

An excerpt from
Lucrezia Borgia
 by Joseph Aragon



Lucrezia's private reception chamber in Ferrara. LISABETTA leads Pietro BEMBO in.

- LISABETTA: This way, Messer Bembo. Her Ladyship is expecting you.
- BEMBO: I must say, I'm feeling quite anxious. I've heard so much about the Duke's new bride; I half-expect her to come descending from the clouds.
- LISABETTA: Oh no, you'll find her Ladyship to be quite of this world.
- BEMBO: You'd think otherwise the way Messer Strozzi goes on about her. The man is obsessed. And his poems! Ream after ream of unrelenting hyperbolic verse. Of course, he gets paid to write that sort of thing, but there must be some grain of truth to it all.
- LUCREZIA enters, with a small book.*
- LUCREZIA: Messer Pietro Bembo, I presume.
- BEMBO: My most illustrious Duchess of Ferrara. I kiss your Ladyship's hand.
- LUCREZIA: That will be all, Lisabetta.
- LISABETTA: Yes, my lady.
- LISABETTA leaves.*
- LUCREZIA: Messer Strozzi has spoken ringing praises of you. He even lent me a copy of your book.
- BEMBO: Which one.
- LUCREZIA: The one about your trip to Mount Etna.
- BEMBO: Oh yes. I hope your Ladyship enjoyed it. I especially laboured on the Latin for that one.
- LUCREZIA: Yes. It certainly sounded laboured. A little too overwrought and pretty for a travelogue, I found.
- BEMBO: I'm sorry your Ladyship feels that way.

- LUCREZIA: . . . Where was this book pressed?
- BEMBO: In Venice. My colleague Aldus Manutius runs a press there.
- LUCREZIA: So you're a Venetian.
- BEMBO: Yes.
- LUCREZIA: We're not supposed to like Venetians.
- BEMBO: Oh . . . Well, I realize Ferrara isn't exactly on speaking terms—
- LUCREZIA: I'll get straight to the point, Messer Bembo. I don't much care for poetry. I find it and its creators tedious, precious and self-important. But Ferrara insists on being a centre of art and learning, and as its duchess, I must dutifully oblige. So I open my doors to dishevelled, bankrupt musicians and wordsmiths who swarm through my court and choke the air like a cloud of obsequious gnats, and expect me to pay them for the favour!
- But yes. Yes, Messer Bembo, I have read your book, marvelled at its needlessly impeccable Latin, and can say with confidence that you will make a fine addition to my fledging menagerie of derelict misfits. I assume you have some new project you wish me to patronize. Consider it done. Just flutter into my court from time to time, recite a dazzling elegy about me in rhyming couplets, and you will be handsomely rewarded.
- LUCREZIA opens a small chest, takes out a small coin pouch and tosses it on the table.*
- There, that's the first of it.
- Well?
- . . . You are an artist, Messer Bembo. Pride is not a luxury you can afford.
- BEMBO: May I speak candidly, my lady?
- LUCREZIA: Please do.
- BEMBO: I have no intention of accepting your patronage, or joining your menagerie. I will not perform tricks for anyone, especially for someone unappreciative of my discipline.
- LUCREZIA: Your discipline.

BEMBO: Art is a discipline, my lady. Scholarship is a discipline. An elevation of the mind and spirit, a journey that will bring us that much closer to the gods. And if your Ladyship's appreciation merely extends to that of a pampered princess with a kennel of lapdogs who dance at the dangling of a morsel, then I cannot and will not accept the support of so boorish and condescending a patron.

LUCREZIA: Boorish and condescending! Of all the insolence. Have you any idea who I am?

BEMBO: Lucrezia d'Este, the Duchess of Ferrara, formerly Lucrezia Borgia.

LUCREZIA: And perhaps you've heard a thing or two about me.

BEMBO: Things which I know are either greatly exaggerated or outright false.

LUCREZIA: . . . And how would you know?

BEMBO: Rumours have a stench about them. To which perhaps your Ladyship's nose is so accustomed that you are beginning to believe them yourself.

I apologize for my insolence, and I beg your Ladyship's pardon. But if my craft is not fully appreciated here, then I'd best go elsewhere. Farewell, my lady, and thank you for your time.

LUCREZIA: Wait.

. . . Will you do us the honour of visiting our court tomorrow afternoon?

You're refreshing, Messer Bembo. You have something the other gentlemen in my court lack.

BEMBO: Which is?

LUCREZIA: A scrotum. (*proffering the coin pouch*) One hundred ducats, with my deepest respect.

Pause. BEMBO takes the pouch.

BEMBO: Until tomorrow, my most generous duchess.

BEMBO kisses her hand and leaves.



End of Excerpt