pharaoh*, London 1996.

chastity, modesty, and faith, but the emblem and motto explicitly refer to the masculine virtues of victory and fame.

The emblem on Sforza's medal was so thoroughly masculine that Charles VIII of France adopted it with only slight variation for a medal he commissioned from Niccolò Fiorentino in 1494-95. The inscription on the king's medal reads «Peace will follow victory» (VICTORIVM PAX SEQVETVR), and the personification of Peace has been added to the motif. Peace leads the victory cart, which still carries the winged personification of Victory (and here, the figure is more firmly identified as Victory by the motto)⁹. Charles VIII might already have been familiar with Sforza's medal; if not, he or his advisors could have seen its emblem in Niccolò's model books, which clients could consult when formulating their order¹⁰. From these examples, from Federico da Montefeltro, Caterina Sforza, and Charles VIII, it is clear that the masculinized victory cart was a successful and popular way to celebrate the fame and power of rulership and military conquest.

The motto "Fame follows Victory" served Sforza so well that when she updated the portrait on her medal a decade later, she maintained the same emblem. In 1498, Sforza's son Ottaviano was nineteen and had come of age. He had taken on his first military contract, negotiated by his mother, and was off serving in the Florentine army¹¹. Sforza continued in her role as regent, but instead of long-term regent of a minor child, she served the adult ruler in a more temporary fashion, as she had once served for her husband when he was away. On her new portrait medal, she removed the veil from her head, and added embroidery on her dress and some pearls to her hair, which once again is pulled back into a Livian knot. Other than these small, but significant changes, the updated medal remains virtually the same as the original. Sforza no longer had to present herself as a widow, loyal to a dead husband; rather, she was now appointed by her son, and could appear as a mature woman, still imposing and still victorious, but also displaying some of the trappings of feminine beauty. Ottaviano Riario also commissioned a medal to celebrate his new responsibilities as ruler and soldier. It too is attributed to Niccolò Fiorentino and was probably ordered at the same time as the alterations to mother's medal¹².

⁹ De Vries, cit. p. 45; and Hill, cit., vol. 1, p. 250.

¹⁰ See Arne R. Flaten, *Portrait Medals and Assembly-Line Art in Late Quattrocento Florence*, in *The Art Market in Italy: 15th to 17th Centuries*. Eds. Marcello Fantoni, Sarah Matthews-Grieco, Louisa Matthew, Modena, pp. 127-139.

¹¹ For the contract, dated June 9, 1498, see Archivio di Stato Firenze, Fondo Mediceo, *Avanti il principato* (MAP), Filza 78, n. 56, fols. 180-85.

¹² On Sforza's medal of c. 1498, as well as Ottaviano's medal, see de Vries, cit. pp. 52-56. See also Hill, cit., vol. 1, pp. 265-66. Other women asserted their abilities to serve as short-term regents. For instance, Isabella d'Este commissioned of a portrait medal in 1498 with an intellectually-challenging emblem in part to buttress her qualifications to serve as temporary regent. See Luke Syson, *Reading Faces. Gian Cristoforo Romano's Medal of Isabella d'Este*, in C. Mozzarelli, R. Oresko, and L. Ventura, eds., *La Corte di Mantova nell'eta' di Andrea Mantegna, 1450-1550*, Rome 1997, pp. 281-94.

The one other surviving contemporary portrait of Sforza, a simple woodcut that illustrates her biography in Jacopo Foresti's *Lives of Famous Women* (*De plurimis claris selectibus mulieribus novissime congestum*, 1497), supports this interpretation of her regency medals¹³. The portrait displayed on the 1488 medal without a doubt inspired the woodcut: a veiled Sforza appears in profile wearing similar clothing. The setting has been expanded, and she stands in front of an expansive landscape suggestive of her territories and holds a baton that signals her rulership. This simple portrait thus conveys the basic information that Sforza is a proper widow and a ruler, the details of which Foresti elaborates upon in his text, Sforza's first biography.

Using courtly rhetoric, Foresti praises Sforza's feminine qualities, like beauty and piety, as well her masculine virtues, like intelligence and constancy. This resembles the balance between these two realms on her regency medals. Foresti betrays some skepticism about her abilities, which prefigures the more vitriolic accounts of female rulers penned later. For instance, regarding her taking power after the murder of her husband, he writes

Like a man she cast away those womanly tears, and took care to show her prudence, her greatness of spirit against the incensed and raging populace [...]. It was a remarkable thing, and unbelievable when you hear it, to have seen this girl of 24 years, brought up constantly in a dainty lifestyle and inexperienced in this sort of chaos, make a stand in a place where even the stout-hearted normally tremble¹⁴.

Foresti's incredulity initiates the exceptional woman motif that later dominated Sforza's legend. While she is young, beautiful, and dainty, she was also strong and virile, and had the wherewithal to stand up to her enemies.

In many ways, Foresti was repeating some of the same tensions between the masculine and feminine realms that Sforza employed in her correspondence. Three of her many letters to her uncle Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, speak to her awareness of how gender affects power dynamics. First, she implies that rulership trumps gender in letter dated 27 March 1496, «[...] there is no need for Signor Giovanni Bentivoglio to be amazed, as I am made of the same stuff as he», in response to Bentivoglio's

¹³ Jacopo Foresti (also known as Fra Filippo da Bergamo), *De plurimis claris selectibus mulieribus novissime congestum*, Ferrara 1497, pp. CLX-CLXV. The text on Sforza is transcribed in Pasolini, cit. vol. 3, pp. 273-76, doc. 723. Foresti's book is modeled on Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* (1361). See also L. M. Frattini, *Foresti, Giacomo Filippo*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome 1997, vol. 48, pp. 801-03.

¹⁴ «Muliebres lacrimas pro virili a se reiecit, et suam prudentiam, suamque animi magnitudinem contra insanum, furentemque populum demonstrare curavit[...]. Mira profecto res, et auditu incredibilis, vidisse puellam quatuor et viginti annorum in deliciis semper enutritam, tumultuumque ignaram eo loco constitisse, in quo etiam magnanimes tremere consueverunt»; quoted from Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, pp. 273-74, doc. 723.

surprise at the strength of her convictions¹⁵. This letter and the next reveal her suspicions that her gender was being used against her. On 11 April 1496, she complains about her cousin-in-law Cardinal Raffaele Riario, «I don't know if he thinks he is dealing with a child, or if it is because I am a woman that he thinks he can lash at me with his words»¹⁶. Finally, on 25 August 1498, when she feared invasion from Venice, she still plays up her courage, «if I have to lose, even if I am a woman, I want to lose like a man»¹⁷. The masculine bravado in that letter contrasts with her assertion of demure womanhood when it suited her needs. In a letter to the Duke of Ferrara Ercole d'Este in August 1490, she justified her arrest of Tommaso Feo, the castellan of the Rocca di Ravaldino who had helped her so much in 1488. She hinted at her innocent and delicate femininity when she explains how his «indecent conduct» (*indecenti portamenti*) left her no choice¹⁸. Sforza's own words join her portrait medals as evidence of her calculated play between masculinity and femininity during her rule, a play that comprised the first layer of her historical reputation and notoriety and captured the popular imagination after her death, beginning with Machiavelli.

Niccolò Machiavelli on Caterina Sforza

As Foresti's biography suggests, Caterina Sforza was already famous on the Italian peninsula during her own lifetime. Her political cunning and forceful rule fascinated many in early modern Italy, including Niccolò Machiavelli, who came to Forlì in 1499 on his first diplomatic mission for the Florentine Republic mainly to renegotiate her son Ottaviano's military contract. Sforza apparently impressed him during these dealings, since she is one of a handful of women he discusses in *The Histories*, *The Discourses*, and *The Prince*.¹⁹ These seminal texts, written by one of the luminaries of Renaissance humanist thought after her death, did much to shape her legend and promote her fame with their repeated reference to the key moment in her rise to power.

In chapter twenty of *The Prince* (written c. 1513 and published 1532), Machiavelli briefly comments on Sforza's use of fortresses within a

¹⁵ «Ma non doveria parere de tanta meraviglia a Messer Iohanni, si pansasse che io sia composta de quelli medesimi elementi è lui», Archivio di Stato Milano, Archivio Sforzesco, *Potenze estere, Romagna*, letter dated 27 March 1496. For a transcription of the full letter, see Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, pp. 244-45, doc. 645.

¹⁶ «Non scio se istimi havere ad fare cum putti o pure per donna se persuada menarme con queste sue belle parole», Archivio di Stato Milano, Archivio Sforzesco, *Potenze estere, Romagna*, letter dated 11 April 1496. For a transcription, see Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, p. 246, doc. 649.

¹⁷ «Et io se havesse a perdere, ancora che sia donna, voria perdere virilmente», Letter of 25 August 1498, ASMi, Archivio Sforzesco, *Potenze estere, Romagna*, c. 1048; Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, p. 303, doc. 837.

¹⁸ Letter dated 30 August 1490, Archivio di Stato Modena, Archivio estense, *Carteggi con principi esteri*, busta 1177; Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, pp. 154-55, doc. 365.

¹⁹ All three texts can be found in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. A. Gilbert, 3 vols., Durham 1965.

larger discussion of their value. He contrasts the protection the Rocca di Ravaldino fortress provided her in 1488, when she outwitted the rebels who had killed her husband and laid siege to the town, with its destruction in 1500, when the walls were breached by Cesare Borgia's French troops and she was imprisoned. Machiavelli's point in this section is that a fortress can be helpful or not, depending on circumstances, and a prince should not rely solely on a fortress for protection. Rather, a successful ruler will be loved and supported by his or her subjects. The examples offered by Sforza's experience served his argument well.

Machiavelli wrote more fully about Sforza's 1488 powerplay in the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, and, as Julia Hairston has clearly explained, his account of the circumstances in the former significantly deviated from the historical record produced in the days immediately following the events²⁰. After the assassination of Girolamo Riario in Forlì, Caterina Sforza and her family were taken prisoner. The castellan of the Rocca di Ravaldino, ever loyal to the ruling family, refused to surrender the fortress to the rebels, so Sforza offered to negotiate with him personally to make him concede. Her children would be held hostage to guarantee her actions. But once she was inside the fortress, she mounted the ramparts and declared her intention to rule. She challenged her enemies to kill her children and hinted that she was pregnant with another. According to eye-witnesses, she then made the lewd gesture of "the four figs," a reference to female genitalia that she likely employed to remind the audience of her fecundity. The implication was that her future child could eventually avenge the deaths of his relatives if they were murdered.

This gesture seems to have captivated Machiavelli, and in *The Discourses*, completed c. 1517, he transformed it into a more overt sexual display:

[...] Madonna Caterina [...] promised that if the conspirators would let her enter the fortress, she would have it surrendered to them; [and] they might keep her children as hostages. With that promise, they let her enter. As soon as she was inside, she reproached them from the wall with the death of her husband, threatening them with every kind of revenge. And to show them that she did not care about her children [being killed], she uncovered to them her genitals, saying that she still had means for producing more children²¹.

His exaggerated version of Sforza's actions was implausible for a noble woman, but highly symbolic of the tensions she faced when balancing the boldness and cunning needed to succeed in the masculine realm of rulership with the more demure and feminine virtues of modesty and chastity.

²⁰ Julia L. Hairston, *Skirting the Issue: Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza*, «Renaissance Quarterly» 53/3 (2000), pp. 687–712. See also Breisach, cit., pp. 102–13; Pasolini, cit., vol.1, pp. 240–62.

²¹ N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Book 3, Chapter 6, in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works*, vol. 1, p. 444; for the original, see Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, Milan 1993, p. 208.

The story is an apt illustration for Machiavelli's arguments regarding conspiracies and the fear of vengeance from family members who might survive a coup. He seems to give Sforza a nod of approval, since she played so well upon those fears. But he underscores, and perhaps even downplays, her political audacity by adding her self-exposure, which emphasizes her sexual transgressions and defiance of proper gender roles. After all, by offering her children up for sacrifice, she violated notions of nurturing motherhood.

In contrast to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli omits Sforza's sexual display from another telling of the story in the *Florentine Histories*, commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in 1519, and completed in 1526 and published in 1532 (Giulio became Pope Clement VII in 1523). After he explains the murder of Riario, Machiavelli concludes the story with Sforza in the Rocca: «[...] as soon as she was within, she threatened them with death and every kind of torture in revenge for the murder of her husband; and upon their menacing her with the death of her children, she said she had the means of getting more»²².

If Machiavelli retreated from his more shocking version of the events, the sensationalized story nevertheless gained a life of its own, and was repeated in numerous subsequent early modern texts, as Julia Hairston has shown, as well as more modern and contemporary texts²³. Machiavelli solidified Sforza's legendary status as a virago, a woman who breaks through her feminine weakness to exhibit what were considered more positive masculine characteristics. This label was first applied to Sforza during her regency, and Foresti employed it in his 1497 biography. The demonstration of male traits was a common motif of praise for women in this era of everyday misogyny, and Sforza's fame lent itself to this type of gendered acclaim²⁴. Whether a virago or a woman who exposes her genitals, Sforza became the exception that proves the rule that women cannot and should not rule.

When Machiavelli wrote of her actions, it was after her death and he, along with many others, were aware of some activities she had worked to hide during her regency. As soon as she took power, rumors began to circulate about love affairs and marriage plans; the first would undermine her credibility as regent, the second would destroy it, since the new husband would likely take over, or the couple would rule over different lands. So Sforza had not only gained political power in 1488, she had also gained a

²²N. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Book 8, Chapter 7, in Machiavelli, *The Chief Works*, vol. 3, p. 1030; and Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 842.

²³ Hairston, cit., pp. 689-94. For feminist and gendered interpretations of Machiavelli's texts, see Hannah Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1984; and Maria J. Flaco, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Niccolò Machiavelli*, University Park 2004.

²⁴ Jacopo Foresti, *De Claris selectibus mulieribus novissime congestum*, Ferrara, 1497, p. CLX-CLXV, "virago" on p. CLXV; transcribed in Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, pp. 272-6; esp. p. 276, doc. 723. See also Julia Schiesari, *In Praise of Virtuous Women? For a Genealogy of Gender Morals in Renaissance Italy*, in «Annali d'italianistica» 7, 1989 66-87; Pamela J. Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, University Park 1992; and Constance Jordan, *Boccaccio's In-Famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the De mulieribus claris*, in C. Levin and J. Watson (eds), *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Detroit 1987, pp. 25-47.

measure of sexual freedom along with public scrutiny of her actions. If she proved disloyal to Girolamo Riario and their children or if she transgressed the roles prescribed for widows, she could lose her position. Girolamo Savonarola, who later corresponded with Sforza on different, spiritual matters, gave advice on how widows were supposed to act in his *Book on the Widow's Life* (1491). His recommends that they adopt a nun-like existence, that is, live in solitude, dress modestly, wear a veil, abstain from all earthly pleasures, and pray continuously²⁵. We now know that Sforza did not quite adhere to these standards.

While we will probably never know which of the many rumors regarding Sforza's sex life were true, it is relatively easy to confirm two long-term affairs during her regency. The proof for each was tangible: each dalliance produced a son. Part of her diplomacy, including the imagery on her portrait medals, served to control the relationships' impact upon her rule²⁶. The first relationship began in 1489 with Giacomo Feo (1470–1495); she gave birth to their son in 1490. Feo had been one of Girolamo Riario's courtiers and Sforza increased his titles to include castellan of the Rocca di Ravaldino as well as governor of Forli. Many thought his rising status threatened the Riario family, and he was assassinated in 1495. The second relationship, with Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (1467–1498), began a year later and continued until he died of natural causes in 1498; earlier the same year Sforza gave birth to their son. Medici was from the cadet branch of the famous family, and he was in Forli as a businessman. He negotiated loans for his family from Sforza as well as grain purchases for Florence; in exchange, he procured Florentine goods for her. During each of these affairs Sforza maintained that her lovers were legitimate associates, but her peers speculated about the true nature of the relationships in letters and reports.

Later in life Sforza claimed to have secretly married each man. In her final testament, given in May 1509, she declared that her son Carlo Feo was "natural and legitimate," which makes clear he was her biological child, and she stated that she had secretly and legitimately married his father Giacomo. She referred to her son Giovanni di Giovanni de' Medici in the same manner, and similarly professed that she had married his father.²⁷ At that point, she had already presented herself for several years as Giovanni di Pierfrancesco's widow during the legal battles she fought (and finally won) with the Medici family over her youngest son's guardianship. She had maintained the image of Riario widow-regent, and then mother-regent, for the duration of her rule because admitting to affairs or marriage to other men would have

²⁵ Girolamo Savonarola, *Libro della Vita Viduale*, in Mario Ferrara, ed., *Opere di Girolamo Savonarola, Operetta Spirituale I*, Rome 1976, p. 20.

²⁶ On the ways Sforza tried to mask her affairs, see de Vries, cit., pp. 47-54; 110-12.

²⁷ «Carolo ejus filio legitimo et naturali nato ex ipsa Ill.ma domina testatrice, et magnifico viro domino Iacobo Feo Savonense eius secundo viro legitimo [...]». Regarding Giovanni di Giovanni di Pierfrancesco: «Ioanni ejus filio legitimo et naturali nato ex dicta Ill.ma domina testatrice et quondam bone memorie Ioannis olim Pier Francisci de Medicis cive florentino ultimo viro legitimo [...]». Archivio di Stato Firenze, MAP, Filza 99, n. 38, cc. 112–42; Pasolini, cit., vol. 3, pp. 537–47, doc. 1355, quote on p. 542.

compromised her loyalty to the Riario family and so jeopardize her position. After her fall from power, this charade no longer served her goals; in fact, in her legal battles with the Medici, it was crucial that she assert her marriage to Giovanni.

Could it be that, with the knowledge of her cunning and audacious duplicity over these affairs or secret marriages, Machiavelli chose to exaggerate her sexual gesture on the ramparts in the *Discourses*? After all, she herself played with her gender and sexuality to great ends. When he wrote the *Discourses* in the 1510s, he probably had little sense that Sforza's son Giovanni di Giovanni de' Medici would grow up to become the "last great condottiero" of Italy, nick-named Giovanni delle Bande Nere, and father to the future Duke of Florence and Tuscany, and he could draw upon Sforza's story with impunity. That said, Machiavelli may have taken a measured view of Sforza's use of fortresses in the *Prince* because the text was dedicated to Lorenzo II di Piero de' Medici, and he wanted to avoid offending the family, who by then had taken a strong interest in young Giovanni. But he might have felt free to take more liberty with Sforza's story in the *Discourses*. It was dedicated to his friends Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai, and stressed the merits of republican rule over princely power. By the time Machiavelli wrote *The Florentine Histories*, the Medici were more firmly situated in Florentine and Italian politics, and he chose to temper the story and not risk alienating the family by repeating risqué stories about one of its important ancestors.

Caterina Sforza and her Medici Descendants

When Cosimo de' Medici became Duke of Florence in 1537 part of his statecraft was to produce an august family history for the new princely line. He extolled his father Giovanni's military prowess as well as his mother's more feminine virtues²⁸. If there was any question about whether his grandmother Caterina Sforza had married Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, Cosimo recast it as completely legitimate union. In his meteoric rise to power, he needed to wipe out any hint of an illicit heritage, and so produced another archival layer in Sforza's legend. The marble slab that Cosimo commissioned for Sforza's grave in the Murate convent (now destroyed) speaks to this: «Caterina Sforza de' Medici Countess and Mistress of Imola and Forlì, died 29 May 1509» (CATHARINA SFORTIA MEDICES COMITISSA ET DOMINA IMOLAE ET FORLIVII OBIIT III KAL JUNII MDVIII)²⁹. The inscription included the Medici name, and even though it acknowledged Sforza's rule of Imola and Forlì, it left out any reference to the Riario family, who, of course, was the reason she was ruling those cities. In fact, the Medici

²⁸ See Karla Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici, 15th–18th Centuries*, 3 vols, Florence 1981, vol. 1, esp. pp., 240–42; Natalie R. Tomas, *The Medici Women*, Aldershot 2003; and Gabrielle Langdon, *Medici Women: Portraits of Power, Love, and Betrayal from the Court of Duke Cosimo I*, Toronto 2006.

²⁹ Pasolini, cit., vol. 2, pp. 342–3.

family erased all reference to her status as a Riario wife or widow until the late seventeenth century. Instead, Sforza's Medicean images immortalize her as a proper and iconic wife and widow to Giovanni di Pierfrancesco.

The artists working for the family drew upon the iconography she had established in her portraits and adjusted it to serve the new agenda. A portrait of Sforza figures prominently in the Sala di Giovanni delle Bande Nere in the Palazzo Vecchio³⁰. Giorgio Vasari oversaw the painting of this room, which was one of several commissioned in the late 1550s by Cosimo I to extol the Medici lineage. Sforza's portrait appears among ones of Giovanni di Pierfrancesco, their son Giovanni delle Bande Nere, his wife Maria Salviati, and their son Cosimo I. Vasari clearly referred to the portrait on the 1488 medal when he devised Sforza's profile. She is dressed in black widow's weeds and her left hand touches the white veil that covers her hair. There is no inscription or emblem as on her medal, and so there is no reference to her status as ruler. None of the frescoed portraits in the room feature inscriptions or symbols. The context of the room, inside the Medici stronghold, and devoted to the father of the ruler, makes clear that Sforza is Medici widow in this portrait, and not Riario. Even though the portrait draws upon a well-known medal that celebrates her rule and triumph, these aspects of her life are elided. The military prowess of her son, Giovanna delle Bande Nere, and not her, are featured in the frescoed vignettes the circle the room.

A similar erasure of history occurs in two versions of a text contemporary to the Vasari image, that is, Giovangirolamo de' Rossi's biography of Giovanni delle Bande Nere de' Medici. Its editing echoes the revisions from Machiavelli's first expanded account of Sforza's actions on the ramparts of the Rocca di Ravaldino to the second, and speaks to how writers worked to create an uncomplicated Medici past in Cosimo I's court. Rossi was Sforza's grandson through her daughter Bianca Riario de' Rossi, and was therefore Giovanni's nephew, and they had known each other quite well. Rossi penned the original biography in the 1540s, and in the late 1550s, when he was part of the ducal entourage in Florence, he presented a special edition to Cosimo I³¹. One significant revision in the presentation copy is the account of Sforza's acrimonious legal battle with the Medici family (specifically, with Giovanni di Pierfrancesco's brother Lorenzo, and then his sons after his death) over the young Giovanni's patrimony. The lawsuit stretched over several years, and was finally resolved in Sforza's favor: she became her son's legal guardian. In the original text, Rossi disparages Lorenzo's desire to control his nephew's estates as avarice and elaborates on Sforza's good will and success in nurturing her son after her triumph in winning the suit. To make this more palatable, Rossi removed any reference to the court cases in the later version, and instead just praised

30 See de Vries, cit., pp. 238-40; Langedijk, cit., vol. 2, pp. 1040-41; A. Cecchi, *Palazzo Vecchio Firenze*, Rome 1995.

31 G. de' Rossi, *Vita di Giovanni de' Medici*, Rome 1996. See pp. 11-30, and especially p. 17 for discussion of the two editions.

Sforza's dedication to her son. Cosimo I's great uncle Lorenzo is no longer a villain in the story. But Sforza is no longer triumphant either—there was no battle for her to win; she is just a good mother³². In this way, the revised text demonstrates the same generalization seen in Vasari's portrait of Sforza—only her role as loyal widow and dedicated mother are important now, and not the details of how she achieved it. Both fresco and text fragmented Sforza's history and created a new archive of information for Medicean purposes.

Sforza figures in another Medici image, this one done in 1585 as part of a series commissioned by Cosimo I's son Francesco I. Lorenzo Vaiani, called lo Sciorina, portrays her in a double portrait, in conversation with Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici³³. He carries a letter in one hand and points to the ground with the other. She clutches a handkerchief in her left hand and raises the right to her breast. Their appearance together suggests that they are married—this is a series of paintings of Medici ancestors, after all. But Sforza is dressed as a widow in a somber black dress and white veil, similar to her clothing in the Palazzo Vecchio portrait, which seems to have been the inspiration for the hand gesture as well. How can Sforza be Medici wife while simultaneously Medici widow? Is she still Riario widow, or even Feo widow, when she is also Medici wife? This would be closer to the historical reality, but it is unlikely that this was Francesco I's or Vaiani's goal. The nature of copying from prototypes caused this problem, and reminds us of how iconic the image of Sforza as widow had become. But it also exposes a fissure in the revision of Sforza's complicated history in the Medici ducal court.

By the early eighteenth century, Sforza's Medicean iconography finally reintegrated the victory motif that she had developed herself. Enough time had passed and her political triumph was sufficiently neutralized into a benign womanhood. In 1739, Antonio Selvi designed a series of portrait medals to commemorate the now-defunct Medici dynasty; these were intended for public sale and were not a commission³⁴. He made two medals for Sforza, both based on her medal of c. 1488. The portraits are the same on each: she is a veiled widow, her face in profile and her bust in a three-quarter pose; her clothing and jewelry are slightly altered to reflect contemporary styles. Selvi abbreviated her name to «Caterina Sforza de' Medici» (CATHARINA SFORZA MEDICES), but repeated her motto, «Fame follows victory» (VICTORIA FAMA SEQVETVR, a miscopy from the original), on the reverse. Selvi produced two different emblems: one features an updated and more flamboyant version of the triumphal cart from the c. 1488 medal, with Victory in a chariot flying over a landscape through the clouds. The other emblem consists of the biscione, the Visconti-Sforza viper, which served on multiple levels since it had become a symbol of the

³² Rossi, cit., pp. 17–18, 36.

³³ De Vries, cit., pp. 241–43; Langedijk, cit., vol. 1, pp. 137–8; 357.

³⁴ De Vries, cit., 245–48; Hill, cit., vol. 1, p. 284; Langedijk, cit., vol. 1, p. 360; *ivi*, vol. 3, p. 1528.

Hapsburg family in the sixteenth century, and the Medici had begun using it after Francesco I married Joanna of Austria in 1565. Both medals assert Sforza's family connections, fame, and victory, but it is only Sforza and Medici fame, and not Riario, even though her original victory was for the Riario family. While her womanly greatness was certainly something to be celebrated in the context of the Medici line, the most impressive component of her historical fame—her rule—was still glossed over in favor of generic widowhood and noble status in this series commemorating the Medici.

Like Machiavelli's story of Sforza flashing her genitals on the ramparts, the Medici-filtered image of Sforza persists today. Most recently, Elizabeth Lev used yet another version of Sforza's name in her biography: Caterina Riario Sforza de' Medici, inverting her natal name with her first married name, adding Medici, but ignoring Feo. Why acknowledge the Medici marriage and not the Feo marriage? I suspect it has to do with fame, lineage, and class—Feo was not an appropriate lover for the heroine, and so he is downplayed. A Medici connection is more recognizable and attractive, especially when marketing books. Contrary to most recent mass-market biographies of Sforza, Lev does provide analysis of the story on the ramparts as a counter to Machiavelli's tantalizing account, which is now an undeniable "truth" in her life and an essential component of its telling³⁵.

My discussion has been critical of the Medici project for Sforza, but I should note an important result of their embrace of her life. Because Sforza won the guardianship of Giovanni de' Medici and reared him in Florence while living in Medici properties during her final years, what was left of her papers, including letters, inventories, ambassadorial reports, accounts, and more, were subsumed into the vast Medici archive. These documents are now available in the Florentine state archives, in the vast section *Mediceo avanti il principato*, a source so popular that the actual files were off limits for years to most scholars, who consulted the material on microfilm to preserve the originals. Now, all these files are digitized, and one can access them online³⁶. So, we can thank the Medici for preserving hundreds of documents from Sforza's life—still just a fragment of the many papers she must have produced in her lifetime, but a significant archive nonetheless.

Many other versions of «Caterina Sforza» exist today in the popular imagination—in the past decade she has been a character in the *Trinity Blood* graphic novel and anime series, the *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* video games and novels, the Showtime television series *The Borgias*, and historical fiction by Jeanne Kalogridis and Sarah Dunant and an art history mystery by Simone Valmori³⁷. While each of these

³⁵ Lev, cit., pp. 133-34.

³⁶ See <http://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/rMap/index.html>

³⁷ The *Trinity Blood* series consists of two sets of books: S. Yoshida, *Rage Against the Moons*, 6 vols, Tokyo 2001-2005; English translation, Los Angeles 2007; *id.*, *Reborn on the Mars*, 6 vols, Tokyo 2001-2003; English translation Los Angeles 2007. The *Trinity Blood* anime series is available from Funimation Productions 2007. See also Jeanne Kalogridis, *The Scarlet Contessa: A Novel of Caterina Sforza*, New York 2010; Sarah Dunant, *Blood*

characters is inspired by her fame and makes reference to some of Sforza's history, they are largely fantasy and fabrication, and thus part of her ever-evolving legend. Would video game developers and television writers have been interested in Sforza if Machiavelli had not written about her genital exposure or if she had not been linked to the Medici family? Perhaps, but their additions to the archive of materials on her cemented her fame and placed her into the public consciousness.

The measure of fame that Sforza cultivated in her own life was carried on by Machiavelli and then tempered by the Medici. Because she was famous during her life for her masculine deeds and reputation, which challenged gender notions, Machiavelli made her notorious, and the Medici then worked to situate her in a more acceptable feminine realm. Throughout this, Caterina Sforza has simultaneously been a woman doing her duty and a woman violating expectations; exemplary and notorious; normative and exceptional.

and Beauty: The Borgias; a novel, New York 2013; and Simone Valmori, *L'anima di Leonardo*, Forlì 2009.