
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Hurlburt, Holly S. Daughter of Venice: Caterina Corner, Queen of Cyprus and Woman of the Renaissance

Sally Hickson

Volume 40, Number 2, Spring 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086283ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i2.28520>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hickson, S. (2017). Review of [Hurlburt, Holly S. Daughter of Venice: Caterina Corner, Queen of Cyprus and Woman of the Renaissance]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(2), 197–199.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i2.28520>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2017

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

that to understand the history (or histories) of science we must try to understand its curious collections, alchemical transformations, and angelic conversations, as well as the moments when seekers of truth actually got it right.

DAVID M. POSNER

Loyola University Chicago

Hurlburt, Holly S.

Daughter of Venice: Caterina Corner, Queen of Cyprus and Woman of the Renaissance.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. xi, 347 + 69 ill. ISBN 978-0-3002-0972-3 (hardcover) US\$85.

The life of Caterina Corner (?1454–1510), late-fifteenth century Venetian queen of Cyprus, Armenia, and Jerusalem, was riddled with paradox: a republican citizen who became a queen, a metropolitan aristocrat consigned to the countryside kingdom of Asolo, and a Venetian symbol of Cypriot appropriation. In many ways, her multiple roles have obscured the reality of her historical existence. The story of her life was romanticized into myth by the nineteenth-century English ex-patriots and rediscoverers of Renaissance Italy—especially by the poet Robert Browning and the art historian Sir Herbert Frederick Cook—and celebrated in an opera by Donizetti. Ever since, she has been popularly marketed as a kind of Renaissance Madame Geoffrin, presiding at her rural villa in Asolo as over a French salon, patron to a courtly assemblage of Venetian cultural heroes from Pietro Bembo to Giorgione to Titian. In *Daughter of Venice*, Holly Hurlburt separates fact from fancy, presenting a lively and meticulously researched account of a real woman in the contexts of “gender history, family history and the history of Mediterranean imperialism” (12).

Caterina’s 1472 marriage to King Jacques II Lusignan was a diplomatic manoeuvre designed to consolidate the domination of the Corner family over the sugar-producing cane fields of Cyprus, and to retain easy Venetian access to trade routes from the east. “Woman as geo-political entity” is not really anything new. Caterina, however, transplanted to Cyprus, found herself a widow after only ten months of marriage, pregnant, and called upon to rule the state. Despite opposition from other branches of the Lusignan family, she

was popular in Cyprus, ruling from 1473 to 1489, always under the watchful eye of Venice. In 1489, prompted by Caterina's engagement to a son of the king of Naples, the Venetian forces moved in, counteracting an Ottoman threat of invasion and also to prevent Cyprus from falling under Neapolitan rule through the queen's possible remarriage (Caterina's infant son James III Lusignan having died under mysterious circumstances in 1474). Having arranged Caterina's marriage to foreign nobility in the interests of imperial expansion, the Venetian empire now struck back by reclaiming her, making her regent over the small mainland town of Asolo. Her homecoming was marked by an elaborately staged public ceremony in Venice in which she was celebrated as the embodiment of Republican patriotism and paraded as the symbol of Cypriot allegiance.

Caterina's period in Asolo was characterized by contemporary poets, like Pietro Bembo in his *Gli Asolani* (1505), as a veritable idyll, devoted to poetry and music in the charming surroundings of her rural villa. In reality, she seems to have lived principally in Venice, or at her villa on the island of Murano, and she remained in the public eye—as evidenced by her presence among the witnesses to a miracle wrought by the Cypriot relic of the True Cross in Gentile Bellini's 1500 depiction of the *Miracle of the True Cross at the Ponte San Lorenzo* (Venice, Academia). She also remained fiercely dedicated to her role and identity as queen: so dedicated that, in fact, she continued plotting to regain rule over Cyprus until she died in Venice in 1510. Her death gave rise to a veritable industry of revisionist history that characterized her abdication as a deliberate sacrifice for the benefit of the Venetian state. As all good propagandists know: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, 1962; an interesting sentiment in Kennedy-era Hollywood). The legacy of Caterina was used by her family to glorify their past, to secure their popularity, prosperity, and ambition in the present, and to ensure the future fame and security of their clan.

Hurlburt's most significant contribution here, I think, comes in chapter 3, in her elucidation of Caterina's royal strategies during the period she ruled in Cyprus. As a foreigner and a woman, constantly under surveillance by Venice, Caterina had to deploy everything she knew about persuasive propagandistic public ritual, an art she undoubtedly learned in Venice. As Hurlburt writes, the queen used "processions, gift exchange, feudal rituals, marital diplomacy and the dispensing of benefices—as a means to maintain and enhance her royal

persona” (11). Nevertheless, the image of her abdication is the one most widely disseminated after her death.

In the interests of full disclosure, I will add that I wrote my MA thesis on Caterina Corner and her villa complex at Altivole. Although it was a good thesis, it did not adequately speak to the complex cultural imbrications between Venice and the Ottoman Turks that Caterina assimilated into, and projected onto, her identity. Hurlburt’s key project here is to identify Caterina’s own agency and voice in the uneasy contemporary, and even current, polemics of east and west. Hurlburt admits, in her introduction, that this is not easy; it requires conjecture and suggestion based on the piecemeal nature of the remaining documentary evidence. If there are times when Hurlburt reads rather too much into too little—with ample use of “may,” “might,” “perhaps,” and, at least once, “We can only imagine” (200)—the rich context she provides and the excellence of her writing make such conjecture plausible.

SALLY HICKSON

University of Guelph

Kiefer, Frederick.

English Drama from Everyman to 1660: Performance and Print.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 447. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. Pp. xxii, 929. ISBN 978-0-86698-494-2 (hardcover) US\$110.

The English civil wars provided a harsh reminder that theatrical practices and artifacts once lost might never be resuscitated. That lesson in cultural frailty seems not to have been wasted on a handful of booksellers, bibliophiles, and theatrical aficionados who began collecting, archiving, and cataloguing all known English plays—both extant and lost. The wellspring for preservationist activity was Francis Kirkman (1632–80), whose obsession with collecting plays led him to start cataloguing his own library. By 1671, Kirkman had printed his second and expanded catalogue of 806 “English Stage-Playes.” His seminal work feeds modern scholarship like Alfred Harbage’s *Annals of English Drama: 975–1700* (1964, rev., 1989) and Yoshiko Kawachi’s *Calendar of English Renaissance Drama* (1986).