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CATERINA SFORZA, THE LIONESSE OF ROMAGNA, IMMORTALIZED AS THE LADY WITH AN ERMINE BY LEONARDO DA VINCI?

Xavier d'Hérouville ¹ & Aurore Caulier ²



Portrait of Caterina Sforza by Lorenzo di Credi

If there is a female warrior figure who marked the Italian Renaissance and thus inscribed her name in letters of blood and gold in the legend of her multiple conspiracies, it is that of Caterina Sforza, the lioness of Romagna ³. Caterina Sforza, the amazon who fought in armor, sword in hand, against the armies of the all-powerful and fearsome Borgia family! Posterity was not mistaken and her heroine character is still portrayed today through the series of a comic book ⁴ and that of one of the most famous historical action-adventure video games and open-world infiltration ⁵.

Caterina Sforza was born in 1463 in Milan, to the love of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Count of Pavia and future Duke of Milan, and his mistress Countess Lucrezia Landriani.

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³ *Caterina Sforza, la leonessa di Romagna*, directed by Giorgio Walter Chili

⁴ Jean-Pierre Pécau, Gabriele Parma et Dimitri Fogolin, *Les Reines de sang - Catherine Sforza, la lionne de Lombardie*, éditions Delcourt

⁵ *Assassin's Creed II, Assassin's Creed : Renaissance, Assassin's Creed : Brotherhood*, developed and edited par Ubisoft

Caterina Sforza was raised by her paternal grandmother Bianca Maria Visconti in the lively and refined court of the great poets and writers of the Italian Renaissance. The latter, as well as her father, transmitted to her their passion for war and hunting and taught her the art of governing ⁶.



Women ferreting rabbit hunts in the Queen Mary Psalter ⁷



The Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo da Vinci

This "ermine" - which is actually an albino ferret - is an early example of a pet ferret, whose conspicuous coat was particularly prized for rabbit hunting ⁸

Married at 10 to Girolamo Riario, 20 years her senior, nephew of Pope Sixtus IV ⁹, pregnant with their first child at 15, she will therefore bear the title of Countess of Imola and Forlì. On the death of her husband, assassinated in

⁶ <https://www.caterinasforza.it/en/history/history-of-caterina/>

⁷

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women_hunting_rabbits_with_a_ferret.jpg

⁸ <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Furet>

⁹ Francesco della Rovere

1488 by supporters of the new pope, Innocent VIII ¹⁰, she was led to exercise the regency in the name of her son Ottaviano, still a minor. As a perfect strategist trained in the executive, she begins by lowering taxes and sealing alliances with neighboring states through the unions contracted for her sons. Moreover, driven by her natural inclination for the army, as an authentic condottiere, she takes charge of the military training of her troops.



Caterina Sforza played on screen by Gina McKee ¹¹

Caterina Sforza then secretly marries a young man named Giacomo Feo, with whom she will have a son, Bernardino Carlo, a year later. The passion she feels for the young man makes the invincible Caterina Sforza bend, so much so that she ends up dismissing her son Ottaviano from the government to entrust the reins of the State to her new husband and place the parents of his at the head of the fortresses which defend the city. But Ottaviano's supporters did not give up and Giacomo Feo was assassinated by conspirators. The young widow then massacres the families and supporters of the assassins in retaliation. In the fortress of Forlì, Caterina Sforza takes over the reins of state administration, caring with as much attention as ever for her children. With her faithful apothecary, Ludovico Albertini, she developed her knowledge of medicine and pharmaceutical-naturalist and perfected beauty recipes and long-life remedies by mixing herbs and essences using processes that at that time were called alchemicals. In 1497, she obtained permission from her uncle, Duke Ludovico Maria Sforza, alias "il Moro", to marry Giovanni De'Medici, a member of the powerful Florentine Medici dynasty, then ambassador of Florence. Just a year after giving birth to a

son, the one who would later be known as Giovanni Dalle Bande Nere ¹², her third husband dies of pneumonia.

In 1495, the King of France, Louis XII, allied with Pope Alexander VI ¹³ - who succeeded three years earlier to Innocent VIII - decides to declare war on the Italian States. He first conquered the Duchy of Milan while the Pope claimed the domains of Romagna for Cesare Borgia, "the Valentino" his son. What the indomitable Caterina Sforza is obviously not willing to accept. Caterina Sforza immediately set to work to expand her troops, improve the armament and store large quantities of provisions and ammunition in anticipation of a possible siege led by the troops commanded by César Borgia, Duke of Valentinois and son of the Pope. It also strengthens the defenses of its fortresses, in particular that of Ravaldino, where it resides.



The Lady with an Ermine is... Caterina Sforza ?

Forlì and Imola having fallen, Borgia began the siege of the fortress of Ravaldino on December 19, 1499. Niccolò Machiavelli reported that the proud and daring Caterina resisted the siege alone, admired for it throughout Italy, but no one is came to help him. Supported by more than a thousand soldiers, Caterina Sforza leads the resistance herself. She repeatedly rebuffs her enemy's peace proposals, though it may cost the lives of her children, as the legend goes. On January 12, 1500, after a succession of terrible battles, Caesar Borgia's troops invaded Ravaldino and Caterina Sforza was taken prisoner. Although she placed herself under the protection of King Louis XII of France, an ally of the pope, it seems that Cesar Borgia refused to part with his prisoner. Partly out of

¹⁰ Giovanni Battista Cybo-Tomasello

¹¹ *The Borgias*, television series created by Neil Jordan

¹² John of the Black Bands

¹³ Rodrigo Borgia

pride, but also because Caterina Sforza would have become his mistress shortly after Ravalдино's surrender.

Despite this, Caesar wasted no time in sending him to Rome after subjecting him to all sorts of humiliations. Pope Alexander VI assigned him to residence at the Belvedere Palace, a beautiful villa near Rome. But the attentions of the pope fail to quell the rebellious spirit of Caterina Sforza. She tries to flee, but, discovered, she is accused of preparing an attack against the pope by means of poisoned letters, and the rebellious Duchess is locked up in Castel Sant'Angelo, this fortress which she had defended with so much ardor a few years earlier. She only remained in prison for a short time because she was released on June 30, 1501, Louis XII having interceded on her behalf. Caterina Sforza then retired to Florence and took refuge in the villa which belonged to her third husband, Jean de Médicis. After the death of Pope Alexander VI, she tries to recover her fiefs from the new pontiff Julius II¹⁴. However, Imola and Forlì opposed his return and passed into the hands of a Vatican nobleman named Antonio Maria Ordelaffi. Her combative fervor subsided, Caterina Sforza spent the last years of her life alongside her sons and devoted herself to the study of alchemy.

In May 1509, she died of pneumonia, aged only 46. She is buried anonymously in the convent of Santa Maria delle Murate, as she had stipulated in her will. But his nephew Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, ordered a white marble tombstone bearing his name to be placed on his grave. Caterina Sforza, the lioness of Romagna, was indeed one of the most romantic and adventurous female characters of the Italian Renaissance. Described by her contemporaries as a sophisticated, beautiful and witty woman... They also attributed to her a temperament that was independent and determined to say the least: A velvet-gloved hand that has never been afraid to cross swords with men, as powerful and fearsome as the Borgias!¹⁵ In addition to the fact that she rubbed shoulders with the greatest geniuses of art and culture of her time, she also unashamedly broke a number of conventions and dusted off many principles, to the point of flirting with alchemy.



Superposition and transparency of the *portrait of Caterina Sforza* and the *Lady with an ermine*

At the turn of the 15th century, Caterina Sforza thus wrote more than four hundred recipes for beauty and good health – tinged with alchemical formulas – in a manuscript entitled *Experimenti*. Extant in a 16th century transcription produced by Lucantonio Cuppano (1507-1557)¹⁶, the manuscript includes instructions for making lip colors, lotions, and hair dyes (with a clear preference for a blonde or red shade), prescriptions for treating ailments ranging from fever and headache to epilepsy and infertility and recipes to improve libido and "restore" virginity... Further still, he gives instructions for producing the philosopher's stone and the quintessence: the elixir supposed to protect and cure all diseases and what is more to ensure eternal youth...

As an example, this "talc water" recipe supposed to achieve several of these objectives at once: *"Talc is the star of the earth and has shining scales; it is found on the island of Cyprus and is similar in color to citrine; in a mass it looks green, and dissolved in air it looks crystalline; and it has the following virtues, not to mention others not noted in this book, which will be the alchemist's desire to discover: First, to make women beautiful, and to remove all spots or marks from the face, so that a woman of sixty will appear to be twenty years old. Also...mixed with white wine, its powder will cure one who is poisoned and whoever drinks the powder in white wine will be protected on that day from poison and from any disease or*

¹⁴ Giuliano della Rovere

¹⁵ <https://www.nationalgeographic.fr/histoire/catherine-sforza-la-guerriere-qui-defia-les-borgia>

¹⁶ *Experimenti de la Ex[ellentissi]ma S[igno]ra Caterina da Furlj Matre de lo inlux[trissi]mo S[ignor] Giovanni de Medici*, in Caterina Sforza, ed. Pier Desiderio Pasolini, v. 3, 617-618 (Rome : Loescher, 1893). Cuppano's 16th-century transcription is held in private archives.

pestilence. Also...this water turns silver into gold, and makes fake jewelry perfect and fine."

Multi-faceted recipes like this, informed by alchemical practice, abounded in modern scientific culture. They circulated in manuscripts and printed matter, among men and women, by word of mouth and through epistolary, commercial and courteous networks. Privileging direct experience, observation and application to study or theoretical explanation, the recipes contained in Caterina Sforza's *Experimenti* reflect the empirical and heterogeneous nature of modern science. Like the printed books of secrets that would explode in popularity in the early 15th century (described in William Eamon's *Science and the Secrets of Nature*), Caterina Sforza's manuscript blurs the lines between alchemy and medicine, practical and obscure, home and court. Her quest for the secrets of the Great Work is not only recorded in the manuscript she bequeaths to her son (the condottiere Giovanni Dalle Bande Nere, father of Cosimo I de'Medici), she also mentions it in letters to her apothecary, his agents, family members and other alchemy enthusiasts throughout Italy.

Caterina Sforza's activity places her at the origins of a Medici interest in alchemy and experimentation that would extend into the 17th century, while positioning her within the broader panorama of modern women's scientific activity. She was not alone in this activity: women's participation in scientific culture was wide and diverse, and the language of recipes proved useful in a variety of contexts, including the Renaissance debate over women. In 1600, Moderata Fonte, in his dialogue, *Il Merito delle donne*¹⁷, will pit the efficacy and frankness of certain medicinal and cosmetic recipes – capable of curing disease or transforming appearance – against the impossible task of finding a recipe for teaching men to respect women as their equals¹⁸.



Caterina Sforza, the amazon who fought in armor, sword in hand, against the armies of the all-powerful and fearsome Borgias family!



*Superposition and transparency of the Lady with an Ermine and the Great Work of Leonardo*¹⁹

¹⁷ *The value of women*

¹⁸ <https://fleurtyherald.wordpress.com/2016/06/21/caterina-sforza-the-chemist/>

¹⁹ https://hal.science/hal-03966781v1/file/Le_Grand_Oeuvre_de_Leonardo.pdf

The esoteric science revealed by this painting is of such depth that one wonders where and how a man, at the end of the Middle Ages, was

*able to acquire it. What universities or academies taught such anthropogony? It was only in Italy, in the neo-Platonic Florence of Marsilio Ficino, Pico de la Mirandola and Cristoforo Landino, that a similar syncretism flourished, in which the Christian doctrine of Salvation, the Greek philosophy of Nature, the profound symbolism of the Hellenistic Mysteries mingled. and Gnostics, practice of magic and theurgic therapy (Wilhelm Fraenger, *The Millennial Kingdom of Jérôme Bosch*, Denoël editions – 1947)*