Unveiling the Myth of Lucrezia Borgia

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Fall 2017

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The Borgia family was one of the most well-known and powerful families in Renaissance Italy. The family produced two popes and other powerful political and church leaders. How they came into their positions was rather intriguing. The first pope the Borgias produced was Pope Calixtus III, who only received his position as a compromise between another family and because they did not think his health would allow him to reign very long. The next pope they produced was Pope Alexander VI who gained his position by simony\(^1\), where he essentially bought all of the votes of the cardinals. Next was Cesare Borgia, who tried to create a secular kingdom in Italy, but he only gained power because of the nepotism\(^2\) his father, Pope Alexander VI, used. Last but not least was Lucrezia Borgia, who gained her power in a more honorable way: by earning it herself, not by buying it or getting lucky.

Not only was the Borgia family notorious for how they gained their power, but they are also well known for the actions they take once they are in power. The Borgias were famous for being power hungry and ruthless. They were to let nothing stand in the way of them gaining more power. For example, during Pope Alexander VI’s reign with Cesare at his side, the Borgias began to be known as evil for the rumors that they committed several acts of murder on their road to more power. This caused the Borgias to be not liked very quickly. Rumors of the Borgias being evil, murderous, and even incestuous began to float around. The Borgias became the talk of the town during Pope


\(^2\) Ibid.
Alexander VI’s time and because the Pope used his daughter, Lucrezia, as a pawn in his power hungry plans. Lucrezia was at the forefront of all the talk and rumors.

**Lucrezia Borgia**

The name Lucrezia Borgia has a very negative connotation. Lucrezia Borgia was a notorious woman during her own time. At a very young age, her father was elected Pope Alexander VI. That brought Lucrezia “to the attention of the largely hostile Borgia chroniclers, the gossip columnists of the day, and of the envoys to the papal court of the Italian states, an important part of whose duties was to purvey intimate details to their employers.”\(^3\) Most of these writers depicted Lucrezia in an undesirable way because “the name Lucrezia, symbolizing as it did womanly chastity, would make her the subject of unseemly mirth among many of her contemporaries.”\(^4\)

Although there are many sources that describe Lucrezia in the most negative tone, there are also numerous, if less well-known sources out there that describe her as quite the opposite. Some argue that Lucrezia was a smart and caring woman instead of evil and immoral. Caring and evil are two words on opposite ends of a spectrum and the fact that Lucrezia has been known to be both is fascinating. By closely analyzing Lucrezia’s life and digging beneath the surface of all the rumors about Lucrezia, one can find out who Lucrezia Borgia truly was. Lucrezia Borgia was known as a murderer, a whore, incestuous, and evil, but she was actually none of these things. Lucrezia was her family’s political pawn, but despite her unfortunate circumstances, Lucrezia was able to

\(^4\) Ibid. p. 17
show that she was in fact, passionate, intelligent, an entrepreneur, and knew how to take control of her own life.

**Murderer**

Lucrezia was believed to be involved in several murders throughout her life time, but the truth was that it was all her father and brother’s acts. In terms of murderous, Lucrezia was an innocent woman. What happened in almost every murder she was associated with is that her father (the Pope) and brother (Cesare) did the killing, but because she shared the last name of Borgia with them, she was immediately accused of partaking in these awful acts.

The first example of this happening is the murder of her first husband Giovanni Sforza. Not long after this first marriage was set up, Lucrezia’s father and brother wanted to ally with Spain and Naples against France and the Sforza family. This meant that Sforza was no longer needed by the Borgia family. Sforza knew of the ruthless stigma attached to the Borgia’s so he began to fear for his life, and secretly fled to Rome. When the news got out that Sforza had disappeared, it was first instinct to think that the Borgia’s, including Lucrezia, had killed Sforza off, but that was not the case. It is said that Sforza fled because he was informed of a plot contrived by the Pope and Cesare to murder him.\(^5\) Yes, it was the fault of Lucrezia’s father and brother that Sforza disappeared but when Lucrezia informed Lucrezia her family’s plans to kill Sforza, she immediately warned her husband to flee.\(^6\) If Lucrezia was wanting to take part in the

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\(^6\) Francesco Ambrogiani. *Vita di Giovanni Sforza*: (1466–1510)
disappearance of Sforza, she would not have told him about her family’s plans to murder him. It is clearly evident that Lucrezia did not take part in the murder of Sforza. As a result, this was the first and the last time Lucrezia was informed of any of her family’s plans to murder anyone.

Sforza was just the first of many examples of Lucrezia being falsely accused of being murderous. Shortly after Sforza fled, Lucrezia had been involved in a sex scandal with a young man named Perotto. Not long after her sex scandal was made public, Perotto went missing and his body was later found floating in the Tiber River. It is said that Cesare was likely to have killed Perotto because of his connection with Lucrezia. What happened here was that Lucrezia’s father and brother had already begun making new marriage plans for her, plans that did not include Perotto. Perotto was getting in the way of those plans and the solution for the Borgia’s was to kill Perotto. It is natural to think that Lucrezia went along with her father and brother’s plans because she did not want any more people knowing about her sex scandal with Perotto, but once again, Lucrezia was only a young girl. She did not know that almost any man she was connected with would be murdered. Furthermore, Lucrezia was not made aware of any of her family’s plans after the first incident where Sforza was able to flee away from them.

The next act of murder Lucrezia was believed to be involved in was of her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon, Duke of Bisceglie. But, through reading the chronicles of the time, one can come to the conclusion that Lucrezia was not party to

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8 Ibid.
the murder. Lucrezia’s second marriage to Alfonso Bisceglie was short-lived owing to the murder of Alfonso. During their marriage, Alfonso had to go to Rome, leaving Lucrezia behind. When this happened, Lucrezia intensely wept for days, wishing that she could be with him. Cesare saw the deep connection between the two lovers and became afraid that Alfonso could influence Lucrezia and their father, the Pope, away from his personal plans. This meant that Alfonso was a direct threat to Cesare. Cesare again took matters into his own hands and decided that Alfonso must be eliminated. Cesare sent the Orsini\(^9\) to brutally attack Alfonso. They stabbed him multiple times, then left him to die. Cesare was predominantly the one accused of the Alfonso’s murder, but Lucrezia was not completely in the clear. It is believed that Lucrezia was involved in this murder because when Alfonso was attacked, Lucrezia just so happened to be off talking with a friend instead of being by his side. It is said that Lucrezia was as power hungry as her brother and was ready for her next marriage to Alfonso D’Este so that she could become Duchess of Ferrara. Lucrezia was believed to be an accomplice in Alfonso’s murder.\(^{10}\) By going off with a friend, Lucrezia strategically left Alfonso alone so that the Orsini could secretly kill him.

This is not the case. Chroniclers at the time tell us that Lucrezia was off talking to a friend, but when they returned to the Pope’s chambers, they had found Alfonso already dead.\(^{11}\) Lucrezia was off minding her own business and had no idea that her

\(^{9}\) Ibid.
\(^{10}\) Ibid.
brother had planned on killing Alfonso when she went out. After Lucrezia tipped off Sforza and helped him flee before the Pope or Cesare could kill him, Lucrezia was not informed of her family’s plans of murders. More proof that Lucrezia was not involved in this murder was because after she been told Alfonso was dead, she uncontrollably wept. She wept so much that her family sent her away to weep because it was an embarrassment.\textsuperscript{12} She would not have been that upset over Alfonso’s murder if she wanted him dead.

There is a pattern with each case of a murder committed by Pope Alexander VI or Cesare. When someone connected to the Borgias was murdered, it was commonly said something along the lines of “the Borgias must have killed them.”\textsuperscript{13} Because the Borgias are to blame, and Lucrezia shares that same last name, she gets included in the guilty party. The Borgias were so disliked during their lifetime that they were always made out to be the evil people, the ones who are the incestuous murderers. With each of these murders, Lucrezia was and is accused of having some role in their murder, but she is getting accused just because she is a Borgia. Chroniclers of the time were so biased against the Borgias that they were willing to make any negative claim against them. The problem is that they were too focused on making a bad name for the Borgias that they did not take the time to look specifically at Lucrezia’s life and see that she was not a part of any of these murders.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
Whore

Not only was Lucrezia falsely accused of being a murderer, but she was also falsely accused of being a whore. Both Sarah Bradford and Maria Bellocini make reference to Matarazzo, a Perugian chronicler who said: “[it was] a conclusion that set all of Italy laughing… it was common knowledge that she had been and was then the greatest whore there ever was in Rome.”¹⁴ The first incident that caused Lucrezia to be thought of as a whore was her sex scandal with Perotto. The phrase “sex scandal” already has a negative connotation, but that fact that Lucrezia was involved in one and had just been married made the situation even worse. During the Renaissance, the word whore was used as a harsher sounding alternative to harlot. The word described someone who “plied their trade among different communities” and would “supply males with companionship for a price.”¹⁵ This does not accurately describe Lucrezia in any way. Lucrezia’s affair with Perotto was merely her finding someone on her own that she might like instead of her father and brother telling her who to love. Lucrezia was not paid for her relations with Perotto and she did not charge him for their time spent together. Therefore, by the definition of a whore in the 1400s, this incident with Perotto does not support the claim that Lucrezia was a whore.

Another incident that caused Lucrezia to be labeled as a whore was her affair with Pietro Bembo during her third marriage to Alfonso D’Este. Bembo was the man she was most passionate about, with their affair lasting sixteen years. The two exchanged

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several letters over the years, which exposed the deep workings of their relationship including their secret meetings and declarations of love for each other.\textsuperscript{16} Once again, Lucrezia did not get paid for her companionship with Bembo. Their relationship was a complete two-way street with no under the table payments.

Just because Lucreza’s relationship with Bembo was an extra-marital affair does not mean that she was a whore. It is important to note that Lucrezia’s marriage with Alfonso was arranged by her family and was strictly for the purpose of gaining more power. The marriage was not created by Lucrezia and Alfonso for the purpose of having sexual relations or even a marriage like what one would think of today. Marriages in the Renaissance period “were not simply personal matters; they were crucial to the network of alliances that underlay a family’s prosperity and prospects and that in, turn, formed the fabric of loyalties, affection, and obligation that supported political civic institutions.”\textsuperscript{17} Marriages were not the same as they are today where you are committing yourself to be a lifelong love partner to someone. Marriages were a currency of dynastic and diplomatic exchange within the aristocracy. Lucrezia’s marriages were this form of marriage, not like the ones seen today. Therefore, Lucrezia’s affairs within her marriages cannot be used as an excuse for her being a whore because she her marriage was not a commitment to remain loyal to that person for their rest of their life, but was merely an exchange of power for her family.


\textsuperscript{17} Art, National Gallery of “Husbands and Wives.” Italian Renaissance Learning Resources. Accessed December 1, 2017.
Incestuous

The negative adjectives attached to Lucrezia’s name do not stop there. There were also rumors that Lucrezia was incestuous. This is frequently misconceived because of the closeness of the Borgia family. The Borgia family was very close and very protective of each other. Specifically Lucrezia’s father and brother were extra protective of her. Braford notes that, “The dominant figure in her life was undoubtedly her father, who loved his three children by Vannozza with an extravagant passion… so much that there were later accusations of incest between Rodrigo and Lucrezia.”18 As soon as the public was aware of how close the Borgia family was, the rumors of incest began. G. J. Meyer states that after the closeness of the Borgia’s was evident, “Thus was born the immoral legend of incest among the Borgias, with Lucrezia at its center.”19

The first time Lucrezia was accused of incest was by her first husband, Sforza. It was an accusation made out of complete anger towards the Borgia’s. Sforza refused to agree to an annulment of his marriage with Lucrezia, so her father told him that their marriage was never consummated and could, therefore, be dissolved. In an act of anger, Sforza denied the Pope’s statement and said that he had been with Lucrezia an “infinite number of times”20 and that the Pope was just taking Lucrezia away from him so that he could have her for himself in that way. Here is where the incestuous rumors began. The truth behind this rumor is that there is very little evidence out there that can prove this rumor to be true.

Not only was Lucrezia accused of incest with her father, but she was also accused of incest with her brother. It is true that Lucrezia and Cesare were very close and in a sense in love with each other, but not in a sexual way. It was believed that they were sexually involved because: Lucrezia still loved Cesare despite the fact that he killed her second husband, Cesare would rush to Lucrezia’s bedside anytime she was ill, and when Cesare died, Lucrezia wept and fell into a very deep mourning over the loss. It is important to remember that just because the two were very close, does not mean that they were sexually involved. Again, there is no evidence that gives these stories credence.\(^{21}\)

The accusations of incest between Lucrezia and her father and brother were completely false. Bradford notes that these claims have to be viewed with a degree of skepticism. Sexual innuendo at the time was a “favorite ingredient”\(^{22}\) of Italian gossip, which Lucrezia was at the front of. One is not to get the closeness of the Borgias confused with acts of incest. The closeness is what made the Borgias a strong power to compete against. Therefore, many people did not like them. People did not like Lucrezia and her family so much that they would create rumors of incest in hopes of revoking some of their power. The rumors of the incestuous Borgia family made for good entertainment back in their day, but their enemies have blurred the line between the truth and fiction. The main point to make from this is that the claims of incest were just \textit{rumors}, none of which can be proven.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Evil

To keep the bad name trending, Lucrezia was notorious for being a murderer, a whore, incestuous, and last but not least, she was also known for being evil. This claim was just as false as the others. For example, E. R. Chamberlin states that rumors about Lucrezia would “expand over the centuries until Lucrezia was an international institution, a universal symbol of evil, not only a sexual wanton but a serial murderer, a poisoner of the mot exquisite skill.”23 Lucrezia was accused of being evil because she used men for sex and to gain power and was believed to have taken part in all of the murders connected to the Borgia’s. For example, it was believed that Lucrezia kept a ring on her finger that was filled with poison. People believed that she would wear the ring to secretly poison anyone that she or her father and brother wanted to get rid of.24 The truth behind this accusation it that there is no evidence to prove that she used this ring to poison any one, but once again she is a victim of bad press.

This tale of Lucrezia being evil has been around for centuries. People, more specifically the chroniclers of her time that were not fans of the Borgia family, starting this rumor about Lucrezia. One can begin to ask is it true and if it is not true, how has the rumor stayed alive so many years? The answer to the first question is, no this rumor is not true. Just like the rumors of incest within the Borgia family, there is no historical evidence that would be able to prove this rumor to be true.25

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If the rumors of Lucrezia being evil are not true, then how have they lingered around for so many years? The answer to this question lies within the acts of her family, specially her father and brother. Sarah Bradford states, “Lucrezia Borgia’s name has been a byword for evil for five hundred years, her life distorted by generations of historians and seen through the prism of the crimes of her family, themselves magnified by hostile chroniclers of the time.”

Here, Bradford is saying that evil has been attached to Lucrezia’s name because of the crimes of her family. When her father became Pope Alexander VI, the reign of the Borgia’s became the most scandalous time in the papal history. Pope Alexander and Cesare were well known for their ruthless ambition and would eliminate all enemies in their path to their plans for power.

The Borgia’s were well known for assassinations, murders, disappearances, and even known for poisoning their enemies. Lucrezia never took part in these events. For the most part she did not even know of the plans her father and brother had until she had heard about someone going missing or dying. Once again, because Lucrezia had the last name of Borgia and it the closeness of the Borgia’s was well known, Lucrezia got accused by association with these terrible crimes.

**Family Pawn**

As one can see, the accusations of Lucrezia being a murder, whore, incestuous, and evil were all caused by the simple fact that Lucrezia had the last name Borgia, which was associated with all those negative terms. Lucrezia was victim to her family

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and was passed around as if she were an inanimate object instead of a human being. The name itself, Lucrezia, is translated as wealth.\textsuperscript{28} The fact that her father would give her a name meaning wealth suggests that he knew she would create the family a lot of money and that he had plans of her doing so. From the day she was born, Lucrezia was planned to be used in order to gain her family money.

Not only would Lucrezia be used to generate her family money, but she was also used to create political power for her father and brother. As previously mentioned, marriages during the Renaissance period were used to create alliances that underlay the family’s prosperity and used to create heirs to inherit the throne that the family had created overtime. Her family used her by constantly passing her around to marry different men in order to gain more power.

By the age of twelve, Lucrezia had already been married off to create an alliance and that was only the beginning of her family’s usage of her. Lucrezia was her father and brother’s most important pawn in creating their power during her lifetime. Because she was the one being passed around and gaining the Borgia’s power, she was put at the forefront of all the talk pertaining to the Borgia’s whether that be talk of murder or incest. To the public eye, Lucrezia was the most active Borgia during the time, she was seen to be the one making them gain so much power, but it is over looked that she was her family’s pawn.

Most of the bad things Lucrezia was accused of happened within her first twenty years of life. She was too young to have been involved in these intricate claims made

\textsuperscript{28} Campbell, Mike. “Meaning, origin and history of the name Lucretia.” Behind the Name. Accessed December 1, 2017.
against her. Lucrezia was her family’s political pawn, but she did not let that stop her
from making her own name for herself. Lucrezia would still follow her father’s and
brother’s orders, but would also begin to show who she truly was. Lucrezia would do
several things to show that she was capable of creating a name for herself. First off, she
would begin to choose men on her own to have a romantic relationship with, and once
she found a man, she would prove to be very passionate about him. She would care
about him and love him just as one would do in a marriage we see today, as would be
seen with her relationship with Pietro Bembo.

Not only this, but she would use her family’s plans for her to her own advantage. For
example, she took her arranged marriage with Alfonso D’Este and used her new title of
Duchess of Ferrara to showcase her administrative talents that she has been secretly
harboring over the years. Lucrezia would show how she knew how to rule over an entire
country without the help of a man or her father and brother. Once she began to create
her own name, Lucrezia would prove to be much more than what she has been
previously known as.

**Passionate**

Because the negative connotations of Lucrezia are always mentioned, who she
really was is often overlooked. It is important to realize that Lucrezia was actually a very
passionate, intelligent, and independent woman who knew how to take control of her
own life under the circumstances she was put under. In order to see how Lucrezia was
a passionate woman, one needs to look at her relationships between the men in her life
that she loved. It is clear that Lucrezia was very passionate about the men she loved; such as the men she had affairs with and her brother.

During her first marriage, Lucrezia had an affair with Francesco Gonzaga, the first man she chose to truly love. Over several years, through Lucrezia’s other marriages, she would continue to show her passion for Gonzaga. Lucrezia cared deeply about Gonzaga. Throughout their affair during her first marriage, Lucrezia would go through the trouble of finding secret, trusted carriers so they could send letters back and forth to each other. When Lucrezia lost her brother, she wanted to weep on Gonzaga’s shoulder because he was her place of comfort.29 Later on, Lucrezia and Gonzaga would end up on opposing sides of the war, but Lucrezia did not let that stop her from keeping in touch with him.30 Although Lucrezia would go on to love other men, she still communicated with Gonzaga which proves that she really did love and care for him.

Even though her second marriage to Alfonso Bisceglie was arranged, Lucrezia was still passionate about him. Although there is not much evidence about how the two acted around each other within their marriage, one can conclude that Lucrezia had some type of passion for him based on her reaction when she heard she had been murdered. Lucrezia was always very close and did whatever her father and brother wanted her to do, but her passion for Alfonso was enough to change that. Once Lucrezia found out that Alfonso had been murdered, she wept for days. She was in so much grief that she left for Nepi to mourn over his death.31 When she found out that her

father and brother could be blamed for Alfonso’s death, Lucrezia was furious and raged against her family. The fact that Lucrezia raged against her beloved family and had to leave the country to mourn over his death, shows how passionate she was about Alfonso. She may not have loved him as a husband but definitely had strong feelings for him as a person.

During her third marriage to Alfonso D’Etse, Lucrezia would show how even though she had an affair, she still would be respectful to him and show how she did care for him. Bradford describes Lucrezia and Alfonso’s relationship as, “He was not, in short, the kind of man to who Lucrezia was naturally attracted; she would not be faithful to him nor he to her, but over the years of their marriage a mutual respect would develop.”

Lucrezia’s passion for Alfonso D’Este was more in the form of friendship. She was always willing to help him with whatever, whenever. For example, even though Lucrezia disliked Alfonso’s sister, she would write letters to her to keep her updated on what Alfonso is doing with his life. She would also step up and take care of Alfonso’s duties in Ferrera when he was away for work.

Another way to show that Lucrezia was passionate about Alfonso was through her unending efforts to give Alfonso a child. Lucrezia got pregnant once, but gave birth to a still born baby girl. After this she felt as if she had failed her duties to give the D’Este family an heir to inherit the throne. Lucrezia knew that she would continue to have problems bearing children, but that did not stop her. Lucrezia was willing to give up her

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33 Ibid.
34 Meyer, G. J. *The Borgias: The Hidden History*. 
life to give Alfonso a child. Lucrezia may not have remained faithful to Alfonso, but she was passionate for him and was willing to do whatever he wanted and/or needed.

Another man Lucrezia loved that would show that she has the ability to be a passionate woman is the man she had an affair with during her third marriage, Pietro Bembo. Bembo was the man Lucrezia was the most passionate about. Their affair lasted sixteen years, which is the longest she had ever associated with a man. Although the two did not get to meet up with each other in person very much, but that does not give an accurate portrayal of how their relationship was. Over the years, Lucrezia and Bembo exchanged several letters which exposed the deep workings of their relationship including their secret message and declarations of love for each other. In one of her first letters to Bembo, she ends the letter saying “I await your reply with great anticipation. –Prepared for your command, Lucrezia de Borgia.” This is the first evidence of Lucrezia’s feelings towards Bembo. One can see that she is anxious to hear from him again and is ready to do whatever he wants her to. This shows that Lucrezia has some sort of strong feelings for him.

The longer the letters were passed back and forth, the more passionate Lucrezia’s letters to Bembo gets. Lucrezia began to reference herself as “f.f.” for secretive purposes and about a year later she sent Bembo a letter saying:

“Although I have legitimate cause for not writing to you, in appreciation of the goodwill you have shown me, and being informed of the discourteous of me not

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to let you know of this in these few lines: both to satisfy the desire you have that the letter should be in my hand and to express my obligation to you. It only remains for me to beg you all I can to promise to take good care of your health from now on; and you may trust the bearer of this as you would myself. f.f.”

This letter specifically shows how passionate Lucrezia was about Bembo. The fact that Lucrezia was begging for Bembo to promise to take care of himself shows that Lucrezia did deeply care for Bembo, which can be translated into passion.

Another letter that shows exactly how much Lucrezia cared for Bembo is in one of her last letters to him. Lucrezia would thank him for everything he has done for her. On March 3rd, 1514, Lucrezia wrote to Bembo saying “…I thank you all I can for everything and remain as indebted to you as such unceasing loyal regard deserves and which shall be content to know it is repaid in equal measure…” At this point, Lucrezia knew that their letters back and forth to each other were going to be scarce due to danger of her father and brother finding out about their love affair. Not knowing when her last letter would be to him, Lucrezia wanted to make sure he knew how much she cared for him and appreciated everything he has done for her. The fact that Lucrezia could not let Bembo go without knowing his value to her and the way she thanks him, using strong phrases such as unceasing loyal regard” shows how much she thought of and cared for Bembo.

36 Ibid. Ferrara late May 1504.
Another man Lucrezia chose to love that shows the extent to how passionate she really was is her brother, Cesare. Despite any and all bad things Cesare could have done to Lucrezia, she was unconditionally forgiving of him. For example, Cesare used Lucrezia for his own personal political plans. Even though Cesare was using her, she still had a strong brotherly love for him. Her strong love her him is one of the reasons she was considered incest in the first place. Despite the fact that Cesare is the one who had her second husband murdered, Lucrezia’s love for Cesare was unwavering. Just like when he second husband Alfonso died, when Cesare died, Lucrezia went into great mourning, which shows just how passionate she was for these men.

What one can see through the relationships with the men Lucrezia loved is that she was a very passionate woman when it came to the men in her life. The question can be asked; how can one be considered evil when they show several acts of compassion towards the men in her life? Bradford makes a note saying that, “She share the curious mixture of piety, sensuality and complete indifference to sexual morality that was a feature of her family, but when she was in a position to express herself, she would prove to be a good, kind, and compassionate woman.”^38 Who she loved was an opportunity for Lucrezia to express herself and, just as Bradford suggests, this gave her an opportunity to show how she was not evil, but in fact was very passionate about the people she chose to love.

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Intelligent

When given a chance to express herself, not only would Lucrezia prove to be a passionate woman, but she would also prove to be a very intelligent woman. As G. J. Meyer puts it, “Though the years ahead would be heavy with dark events, and though she was quite human enough to be changed by the misfortunes that befell her, Lucrezia would mature and improve rather than harden with the years.”

Lucrezia would begin to show her intelligence at a very young age. One of the first instances where one can see that Lucrezia was a very intelligent woman is in her letters to Vincenzo Giordano, her confidant. While Lucrezia was away in Nepi grieving over her second husband’s death, she began to write letters to Giordano which had a mysterious and secretive tone to them, but also had a house- wifely and commanding tone to them. She began to hint at intrigues with the Vatican and Giordano “must not be surprised if the letter to Caterina was written in cipher because it is done for more secrecy and less scandal.”

Lucrezia’s need for secrecy hints at the notion that she is planning on returning to Rome, but on her own terms, not those of her father and brother. Because Lucrezia wanted to return to Rome but insisted on doing it in secrecy shows to she knew she was under the public’s watch. More specifically, she knew she was under her father and brother’s watch and her return not on their time would make them angry. Lucrezia’s intelligence shows through the fact that she knew how to make a safe getaway from Nepi and secretly come back.

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to Rome without anyone finding out. Lucrezia was under the age of eighteen when she planned this trip, which is something many eighteen year olds today would struggle doing, let alone doing it in secrecy.

The next instance where Lucrezia would showcase her intelligence is within her third marriage to Alfonso D'Este, which made her Duchess of Ferrara. Being Duchess of Ferrara required Lucrezia to play several roles such as: leader of the court, wife, mother, and the most important role—Governor of the state.\textsuperscript{41} During their marriage, Alfonso had to leave Rome often in order to go to protect the state. While he was away, Lucrezia would step up and take over his duties. Lucrezia was no longer standing back and watching the ruler. Now, she was actively participating in governing the city. For example, when Alfonso was gone, “Lucrezia was left to be in charge as Governor of the city, giving audiences and issuing orders, not mere attending to the examination of petitions. It was in indication not only of her administrative talents but a demonstration of trust.”\textsuperscript{42} During her marriage to Alfonso, Lucrezia was at a young age, just in her twenties. The mere fact that at that young of an age she was in charge of an entire city and doing it well shows just how intelligent she was.

The last big event that happened in Lucrezia’s that allowed her to show off her intelligence was when she was appointed \textit{de facto} rule of Ferrara. “Born into a powerful and dangerous family, Lucrezia survived many scandals and intrigues before she finally

\textsuperscript{41} Gregorovius, Ferdinand. \textit{Lucretia Borgia: According to Original Documents and Correspondence of Her Day}. New York, 1968.
made a place for herself at the court of Ferrara." Alfonso was almost always away fighting with enemies in war at the time and because of this, Lucrezia would be appointed as *de facto* ruler of Ferrara. This is where Lucrezia would be able to showcase her military knowledge and intelligence. Bradford states, “Lucrezia was only nineteen but her appointment was far from being a cynical joke; later in life she was able to demonstrate that she had inherited her father’s administrative ability.” Lucrezia excelled in this position for many different reasons, thanks to her father and brother. Lucrezia gained her administrative skills from closely watching her father act as Pope over the years. Because her father and brother were always devising new plans to gain more power, they were always updated on newest military affairs. This, in turn, allowed for Lucrezia to be very aware of all the military affairs going on at the time. Lucrezia could not have obtained the title *de facto* ruler of Ferrara if she was not intelligent enough to excel at this position.

**Entrepreneur**

What many people did not realize was that Lucrezia was also an entrepreneur. One would not know this unless one looked into Lucreiza’s economic activities and what she was invested in. Ghirardo said, “Her economic activities have been overshadowed by unfortunate and unfounded accusations of incest and the supposed poisoned of her second husband.” Lucrezia invested in land, property, and livestock, which she used in

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her favor to create her own revenue. What stands out about her economic activities is the scale of her enterprises.\textsuperscript{46}

During Lucrezia’s time, women were viewed as “vehicles”\textsuperscript{47} for the transfer of wealth and were better collaborating with their spouse on their activities instead of being their own economic agents. Why Lucrezia’s economic activities stands out is because she was not a helper in her husband’s activities but she created her own fortune. Ghirardo puts it as, “Lucrezia Borgia undertook economic activities independently and in her own interests. Her entrepreneurial activities have escaped attention because they do not fall within the constructed paradigm of female patricians in Renaissance Italy, in which women used their resources, and subordinated their own interests, on behalf of their families.”\textsuperscript{48}

One of the first ways Lucrezia shows her entrepreneurial skills is with her interest in land and how she acquires it. Lucrezia almost never used her own capital to purchase land. She knew other ways to gain land and not spend money. Some would say that Lucrezia was even “too shrewd”\textsuperscript{49} to use her own money to purchase land unless it was absolutely necessary. Instead of using her cash in acquiring property, she received most of the land as donations, either from individuals or from town councils. In most cases, she agreed to undertake major reclamation projects in exchange for the properties.”\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{46} Ibid., p. 55
\bibitem{47} Ibid., p. 55
\bibitem{49} Ibid., p. 65
\bibitem{50} Ibid., p. 65
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For example, Lucreiza set up a program with her third husband’s cousin, Don Ercole D’Este, here he donates half of his land in Diamantina to Lucrezia in exchange for her to agree to undertake a major reclamation project that included creating embankments and digging canals. Within three months of the accord with Don Ercole, Lucrezia had also acquired property in Ariano by asking for the land as a donation in return for reclamation promises. These reclamation promises are what made people interested in donating their land to Lucrezia. The reclamation projects would consist of things such as digging canals, excavating conduits, and plating contemporaneously. What Lucrzia did with the land after she received it also shows her entrepreneur skills. One of the most important things Lucrezia did with the land she received is that she held the titles in her own name, not her husband’s. Her land investments benefit her personal patrimony, not her husband’s Alfonso.\textsuperscript{51}

The specific type of property that Lucrezia sought played a big part in her entrepreneurial success also. Lucrezia sought property in terms of \textit{emphyteusis} or \textit{livello}. This would allow the lessee to sell or rent the property, for all practical purposes the lessee claimed ownership, including the titles to all improvements. This meant that Lucrezia could rent land, but claim ownership of it and do with it as she pleased. Being able to hold the title to all improvements was an incentive for Lucrezia to better the land and turn it over for sale or rent it herself at a much higher rate that she was renting it at.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 75
The perfect example of how Lucrezia was smart with her investments compared to her husband, Alfonso, pertains to the type of contracts they signed for the property they owned. Alfonso would sign twenty-nine-year contracts, which fixed his income at minimal levels whereas Lucrezia sign short-term contracts and would invest her capital to improve the land and the use it to pasture her livestock and grow grain. This allowed her to renegotiate or terminate contracts, which would prove advantageous and allow her to generate more of her own wealth.53

Reclamation and betterment projects were not the only part of Lucreiza’s plan to create her own wealth. She also invested in livestock. Over the years, she owned large numbers of horses, cattle, milk cows, and sheep. She spent one quarter of her son’s inheritance on livestock, which in turn would fund her entrepreneurial activities. Livestock was also the one thing she spent her personal capital on. She would invest her cash and even sell her own jewelry in order to purchase livestock. “A few later, her treasurer reported that she pawned a piece of jewelry that consisted of a ruby and pearl to buy water buffaloes. It appears that whenever she had available cash, she purchased livestock.”54 Once Lucrezia gained property, she would put livestock on the land, which would later produce goods such as meat, milk, and cheese. These goods she could sell to replenish her cash stash. Lucrezia knew that livestock would be a good investment that would allow her to create her own wealth.

53 Ibid., p. 70
One of the last acts of Lucrezia that shows her entrepreneurial skills is how she took care of her debts. Lucrezia would take her newly acquired land and use it as guarantees for her debts. For example, she was indebted to a spice merchant, Nicolò Coadis. Lucrezia promised him the first piece of land in the village of Diamantina in the event that she failed to pay her debts off within the allotted time.\textsuperscript{55} Lucrezia knew how to use the land that she was receiving as donations to help her pay off her own debts. Not only was Lucrezia in debt with people, but people was also indebted to her and she was not about to forget about that. “During her last six years, Lucrezia also began a concerted campaign both to redeem jewelry pawned or loaned in earlier years and to collect other debts.”\textsuperscript{56} Lucrezia knew that it was important to pay off her own debts, but that it was also important that people pay off their debts with her too.

One of the most important things to note about Lucrezia’s entrepreneurial skills is that “by investing in the systematic reclamation and capital foundation of landing resources for her personal patrimony rather than in luxury and magnificence, she defied the convention of her class and gender in the early sixteenth century.”\textsuperscript{57} Lucrezia knew better than to spend her money on fancy dresses or spend her money on leisure retreats unlike her husband Alfonso. She knew that investing her money on bettering run down land would eventually benefit her and allow her to independently create her own wealth.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 72.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 87
Independent

Once Lucrezia decided to create her own name, it is evident that Lucrezia knew how to take control of her own life and become independent from her father, brother, and even her husband to some degree. She may not have completely broken away from the powerful, demanding men in her life, but she did not let them completely control her. The major turning point in Lucrezia’s life that allowed her to start becoming independent was when her family was planning her marriage to Alfonso D’Este. For once, Lucrezia wanted this marriage as much as her father and brother did. Lucrezia knew that with this marriage she would become Duchess of Ferrara, which is one of the highest ranks she could have possibly received. Bradford puts it as:

“Like Alexander and Cesare she was ambitious, clever and a realist. Rome had become oppressive to her, her surroundings a constant reminder of things she would rather forget. This was her chance to establish herself for life, to be no longer the pawn in Alexander and Cesare’s high games.”

Once Lucrezia saw this opportunity to be able to take control of her own life, she was dead set on making it happen. She showed Alfonso that she did care about him and wanted this marriage in order to convince his family that the marriage would be a good thing for both families. Once the marriage was drawn up, Lucrezia took the opportunity and ran with it. It is during her this marriage that she begins to showcase her abilities and show that she does not need her father or brother to create her own destiny. This

marriage is where Lucrezia finally begins to break away from her father and brother and becomes independent from them.

Through a deep analysis of Lucrezia’s actions throughout her lifetime, it becomes unmistakable that she was not the woman that people depict her to be. She was far from being murderous, whore, incestuous, or evil. Lucrezia was her family’s pawn, being passed around simply for Pope Alexander VI and Cesare to gain more political power. Lucrezia had the unfortunate fate of sharing the last name “Borgia” with her father and brother. Her last name is what put her at the forefront of gossip in Italy, none of which was positive. Rumors that included Lucrezia’s name was those of killing her husbands and sleeping around, even with her brother. All of these accusations against Lucrezia were nothing but false. Just because Lucrezia has the last name of Borgia does not mean she is anything like her father and brother. Yes, Pope Alexander VI and Cesare killed people and could be described as evil, but Lucrezia could not be.

Even though she was able to gain power and create her own destiny, Lucrezia is still a very misunderstood woman. To this day, there are still rumors floating around saying that she was part of the murderous Borgia’s plans and that she did have sexual relations with both her father and brother. The truth behind it all the rumors is that there is not much evidence today to back up any of those claims. The little bit of evidence mentioned is all there is to know and is left up for the reader’s interpretation. For example, it is known that Sforza said that Pope Alexander VI wanted Lucrezia for himself, but it is not known in what way he meant and there is no hard evidence that Lucrezia ever slept with her father. One has to take the context of what is truly known
and make their own judgments. The question then is, “If there is no evidence to prove any of these rumors true, how are they still being told today?”

These rumors make for a good and interesting talk, which is why they are still being told today. The idea of a powerful woman involved in several scandalous acts catches people’s attention and makes them interested in her. Because of these rumors, Lucrezia Borgia has been used as modern day entertainment. In 2011, Neils Jordan created a television series surrounding the Borgia’s murders and road to power. Not only this, a well known video game called “Assassins Creed” created a character who would be the secondary antagonist of the game based off of Lucrezia because of her “cruel and ruthless”59 nature.

The moral of the story is that Lucrezia Borgia has been called many different things throughout her lifetime but no one really knows who she truly was. One is left with minimal evidence of her life to make their own conclusions about who she was. Because there is no hard evidence, the truth about who Lucrezia Borgia was will never be revealed. Based on the evidence as stated within this paper, one is compelled to conclude that Lucrezia was not any of the negative terms she was believed to be. Lucrezia was not murderous, a whore, incestuous, or evil. She was quite the opposite.

Lucrezia was a prime example of the women of her time, through her displays of the Renaissance’s new sense of self and determination to accomplish new things. She had the grit required to make the best of the circumstances she was placed in and create something of herself. She did not let her father, brother, or society define who

she was going to be. By looking at the personal actions of Lucrezia, one can see that she was passionate, intelligent, and an entrepreneur. She took matters into her own hands and created her own destiny through self-gained power.