

The Renaissance Life of Lucrezia Borgia

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According to Ferdinand Gregorovius, Lucrezia Borgia was "the unluckiest woman in history" and many factors certainly support the idea that a lot of tragedy befell her life, even more unlucky in the fact that it was so often at the hands of her family. Despite claims of a close relationship with her father Rodrigo, who became Pope Alexander IV, and her brothers Juan and Cesare, Lucrezia was little more than a pawn in the power game of Italy during this period; a commodity which her father, and later her brother Cesare, used to strengthen Borgia alliances with other powerful families and states. Lucrezia found herself thrust into a number of broken betrothals and unhappy marriages from a young age as Rodrigo and Cesare sprung from one political manoeuvre to the next, damaging Lucrezia's reputation in the process. The following years were filled with discontent and tragedy for her, as many of those close to her were murdered. Most disturbing about these murders was the fact that the Borgia family or their political motives were always implicated - it seems that Lucrezia's happiness was constantly sacrificed by her ruthless family and their quest for power. According to Wykes, she was "a girl plunged into a political whirlpool and used by her father and brothers for furthering their own despotic designs"

Lucrezia was very much an object of political advantage to the Borgia family, as were all noble-born females to their families in this age. In arranging marriage alliances between Lucrezia and other important families, the Borgias could gain themselves some powerful allies. Lucrezia's father Rodrigo, and later her brother Cesare, were responsible for pushing Lucrezia into a number of unhappy betrothals and unhappier marriages. At first Rodrigo was vying for support during his Papal campaign, and later he and Cesare sought together to strengthen Borgia family connections. By the time Lucrezia was 13 years old she was married, with two unsuccessful betrothals behind her. In her lifetime she was married three times. Her first fiance was a Spanish nobleman by the name of Don Cherubino de Centelles, a friend of the Borgia family with 25 years to Lucrezia's 10. Sources suggest that at this tender age Lucrezia lost her virginity to Centelles at "one of the many erotic exhibitions" (Wykes) Rodrigo arranged at his court - a dismally young age, especially unfortunate as the betrothal was short lived. The engagement contract stipulated that the betrothal could be dissolved immediately should Rodrigo find someone more suitable for his daughter - and so he did. This second suitor was the Count of Aversa, Don Gaspero di Procida, "not a mere Spanish nobleman but a Spanish grandee" (Wykes), who would link the Borgia family to the Kings of Aragon. However, an unpleasant pattern was beginning to form as Rodrigo asserted his rule over Lucrezia's life, and a few months and 3000 ducats later this second engagement was broken. Lucrezia, apparently through no desire of her own, was presented with a suitor more beneficial to Rodrigo's politics - Giovanni Sforza, a member of one of the most powerful families in Italy. Lucrezia married him on the 12th of June 1493.

The reasoning behind the Sforza alliance was to guarantee Rodrigo a vote from this family in the papal elections. Lucrezia was said to be most discontented in her marriage as her husband was described as "lacklustre, a stubborn, weak man" (Chamberlain) but the alliance soon outlived its usefulness and divorce proceedings began. The divorce was humiliating for Sforza as it was on the grounds that the marriage was unconsummated after three years and that Lucrezia was still a virgin - at

the time Lucrezia was 6 months pregnant with the bastard child of her lover, Pierre Calderon. A wrathful Sforza struck back with accusations of incest within the Borgia family between Lucrezia and her father and brothers. Lucrezia was married again not long after the divorce to Alfonso of Aragon, but Alfonso was murdered in his room 18 months after the pair married; it is widely known that Cesare Borgia was responsible. With so many broken engagements, whirlwind marriages, murders and claims of incest, many were beginning to see the potential danger and humiliation in becoming involved with the Borgia family. Lucrezia's name was severely damaged by these occurrences, all of which were out of her control in the hands of her family.

Lucrezia's unhappiness wasn't confined to her miserable marriages. More personally damaging were the murders of three of her loved ones - her younger brother Juan, her lover Pierre Calderon and her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon, the only spouse she is said to have truly loved. Possibly the most distressing part of these losses was that Cesare, Lucrezia's older brother, was implicated in all three killings. In June of 1497 Juan Borgia's body was found in the Tiber, throat slit and eight stab wounds decorating his corpse. Speculation over the identity of Juan's killer was rife, pointing the finger at his lovers or their families, but Cesare soon emerged as one of the prime suspects. Whispers of incest between the Borgias were now frequent - some believed that Cesare, in a jealous rage over Juan's relationship with Lucrezia, as well as rivalries over other lovers the brothers shared, may have driven him to murder. However, such gossip is improbable; if Cesare was responsible it was more likely due to his known envy of Juan's secular career. "With Juan's death, Cesare could inherit his brother's estates and riches" (Wykes).

After Lucrezia's lover, Calderon, also washed up in the Tiber a short time after Lucrezia's divorce from Sforza, when she was 6 months pregnant with Calderon's child, the finger again was pointed at Cesare. A Venetian ambassador in Rome, Paolo Cappello, claimed that "Cesare, naked sword in hand" pursued Calderon through the Vatican Halls. Calderon had taken refuge in the arms of Alexander [Pope Alexander IV, Lucrezia's father] but Cesare had stabbed repeatedly. (Chamberlain)

The truth of these claims was never proved, and oddly Cappello didn't recount his story until a year after the supposed stabbing of Calderon occurred. However, accusations had been made and it is not likely that Lucrezia was unaware of them, nor that her own suspicions were unaroused. She must have wondered, especially after the murder of her husband Alfonso in July of 1500. It seems likely that Cesare was responsible for this killing. Prior to the murder Cesare had become engaged to Charlotte d'Albret of France, allying the Borgias to France but putting Lucrezia in an impossible position at the same time - France was an enemy of the house of Naples, and therefore an enemy of her husband Alfonso, creating a conflict between all three families. To strengthen the alliance with France, Alfonso had to be removed and Lucrezia married into the French nobility (consequently Lucrezia married Alfonso d'Este, some time later, and maintained a long standing, if not rapturously happy, marriage). The death of Alfonso of Aragon was a massive betrayal to Lucrezia who was now left without the one man she is said to have truly loved. It must have brought Lucrezia no great joy to realise her family was entirely without conscience in their quest for power, but as a female and a Borgia she was trapped.

Gregorovius' description of Lucrezia as "the unluckiest woman in history" is very valid because of all that Lucrezia suffered in terms of personal loss. Against the single-minded power quest of the Borgia men Lucrezia was no opposition, nor did she attempt to be. She submitted to their orders without question and was successfully used to secure many temporarily necessary alliances with other great powers in Italy and the surrounding countries. Her life was an unhappy one, due largely to the fact that her personal contentment was put aside in place of Borgia politics, and the greatest unluckiness lay in the fact that those responsible for her misery were most often her own family.

Bibliography

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