



**Caterina Sforza,
1463-1509**

Why was this rather placid looking woman, mother of eight and widow of three, called “The Tigress” by contemporaries, cited four times in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli as a model of “virtu” (manly virtue or courage), and called a “Virago” and “Amazon” by others?

The illegitimate daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, Caterina Sforza was married at the age of ten (consummated at 14), to Girolamo Riario, nephew (son?) of Pope Sixtus IV (after whom the Sistine Chapel was named). As was common in those days, she was given the same classical education as were the boys in her family, but she preferred the hunt, and learning how to handle weapons.

The young couple were given the fiefdom of Imola in the Romagna region as a dowry by the Pope, and spent the next seven years at the Papal Court in Rome, where Caterina shone as an elegant member of society. She eventually delivered six children into the Riario family.

Upon a vacancy in the fiefdom of Forlì, a much larger town controlling the passes through the mountains from the north to the south, Girolamo was named Lord of that area as well. He immediately set upon earning the allegiance of the populace by constructing magnificent buildings and churches and abolishing taxes (!).

When Sixtus IV died in 1484 a rebellion broke out in Rome and pregnant Caterina had to take refuge in the Castel St. Angelo (Hadrian's Tomb) on the Tiber. When her husband accepted payment from the College of Cardinals for the destruction of his property in Rome, Caterina and her husband returned to Forlì.

The new Pope, Innocent VIII, had been a rival of Sixtus IV, but he nevertheless confirmed Girolamo's Lordship over Imola and Forlì, perhaps to remain at peace with Caterina's fierce uncle, Lodovico il Moro, who had succeeded her father Galeazzo, as Duke of Milan.

Without an income derived from his services to the Pope, Girolamo was forced to re-impose taxes on the citizens of Forlì, thereby earning their opposition to his rule and lavish spending. A series of uprisings (during one of which Caterina gave birth after spending 24 hours in the saddle leading a contingent of troops in battle) and attempts to turn over the fiefdoms of Imola and Forlì to a relative of the new pope, resulted in the assassination of Girolamo and the imprisonment of Caterina and her children.

When asked by her captors to retrieve the key to the fortress protecting the city, from the castellan or keeper of the fortress, Caterina agreed, leaving her children in their custody, under the threat of their death should she refuse. Instead, she climbed to the top of the parapet, lifted her skirt and challenged them to carry out their threat, saying in a loud voice, "Do what you will; I have the means to make more" (Ho con me lo stampo per farne degli altri)!

The people of the town relented, stopped the assault, and no child of Madonna Caterina, as she was called, lost its life that day. Lodovico's forces came to her aid and she was re-instated as the Countess of Forlì, serving as the Regent for her young son, Ottaviano, who in turn was recognized as the Lord of Forlì by Innocent VIII "until his line ended". By all accounts, she

was an excellent governor and administrator of those estates and succeeded in making alliances with other lords, near and far. She was even supported by the nefarious Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, who had been Ottaviano's godfather, upon the death in 1488 of Innocent VIII.

That same year Caterina married Giacomo Feo, and bore him a son. When jealousy between Giacomo and Ottaviano developed over the future of Forlì, Giacomo was assassinated by the adherents of Ottaviano, believing they had the support of Caterina. Infuriated, she conducted a mass slaughter of all the men and their families involved in the plot, and added ferocity to her many attributes.

Shortly afterward, Giovanni dei Medici, a member of a minor branch of the Medici family of Florence, was appointed Ambassador to Forlì. Caterina soon became enamoured of the handsome Giovanni, and in 1497 they married. In 1498, the last and most famous of her children, Lodovico, or "Giovanni delle Bande Nere", was born.

When Venice attempted to invade Florence over a territorial dispute, Giovanni led a contingent of troops to aid Florence and soon became ill and died. Caterina herself trained an army and temporarily succeeded in thwarting the Venetian advance. It was at this time that she began to be called "The Tigress", and many songs and poems were written in her praise.

Meanwhile, the Borgia Pope Alexander VI, despite his relationship to Ottaviano, issued a Bull invalidating the right of Caterina and her heirs to rule their territories. He was determined to establish a state in the Romagna for his son (!), Cesare.

From December of 1499 until January of 1500, Cesare Borgia lay siege to Forlì. At one point Caterina asked her citizens if they preferred to surrender. When they did not reply she absolved them of their oath of fealty, sent her children to Florence and barricaded herself in the fortress.

Caterina held out, until the walls were breached and she was captured, still fighting, with weapons in her hands. She went once again to the Castel St. Angelo, but this time as a prisoner. A year later she was released by the

French, who had marched south on their way to Naples, because they did not believe in imprisoning women. She spent the rest of her years with her children in Florence.

Upon the Death of Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia lost all claims to the Romagna. Caterina tried to return to power in Forlì and Imola, and was supported by the new Pope Julius II, but was opposed by the citizenry of those towns, who preferred that they be returned to their previous Lords.

So why is Caterina considered such a seminal figure in Renaissance Italy? Her grandson, Cosimo dei Medici (son of Giovanni delle Bande Nere) became the Grand Duke of Tuscany, whose family ruled the region until the 18th century. Cosimo's descendants include two queens of France, Catherine and Marie, several kings of England, beginning with Charles I and II, and all of their progeny, down to and including Lady Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, whose sons William and Henry are next in line to succeed their father Charles, and grandmother Elizabeth II, to the British throne.

So, Tigress? Virago? Amazon? You be the Judge!

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