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Mercy for Anne and a Rose for Lucrezia

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Mercy for Anne and a Rose for Lucrezia

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Historical fiction presents first-hand accounts of actual events that transport readers into the realm of the past. The retellings of these events are often narrated by fictional characters, crafted by the author's own hand, while in other instances, an author will choose to breathe life into historical figures, the real life players of the past. The Tudors of the English royal court and the Spanish descended Borgias of the Papal States are two of the most powerful and sometimes notorious families of Renaissance Europe. Twice the Man Booker prize winner, Hilary Mantel realizes the notorious scandal of the Tudors in her novel *Wolf Hall*, while Sarah Dunant uses her New York Times best-seller, *Blood & Beauty: The Borgias, A Novel* to capture the relentless ambition of the first organized crime family, the Borgias.

Wolf Hall and *Blood & Beauty* have been widely received as leading novels of modern historical fiction, winning them a spot on the nation's best-selling list, and various awards of distinction. Both novels have been reviewed by noteworthy publications—like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Sunday Review*—and even featured in favored media magazines, such as *Elle*.

In the novels, both authors succeed in the humanization of the two families' leading ladies: the harlot and usurper, Anne Boleyn, and the alleged mistress of lust and poisons, Lucrezia Borgia, both of whom have been rendered an archetypal villainess by generations of historians. While Mantel chooses to focus solely on the rumors and traditions surrounding the life of Anne Boleyn, it is Dunant who redeems Lucrezia Borgia from her soiled reputation through her rigorous historical research of life as a Renaissance woman—during a time where the advantageous life of men was often taken for granted.

By comparing the events in Mantel's and Dunant's novels to historical evidence, the factual accuracy of each work of modern historical fiction will be assessed—especially with reference to

Anne Boleyn and Lucrezia Borgia. Through the careful comparison of the fictional texts with the historical, Dunant's novel will be revealed as the superior work of historical fiction, due primarily to her unrelenting devotion to research and the truth.

I. Renaissance England's Anne Boleyn

"Anna comes, the most famous woman in the world; / Anna comes, the shining incarnation of chastity / In snow-white litter, just like the goddesses / Anna the Queen is here, the preservation of your future."
 –Nicholas Udall, *In Praise of Queen Anne Boleyn*, 1533

Over one hundred biographies have been written on the life of Anne Boleyn, since the date of her execution in 1536. She has been admired and reviled as queen consort, and painted as history's most remembered jezebel of the English Renaissance. Supporting this "monster legend" was the Elizabethan recusant activist, Nicholas Sander's account, in which he states:

Anne Boleyn was rather tall of stature, with black hair and an oval face of sallow complexion, as if troubled with jaundice. She had a projecting tooth under the upper lip, and on her right hand, six fingers. There was a large wen under her chin, and therefore to hide its ugliness, she wore a high dress covering her throat . . . She was handsome to look at, with a pretty mouth.

Could such a monstrosity of a woman ever have captured the eye of the Tudor King, or were these mainly the views of those supporting Henry's first wife, Queen Katharine of Aragon?

It was Anne Boleyn who served as Henry VIII's catalyst in his famous decision to break with Catholicism and found the Church of England. It was Anne Boleyn who mothered one of England's most powerful royals to date, "The Virgin Queen," Elizabeth I. Although it was her inability to produce a male heir that led to her tragic downfall, Anne Boleyn's controversial reign and continental prowess are what continue to survive her beyond the grave (Ives 45-46).

One of Anne's first contemporaries to write about her, Lancelot De Carle—Bishop of Riez and French poet—lamented on her life as Henry's consort, only days after witnessing the queen's trial and execution. It was De Carle who invalidates the false depictions of Anne's unproven physical deformities when he calls her "beautiful and with an elegant figure," and then describes her eyes, in the English translation of *A Letter Containing the Criminal Charges Laid Against Queen Anne Boleyn of England*:

. . . eyes always most attractive / Which she knew well how to use with effect, / Sometimes leaving them at rest, / And at others, sending a message / To carry the secret witness of the heart. / And truth to tell, such was their power / That many surrendered to their obedience.

It was this eye-catching elegance—cultured during her time spent in the court of Queen Claude of France—combined with Anne Boleyn's sophistication and independent spirit that would take the English Royal Court by storm (Ives 44-45).

In G.W. Bernard's 2010 biography titled *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*, he points out that the correct time and place of the queen's birth are unknown and that any portraits depicting her physical appearance have been put into question, regarding matters of authenticity. We have an idea of what Anne may have looked like, based on the few brief descriptions given to us by her contemporaries; and yet, none of these testimonies are set in stone. We can only continue to speculate, since the rest is left to the imagination of historical fiction novelists, like Mantel (Bernard 10, 20).

But what was so captivating about Henry's second queen? What was the root of her power over him? An expert on Tudor history and author of *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (2004), Eric Ives states that it was not due to her physical looks, but because "she radiated sex" (44). In one of the King's undated love letters, he fervently writes to Anne of his most ardent affections:

Mine own sweetheart, this shall be to advertise you of the great loneliness that I find here since your departing- for I assure you methinketh the time longer since your departing now last, than I was wont to do a whole fortnight. I think your kindness and my fervencies of love causeth it; for otherwise I would not have thought it possible that for so little a while it should have grieved me . . . wishing myself (especially of an evening) in my sweet-heart's arms, whose pretty dugs I trust shortly to kiss. (*The Love Letters*)

Anne chose to resist Henry's sexual advances until the time of their betrothal, and in doing so, secured for herself a seat of power. What caused the King of England to become so mesmerized by this woman to the point where he wrote love letters, penned in his own hand? Mantel's article titled "Anne Boleyn: witch, bitch, temptress, feminist" written for *The Guardian* in 2012, gives us a deeper look into Anne's relationship with Henry: "Henry even drew hearts around both of their initials, "carving them into the paper like a moody adolescent. In time favours were granted. She allowed him to kiss her breasts. Her 'pretty duckies', he called them. She had made the man a fool".

Mantel also states that it is very possible that Anne did have affairs, since adultery and incestuous crimes were not that uncommon in 16th century Europe. Along with seducing courtiers of the King, Anne was accused of sleeping with her brother, George Boleyn, 2nd Viscount Rochford, with whom she kept an especially close relationship. While this may sound preposterous to us, Anne lived in an era where siblings were often not raised in the same household and so, genetic attractions did occur and were frequently acted upon; and yet, a crime of the Holy Mother Church is in not always a perfidious crime of the state. In *Fatal Attractions*, Bernard explains that this is why the case against Anne should have then been proceeded exclusively by ecclesiastical

courts (Bernard 152). Mantel agrees with Bernard on the fact that “Led by love or lust, people will do anything. Look what Henry had done.” (Mantel’s “Anne Boleyn: witch, bitch”)

Henry also wrote to Anne in one of his letters: “If you ... give yourself up, heart, body and soul to me ... I will take you for my only mistress, rejecting from thought and affection all others save yourself, to serve only you.” Anne was shrewd in her actions and instead of giving in to the King’s sexual advances, offered him this brave ultimatum: “Your wife I cannot be, both in respect of mine own unworthiness, and also because you have a queen already. Your mistress I will not be.”

There is also speculation that Anne is the famed “Anna” of Thomas Wyatt’s lyrical poetry. After being separated from his wife, Wyatt joined the royal court of King Henry VIII in 1524, becoming clerk of the king’s jewels, and then diplomat and high marshal of Calais. None of his poems on the theme of unrequited love were published before his death, and yet, he never identifies the woman that has thwarted his affections.

In one of Wyatt’s documented epigrams, he poses the riddle: What word is that that changeth not / Though it be turned and made in twain? / It is mine answer, God it wot, / And eke the causer of my pain. / It love rewardeth with disdain: / Yet I it loved. / What would ye more? / It is my health eke and my sore /” (Wyatt 1-8) to which the answer is none other than the name that can be read left to right and right to left, “Anna” (Bernard 16).

Wyatt’s Sonnet 3, which was later informally titled “Anne Unattainable,” clearly speaks on his impossible love for the object of the King of England’s affections, comparing Anne to the deer sought after by the huntsman [Henry]:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind, / But as for me, alas, I may no more, / The vain travail hath wearied me so sore. / I am of them that farthest cometh behind; / Yet may

I by no means my wearied mind/ Draw from the Deer: but as she fleeth afore, / Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore, / Since in a net I seek to hold the wind. / Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt, / (Wyatt 1-9)

The lines “As well as I may spend his time in vain: / And, graven with diamonds, in letters plain/ There is written her fair neck round about: / *Noli me tangere*, for Caesar’s I am, / And wild for to hold, though I seem tame” (Wyatt 10-14) point to the idea of Anne’s distancing herself from Wyatt, in her pursuit of Henry, the King.

There is no marvel as to why Wyatt never publically named Anne in his writings, since it would have been both suicide and treason to name her in his works, especially while she was in the eye of the king. Before her execution in May of 1536, Wyatt laments on the life of Anne, in *Innocentia Veritas Viat Fides Circumdederunt me inimici mei* (Innocence, Truth & Fidelity – My Enemies Surround My Soul),” as he watches her decapitation from his cell in the Tower of London:

These bloody days have broken my heart. / My lust, my youth did then depart, / And blind desire of estate. / Who hastes to climb seeks to revert. / Of truth, circa regna tonat. / The Bell Tower showed me such sight / That in my head sticks day and night. / There did I learn of a grate / For all favor, glory, or might, / That yet circa regna tonat. / By proof, I say, there did I learn: / Wit helpeth not defense to yerne, / Of innocence to plead or prate. / Bear low, therefore, give God the stern, / For sure, circa regna tonat / (Wyatt 1-15),

where the Latin “circa regna tonat” translates literally into English “about the throne the thunder rolls.” The execution of Anne would have been a sad day in the life of Wyatt, and then much anticipated by some other contemporaries who absolutely despised her.

Men like Eustace Chapuys, who served Holy Roman Emperor Charles V as imperial ambassador to England during King Henry’s reign, was among those who despised Anne. Since

the emperor was none other than the nephew of Henry's first wife, Queen Katherine, it is no wonder why Chapuys sided with the later re-titled Dowager of Wales, when she had been usurped and replaced by Anne Boleyn.

It has already been argued that it is unlikely that it was Anne Boleyn who put the idea of a divorce in Henry's head, and now Anne does not seem to have played a leading part in bringing down of [Cardinal] Wolsey. (Bernard 54)

However, Mantel begs to differ in her elaboration of this myth, where Anne serves as the main influence over Henry, in the undoing of Cardinal Wolsey, his once most trusted advisor. Mantel's character of Anne plays "the bolder one of the pair, the more radical, and arguably, the more principled" role in her and Henry's gravely passionate relationship (Bernard 54).

Despite the fact that it was mainly Henry who pushed for the divorce from Katherine, it became evident that Anne was the main cause of Henry's decision for England to split from the Holy Catholic Church in Rome. Chapuys sent countless dispatches to Charles V, which sought to tarnish the reputation of England's new soon-to-be-queen. For instance:

In February 1531 Chapuys regretted the pope had not sent an order that Anne should be kept away from the king, since, as far as he could understand, Anne and her father had been the principal cause of the king's claim to sovereignty over the church. (Bernard 56-57)

Chapuys's revulsion for Anne is also featured more intermittently in *Wolf Hall*, further adding to Mantel's exploitation of the "monster legend" surrounding Anne. Anne was, without a doubt, the subject of much conjecture during her lifetime. While Wyatt mourned their unattainable love, Chapuys reviled her, along with countless other supporters of the Dowager of Wales.

By the end of her life, Anne was even accused of having slept with over one hundred men. Whether it was guilt from these crimes or her "proud and abrasive character than soon became

intolerable to her husband,” Anne’s downfall became foreseeable when she failed to provide the Tudor King with his male heir to the throne. In Suzannah Lipscomb’s article, “Why did Anne Boleyn have to die?” published in the April 2013 issue of *BBC History Magazine*, she cites the opinion of J.J. Scarisbrick—author of the authoritative volume *Henry VIII*: “What had once been devastating infatuation turned into bloodthirsty loathing, for reasons we will never completely know.”

However, it is today in the year 2014 that scholars have ceased trying to feign Anne’s innocence. The allegations made against her can only be inferred from the detailed records taken from first-hand accounts, which may be very biased and not entirely accurate to begin with. Bernard explains this as “the greatest shortcoming of the surviving sources is that we are short of information about what people thought and why they did what they did” (Bernard ix).

II. The Anne Boleyn of *Wolf Hall*

“Mantel’s main characters are scorchingly well rendered. And their sharp-clawed machinations are presented with nonstop verve in a book that can compress a wealth of indecisiveness into a few very well-chosen words.”

—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

Sharp-clawed might be an understatement for Mantel’s leading lady in *Wolf Hall*, Anne Boleyn. Anne is about 21 years old at the start of novel and is as Mantel describes “lithe, ivory-skinned, not a conventional beauty but vital and polished, glowing” (“Anne Boleyn: witch, bitch”). She is introduced as playing the role of Perseverance, in a rendition of John Skelton’s *Magnificence: An Interlude* at Cardinal Wolsey’s York Palace at Shrovetide, where she quickly has a following of admirers captivated by her dancing “gracefully but briskly, with an amused expression on her face, a hard, impersonal touch-me-not smile” (*Wolf Hall* 62).

Throughout the story, Anne certainly embodies the very meaning of perseverance, trickery, ambition, and the like. She is a force to be reckoned with and serves as the novel's main contender in the trials of fate. But was she really the sharp-clawed she-devil that King Henry VIII and his court made her out to be? Or was Anne Boleyn a victim of vicious hearsay and unprecedented rumor?

In her article for *The Guardian* Mantel describes Anne as:

one of the most controversial women in English history; we argue over her, we pity and admire and revile her, we reinvent her in every generation. She takes on the colour of our fantasies and is shaped by our preoccupations: witch, bitch, feminist, sexual temptress, cold opportunist. She is a real woman who has acquired an archetypal status and force...she is the guilt-free predator, the man-stealer...Her rise is glittering, her fall sordid... Much of what we think we know about Anne melts away on close inspection.

We do not hear from Anne for about another 60 pages in *Wolf Hall*, until Lady Carey—Anne's sister, Mary Boleyn, who has had prior sexual relations with the King—speaks to Thomas Cromwell on the love letters being sent to Anne from Henry. She tells Cromwell “Anne knows everything about people who work for the cardinal. She asks questions and writes the answers in a book” (*Wolf Hall* 125-127). From the very inception of Mantel's story involving Anne, she is sharp enough to know “These people want me dead,” and then works to consciously keep her enemies at bay (*Wolf Hall* 409).

A later scene voices the desire of German portraitist, Hans Holbein, to paint Anne in a conversation he has with Cromwell. Cromwell tells Holbein that “You would not choose her as a model for a Primavera. Or a statue of the Virgin. Or a figure of Peace” stressing that Anne's was a countenance so great that it would be nearly impossible to transfer into a work of art. Holbein

laughs, answering with, “What then, Eve? Medusa?” This and similar scenes in *Wolf Hall* echo back to the many unreliable depictions of Anne, and Mantel’s decision to exploit the ill-repute surrounding her name (*Wolf Hall* 343-344).

An interview with Lydia Leonard—the actress who plays Anne, performing the Royal Shakespeare Company’s stage rendition of *Wolf Hall* in Stratford-upon-Avon and London’s West End—reveals that Mantel had given her a “B” gold-and-pearl necklace set to resemble the necklace that Anne famously donned in portraits commissioned appropriately by an unknown artist (Cripps).

According to Leonard, Mantel “has lots of incredible advice and support because she has spent so much time inside Anne’s mind herself. She once told me she knows what an occasionally dark place it can be... Hilary can tell you what Anne Boleyn is thinking at any given moment—she can be so specific and deep... she knows those characters so well. She really has inhabited them for many years.” On playing Anne, she states “there is so much rumor because while she was alive she was the focus of every lurid story the imagination of Europe could dream up. Picking that apart, I am very much playing Hilary Mantel’s Anne Boleyn.” As an actress, Leonard was able to seek the insight of her character’s creator, especially one as complex and enigmatic as the famed Anne Boleyn.

Mantel begins to exploit the rumors surrounding Anne, during a scene where Thomas Cromwell eavesdrops on one of the men convicted (and later put to death) for sleeping with Anne. His name is Mark Smeaton and he is a musician at the court of King Henry, putting him in the best position for hearing ample gossip at court. One of the servant boys muses to Mark about the matter of Anne’s maidenhead, and he replies with: “She is no maid. Not she... Could she be at the French court, do you think, and come home a maid? Any more than her sister could? Any Mary was every

man's hackney? . . . Besides, Tom Wyatt has had her, and everybody knows it, down in Kent” (*Wolf Hall* 156).

Cromwell is not quick to discard this small bit of gossip and it resurfaces in a later conversation with Antonio Bonvisi, a merchant and close companion of the King's Royal Chancellor, Thomas More. Their conversation goes as follows—where “he” refers to Cromwell himself in the often confusing, omniscient third-person:

“Tell me something that intrigues me,” he says. “I want to know about Thomas Wyatt.”

Wyatt went to Italy... the question is, why did he run away from the English court in such haste?”

“Ah. Wyatt and Lady Anne,” Bonvisi says. “An old story, I'd have thought?”

Well, perhaps, he says, but he tells him about the boy Mark, the musician, who seems sure Wyatt's had her; if the story's bouncing around Europe, among servants and menials, what are the odds the king hasn't heard? (*Wolf Hall* 179).

The idea of Wyatt having Anne was the result of much conjecture and hearsay, spread during her lifetime, which Mantel took the liberty of exploiting within *Wolf Hall*. Although Wyatt's texts do allude to an unattainable love that is hinted to having been Anne, there is no documented proof that he and Anne had engaged in a close or even sexual relationship.

Nevertheless, Mantel fleshes out this idea of Anne having loved Wyatt, prior to her time at the English court of King Henry. It is a relationship that unveils itself throughout the plotline of the story and evolves from page to page. What we know of their relationship in this work of fiction is what Cromwell overhears, is told by others, or from what Wyatt admits to himself. Historians could only dream of having such a confession from the actual figures in history like the one Mantel devises in the latter half of the novel. It is the last we see or hear from Wyatt, in *Wolf Hall*:

Wyatt sits down amid the files, an apple in his hand. “Cromwell, suppose you’d been away from England for seven years? If you’d been like a knight in a story, lying under an enchantment?”

. . . You cannot joke with Anne these days. You cannot laugh. You must think her perfect, or she will find some way to punish you.

. . . The trouble is, though Anne has remade the court, there are still people who knew her before, in the days when she came from France. . . They compete to tell stories of how she is not worthy. Or not human. How she is a snake. Or a swan. *Una candida cerva*. One single white doe, concealed in leaves of silver-gray; shivering, she hides in the trees, waiting for the lover who will turn her back from animal to goddess. “Send me back to Italy,” Wyatt says. Her dark, her lustrous, her slanting eyes: she haunts me. She comes to me in my solitary bed at night. (470-471)

Cromwell jests with Wyatt saying that he is surely drunk, in voicing his feelings for Anne to one of Henry’s most trusted confidantes. Wyatt essentially admits that he had left England for Italy, spending seven years away from the English Court, all as a means of escaping this hopeless love affair. He admits to her “haunting” him and being the continual subject of many his dreams. Mantel uses Wyatt’s last conversation in *Wolf Hall* to bear witness to the hold Anne has over the men in her life—especially Wyatt.

In later years, we are granted another retelling of this supposed love story (or at least the idea of it) in one of the works of Wyatt’s grandson’s, *Life of Queen Anne*. George Wyatt “declared that Wyatt, on seeing Anne, admired her, ‘so as finally his heart seemed to say, I could gladly yield to be tired for ever with the knot of her love, as somewhere in his verses hath been thought his meaning was to express” (Norton 34). He then supports this claim with evidence taken directly

from the lines in his grandfather's poetry; and so, we must speculate: If it were believable enough for Wyatt's grandson and countless others of Anne's contemporaries, could the rumors, indeed, be true?

Unfortunately there is no known historical evidence to verify the hearsay surrounding Anne and Wyatt's alleged relationship. Although Wyatt was charged and imprisoned in the Tower of London for the time before Anne's execution and months afterward, he was eventually released and absolved of any convictions. It is Mantel who takes this gossip and runs with it, making it seem more than entirely credible within the pages of her novel.

Mantel titles one of the chapters in *Wolf Hall* after one of the actual songs penned by Henry VIII, "Alas, what shall I do for love?" It is the spring of 1532 and Mantel opens this section of the novel with a sermonizing aside on the subject of love and marriage:

Time now to consider the compacts that hold the world together: the compact between ruler and ruled, and that between husband and wife. Both these arrangements rest on a sedulous devotion, the one to the interests of the other. The master and husband protect and provide; the wife and servant obey. Above masters, above husbands, God rules all. He counts up our petty rebellions, our human follies. He reaches out his long arm, hand bunched in a fist.

(312)

Here, Mantel outlines the fundamental essence of courtship, where unchangeably, wife is subservient to husband, and man kneels only to God. Although this appears as foreshadowing of Anne's eventual downfall for readers, Henry grants Anne the privilege of having her own rooms, only five pages afterward (317); further attesting to the strong and quixotic hold Anne kept over the men in her life, during the time of her reign.

It is also during this chapter in the novel that Anne starts to gain legitimacy in regards to her station at court. “Anne needed to be fitted for the European stage... she needed status” (Ives 158), and was granted the new title, Marquess of Pembroke—which would make her well-suited to the King of England in his quest to marry her.

Anne kneels to the king, while Stephen Gardiner read out a patent conferring on her in her own right and on her offspring the title of marquis of Pembroke. Henry placed on her mantle and the coronet and handed her the patent of nobility, plus another granting lands worth £1000 a year. Anne thanked him and withdrew. (Ives 158-159)

Mantel describes the ceremony for us, in her own words, adding her own personal touch to this naming ceremony:

Sunday, September 1, at Windsor: Anne kneels before the king to receive the title of Marquess of Pembroke. . . She is vivid in red velvet and ermine, and her black hair falls, virgin-style, in snaky locks to her waist... Cromwell has organized the income from fifteen manors to support her dignity . . . At the feast Anne sits beside Henry on the dais, and when she turns to speak to him her black lashes brush her cheeks. She is almost there now, almost there, her body taut like a bowstring, her skin dusted with old, with tints of apricot and honey; when she smiles, which she does so often, she shows small teeth, white and sharp. She is planning to commandeer Katherine’s royal barge, she tells him, and have the device “H&K” burned away, all Katherine’s badges obliterated. The king has sent for Katherine’s jewels, so she can wear them... (*Wolf Hall* 357)

Mantel continues to add her own personal touch to these events surrounding Anne, feeding into the myth that she was nothing more than a cunning, serpent-like vixen. She describes her hair as being virginal and then immediately counters this with a description of her curls as being long, and

snakelike. Mantel takes Anne's contempt and jealousy for Katherine to an entirely different level, with the following conversation where Anne demands of Henry that he obliterate any trace of his first marriage. In *Wolf Hall*, Anne wasn't leaving without Queen Katherine's jewels, while historically, she is said to have kneeled before the King and then retired (Ives 159). There is no historical evidence of Anne's plight for the Queen's riches and privileges, following the ceremony.

The next major historical event which Mantel describes for us is Anne's coronation ceremony, on June 1, 1533. This event heralds the first chapter of *Wolf Hall's* Part V titled in her honor, "Anna Regina." Mantel describes the four day ceremony in full and elaborate detail:

Four days. Fifty barges in procession, furnished by the city livery companies; two hours from the city to Blackwall, their rigging hung with bells and flags; a light but brisk breeze, as ordered from God in his prayers. Reverse order, anchor at the steps of Greenwich Palace, collect incoming queen in her own barge—Katherine's old one, rebadged, twenty-four oars: next her women, her guard, all the ornaments of the king's court, all those proud and noble souls who swore they'd sabotage the event. Boats packed with musicians, three hundred craft afloat, banners and pennants flying, the music ringing bank to bank, and each bank lined with Londoners. Downstream with the ride, led by an aquatic dragon spitting fire, and accompanied by wild men throwing fireworks. (*Wolf Hall* 428)

Though Mantel may have embellished some of the finer details, her initial account of the coronation is seemingly accurate. Ives describes the totality of the four day ceremony as being sheer pageantry, engineered as a piece of corporate idolatry. "All had apostatized before the king's command; all had bowed the knee to the new goddess," (Ives 175) which is also captured in the fictional world of *Wolf Hall* (172).

However, Mantel stylistically chooses to extrapolate facts with the inclusion of her own added scene, during which Henry publically ravages his new queen. “Henry is waiting to greet Anne as she lands. He kisses her without formality, scooping back her gown, pinning it at her sides to show her belly to England” (*Wolf Hall* 428).

The birth of Anne’s child is written into the next chapter of *Wolf Hall*, and rather abruptly. Henry, having prepped himself beforehand for the unfortunate news of his new child being a daughter, “takes the blow perfectly.” Immediately after naming the new princess, Elizabeth, he cancels the jousting celebrations, which were arranged to herald the birth of England’s next king.

This undid much of what the coronation had set out to achieve. Anne Boleyn remained a pretender. If she had had a son in September 1533, her position would have been beyond challenge... The arrival of Elizabeth revived and perpetuated instability. Security would only come if Anne could have a son... The essential function of a sixteenth-century queen was to bear sons, or else she was a failure. (Ives 186-189)

In an earlier conversation imagined by Mantel, Cromwell asks Anne if she is happy after learning the news of her pregnancy. She replies, “Yes, because of this. You see, I was always desired. But now I am valued. And that is a different thing, I find” (*Wolf Hall* 400). Mantel makes a point of telling readers that Anne’s unborn child—should it be a son—would be “the beginning, the start of something, the promise of another country” and guarantee peace within England (*Wolf Hall* 417). Anne’s giving birth to a daughter marks the beginning of her very rapid downfall in *Wolf Hall*, which sets into motion the unravelling of her once wicked and wily character. This downfall is then realized in *Bring Up the Bodies*—Mantel’s sequel to *Wolf Hall* and the second installation of her planned trilogy.

Mantel's exploiting the "monster legend" of Anne Boleyn is nothing new to readers of historical fiction, since many of her portrayals have shown little variety over the past century. In "The Fictional Afterlife of Anne Boleyn," Miriam Elizabeth Burnstein describes "such Annes follow[ing] a pattern formalized by the late 1950s in which Anne is vengeful, near hysterical...and power mad" (3). She supports this claim with the citation of forty-five Anglo-American novels and short stories, either about or prominently featuring Anne Boleyn, with thirty-eight of them being published after the year 1950.

The Anne Boleyn of *Wolf Hall* is a sharp-clawed she-devil—an ambitious vixen, who will go to any length to secure herself a seat on the royal throne. Mantel takes advantage of her many creative liberties as an author and exploits of the truth behind the question: Who was the real Anne Boleyn? Throughout *Wolf Hall*, Anne embodies the very meaning of perseverance and trickery, as she is unremittingly portrayed the as novel's very own villain—the serpent princess. Mantel succeeds in shaping Anne into a force to be reckoned with; yet, her saucy disposition and treacherous dialogue depicts her as being nothing more than *Wolf Hall*'s scheming vixen.

III. Renaissance Italy's Lucrezia Borgia as Portrayed in *Blood and Beauty*

Conversely, it is Sarah Dunant's *Blood and Beauty* that surpasses *Wolf Hall* in being the superior work of contemporary, historical fiction. Published during the summer of last year, *Blood and Beauty* covers 10 years of Borgia history—one of the most notorious and scandal-ridden families in Renaissance Europe. The name Borgia has become synonymous with murder, incest and intrigue. The family's patriarch, Rodrigo Borgia, conquered the papacy through bribery and shrewd tactics—much like Mantel's Anne Boleyn, who worked diligently to leave her lasting mark on the Tudor dynasty.

The House of Borgia was distinguished by ruthless ambition and an uncontested (and almost unnatural) sense of familial love. Rodrigo Borgia did not rise to the seat of the papacy alone; he took his entire family with him. As Spaniards, the Borgia were seen as outsiders, since the majority of those holding positions in the College of Cardinals were of the usual Italian-Roman descent. Rodrigo's uncle, Pope Callixtus III, was the only Spaniard to wear the holy ring of St. Peter and yet, his reign of papal influence only lasted from the year 1455 to 1458. However, during this time, the first Borgia Pope elevated two of his nephews into the religious life of royalty—including none other than Rodrigo Borgia (Hollingsworth, 74).

During his lifetime, Rodrigo served as Vice Chancellor to four different popes, giving him much time to deliberate his own plans for ultimate papal domination. In the 1490s, Rome and the Holy Vatican were at the hub of Europe's affluence and aristocratic society. Italy was divided into city-states, which were governed by the select few ruling families of noble prestige. However, it was Rome that became known as

a bear pit of... [these] established families jockeying for position, but also, more importantly, the seat of the papacy. While the Pope's earthly territories were modest—and often leased out to papal vicars—his influence was immense. As head of the Church, the man himself...controlled a vast web of patronage throughout Europe, and as God's representative on earth, he could and did wield spiritual power for strategic and political ends. With Catholicism reigning supreme and corruption in the Church endemic, it was not uncommon to find popes amassing wealth for themselves and favoring the careers and well-being of those in their families. In some cases, even their own illegitimate children. (Dunant, "Historical Note")

One such patriarch who sought to raise the status of those he favored (as well as his bastard children) was Rodrigo Borgia, crowned Pope Alexander VI in 1492. Ideally, his main incentive

should have been to serve God as the Holy Vicar of Christ, here on Earth. However, for the Borgias, family came before anyone else—even The Risen Christ.

Blood and Beauty showcases the Borgia's ambition and desire for domination over the lands central to the essence of Renaissance life. A *New York Times* best-seller, the novel proves to be nothing less than historically accurate; especially since Dunant is already an award-winning, and internationally known author of historical fiction. Her previously recognized titles include: *The Birth of Venus* (2003), *Sacred Hearts* (2006) and *In the Company of the Courtesan* (2007). *Blood and Beauty* is the fourth of Dunant's award-winning titles on the life and times of those who lived in Renaissance Italy.

The novel is the product of Dunant's extensive and professional research, which includes approximately 28 different and reputable sources. These texts serve as Dunant's blueprint for writing *Blood and Beauty* and include: Niccolò Machiavelli's iconic publication *The Prince* (1532)—inspired by none other than Rodrigo's eldest son, Cesare Borgia—and English translation of Master of Papal Ceremonies, Johannes Burchard's *At the Court of the Borgia* (1963).

Dunant answers the pivotal question: "Why the Borgias?" in a blog post on her from her author webpage, dated January 2013. She asks:

Is there a family in history more dazzling, dangerous and notorious than the Borgias? A powerhouse of the Italian Renaissance, the very name Borgia epitomises the ruthless behaviour and sexual corruption of the Papacy...But how much of the history about this remarkable family is actually true, and how much distorted, filtered through the age old mechanisms of political spin, propaganda and gossip? What if the truth, the real history, is even more challenging? "Blood & Beauty: The Borgias" an epic novel which sets out to capture the scope, the detail, the depth, the colour and the complexity of this utterly fascinating family.

Rodrigo's daughter by Vanozza de Catanei serves as the novel's real star of the show. Her name is Lucrezia Borgia and unlike Mantel's Anne Boleyn, Dunant makes an effort to redeem Lucrezia from her marked reputation by choosing to introduce her character when she is at her most vulnerable stage in development, the onset of puberty.

The first we hear of Lucrezia in *Blood and Beauty* she is awakening to the joyous sound of Roman crowds exclaiming “*HABEMUS PAPUM!* WE HAVE A POPE! . . . Rodrigo Borgia, Cardinal of Valencia, is elected Pope Alexander VI. Bor-g-i-a! Bor-g-i-a! . . . BOR-G-I-A!” (Dunant 16-17). Lucrezia's father is elected as the next Holy Vicar of Christ—the second and final Borgia pope—whose seal of the Borgia bull heralds a new Golden Age in Rome.

Lucrezia is everything that the men in her family should have been: selfless, kind-hearted and eternally faithful to The Risen Christ. Dunant introduces Lucrezia's gentle spirit with her absolute faith in her eldest brother, Cesare Borgia:

She never liked sleeping alone. Even as a small child, when her mother or the servant had left her and the darkness started to curdle her insides, she would steel herself to brave the black soup of the room as far as her brother's bed, creeping in beside him. And he [Cesare], who when awake would rather fight than talk, would put his arms around her and stroke her hair until their warmth mingled and she fell asleep. (Dunant 18-19)

Cesare is Lucrezia's light to conquer the darkness, her protector and most trusted confidante, up until the day that she is given to another in Holy Matrimony. “How she worshipped her brother. For weeks she would not let him out of her sight, following him around, calling his name like a bleating lamb until he would have to stop to pick her up and carry her with him” (Dunant 21).

A few paragraphs into allowing readers to peer into this intimate relationship between the two siblings, Dunant describes Lucrezia's physical attractiveness and girl-like charm. “Feast your eyes

on that perfect nose, those cheeks plump as orchard plums... Her mother's looks and her father's temperament. What a woman she will become," (Dunant 21-22) and one of the most revered princesses of the Holy Mother Church.

Sarah Bradford's biography, *Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (2004), includes an eyewitness testimony on the physical description of Lucrezia, from Niccolò Cagnolo of Parma. He states that

She is of middle height and graceful in form. Her face is rather long, the nose well cut, hair golden, eyes of no special colour. Her mouth is rather large, the teeth brilliantly white, her neck is slender and fair, the bust admirable proportioned. She is always gay and smiling. (11)

Bradford then adds her own description of the Borgia princess, describing the young Lucrezia who had light hair and gentle grey-blue eyes, and she melted her father's heart...Lucrezia resembled her father in his cheerful way of believing that the future was full of promise. Like her father she had a receding chin, but this was so prettily shaped that it gave her an appearance of perpetual adolescence. She was fair with light eyes, and graceful. In spite of her slenderness, her thick Spanish blood gave her a certain colour and robustness. (16-17)

During the years preceding her marriage, it is most likely that Lucrezia was educated at the Dominican Convent of San Sisto, on Appian Way, where she developed her strong sense of faith.

Dunant briefly touches upon her time spent in the convent, which was

filled with daughters of Rome's most powerful families, all of them rich, most of them waiting for husbands either promised or yet to be decided...It was there, when the gossip turned cruel...that she [Lucrezia] was made aware of some scandal in her household; the hint of sin in her own birth. The nun of the boarders had found her in tears, so inconsolable that she had taken her to the abbess. (59)

The sanctuary of San Sisto was Lucrezia's retreat from the throws of Rome—an “anchor in the tempests of her life...” where she “always felt safe when surrounded by the whispers of gentle voices in a world stripped of sensuality” (Bellonci 17).

Part II of *Blood and Beauty*, titled “Love and Marriage,” begins with Lucrezia knowing little about the ways of love and courtship. Having been born into a family where adultery is the norm, keeping a mistress or two was viewed as entirely acceptable. The men of the Borgia family were known to be the greatest womanizers of the Holy City, and Rodrigo's mistress, Giulia “La Bella” Farnese is only six years Lucrezia's senior. Giulia, as well as Sancia—Duchess of Squillace (her youngest brother disgracefully promiscuous wife)—are her two of her closest female companions in the novel.

Although Lucrezia is surrounded by sex and scandal, she often feels ill at ease after hearing the sexual throes of her young friend (and father's mistress), late into the night.

It is a strange sound, harsh, high-pitched, like a fox or some other animal in pain...But it is not an animal...Lucrezia knows that well enough. It is the sound of her father in bed with Giulia [Farnese]. She turns her head further into the pillow to muffle it. It comes again. She waits to hear if Giulia's voice will join in; she makes the sweet warbling noise sometimes, a songbird rising out of a tree. It is love, not violence, she is hearing. She knows that too...But she also knows that what they are doing is forbidden. That Giulia is another man's wife. That by the rules of the church this is a sin. Yet the man is her father. And her father is the Church. More than that: without this same sin she would not be here. Not her, nor Cesare, nor Juan, nor Jofré. For their mother had been married to someone else as well. Does that make all of them sinful too, they who are loved so much and treated so well? Or does that mean that sin itself changes, depending on who commits it? (Dunant 57)

The latter question is essential to capturing the true scope of the Borgia ambition.

In *Blood and Beauty*, Lucrezia is merely a pawn to be moved around the chessboard of the Borgia family's ambitions. The Pope's beloved daughter, who is widely revered for her beauty and sweet disposition, is even more valued for her singlehandedly being used as a means to securing the Borgia's ends; and yet, surviving "in a world where the dice were heavily loaded in the favour of men, Lucrezia operated within the circumstances of her time to forge her own destiny" (Bradford, "Foreword"). Dunant includes a scene within the text, where we learn that she is not nearly as green as the Borgia men believe her to be. Lucrezia inquires as to whether her husband will be from Milan or Naples, since the Papal States meant to strike a balance of powers between the two duchies. Dunant includes a scene within the text, where we learn that she is not nearly as green as the Borgia men believe her to be. Lucrezia inquires as to whether her husband will be from Milan or Naples, since the Papal States meant to strike a balance of powers between the two duchies.

Her first role in the securing of an alliance for the Borgia family is with her betrothal to Giovanni Sforza of Milan—from one of the Romagna's ruling families to which Rodrigo partly owed the success of his Papal election. Lucrezia anxiously awaits her very first look at the man she is told to marry. "This is happening to me, here, now, she thinks. I am nearly fourteen years old and I am meeting the man I will marry. Dear, sweet Jesus, let him like me. Let me love him" (Dunant 99), and in a later scene, her brother Cesare tells Lucrezia that her marriage will not yet be consummated (Dunant 84). The very fact that Lucrezia turns to the men in her family for any subtle hint of direction for her wavering future—and without any disdain, or guile—showcases the young flower whose purity will help the redeem the reputation of the warring House of Borgia.

Dunant details Lucrezia and Giovanni's first meeting in the novel on June 9, 1493, just three days before the date of the official wedding ceremony:

Below, the atmosphere is carnival rather than procession: this colorful knot of squires, knights, page boys and musicians attended by fools and jesters doing cartwheels, or gibbering and playing with the crowds, one decked out as a priest offering blessings to anyone and everyone. And in the middle somewhere, the bridegroom.

As the first drummers and flag wavers enter the little piazza in front of the palace, Lucrezia moves forward to the balustrade and every goes up to look at her...this tender young woman emblazoned in silk and pearls, her virgin long hair under a jeweled net falling onto her shoulders...At this moment she is everyone's daughter. The new blossom on the tree. The spring that promises a great harvest. The kiss of romance. The thrust of lust. Rome is hungry for it all. God preserve the family that brings them so much theater...Man on horse: woman on balcony...He takes off his hat and bows low to the side...In response, Lucrezia drops into a deep curtsy, disappearing from view before rising up again. The moment is held.

(Dunant 99-100)

Compared to the actual event in history, Dunant adheres to the truth, paying close attention to such great detail and with the upmost accuracy. A retelling of this is included in Maria Bellonci's *The Life and Times of Lucrezia Borgia*, whose work serves as a testament to her extensive knowledge of the Borgia family.

Squires in coats of brocade followed by files of pages dressed in variously coloured silks; and an atmosphere of levity and carefreeness was introduced by the clownings of a jester, Mambrino 'the priest'...Then, to the merry music of fifes and trumpets, the vivid procession moved on.

...The girl [Lucrezia] had already received the good wishes and congratulations of the Roman gentlewomen and had experienced, perhaps for the first time in her life, the heady intoxication that comes from being the centre of all eyes. As soon as the first blast of trumpets was heard from afar, all the women and children took up positions at the windows leaving the bride alone in the place of honour in the loggia. In a moment, the piazza was seething with people; the squires and pages came first, then the households of the Cardinals and finally the ambassadors with the bridegroom in their midst. The gaze of all...was turned to...little Lucrezia, whom the Pope loved 'supremely', was to be seen with the sun shining on her long fair hair that fell over her delicate shoulders to her waist, like serpents of fine gold. Giovanni Sforza drew his horse to a standstill under the loggia. His glance met Lucrezia's, and for a second their problem was that of any man and any woman. But the bridegroom knew his part. He had to bow like a courtier towards the window where he saw the bejewelled head. Lucrezia responded with a conventional curtsy. (Bellonci 26-27)

Dunant includes additional dialogue into her retelling of this scene, during which Lucrezia tells her Aunt Adriana that she could not even see her suitor due to the intense glare from the sun. Lucrezia's attendants find the irony of the situation to be "wonderfully funny" (Dunant 100), but this is just another instance where Lucrezia's feelings are not taken into consideration. Dunant uses this unfortunate shortcoming for a Renaissance woman to further develop Lucrezia into a character that is more relatable, on a personal level.

Johannes Burchard also documents this first meeting in *At the Court of the Borgia*, a collection of diary entries written on the family, which have been translated from dog-Latin into English. In *Blood and Beauty*, Burchard is described not only as the Master of Ceremonies but as keeper of the Borgia family secrets.

There is a rumor around the Vatican that he [Johannes Burchard, the Pope's Master of Ceremonies] keeps a secret diary into which he writes every detail pertaining to matters of papal ceremony... You should be grateful to us, he [Cesare] thinks. There have been none like us before. And there will be none afterward. Be careful what you write." (Dunant 81)

He writes on the details of Lucrezia and Sforza meeting for the first time outside the Palazzo Santa Maria in Portico, on the 10th of June 1493. However, due to his lack of attention paid to precision and detail in this particular entry, Burchard misuses Lucrezia's father's name in the place of her suitor: On the 10th of June, 1493, Alexander [His real name was Giovanni*], the son of the Lord of Pesaro, arrived in Rome with a large suite of bishops, and on the very day of his arrival was betrothed to the illegitimate daughter of Pope Alexander (Burchard 70).

Bellonci states in her biography "that Burchard was not friendly to the Borgias is proved by the way his diary is written" (xxv). Although he never indulges in the hearsay, Burchard's tone does sometimes implicate "the impression of [his] wanting to deliberately confuse our judgment," with his taciturn description of everyday life and pontifical etiquette, in the House of Borgia (Bellonci 27-28).

Burchard writes on yet another event of historical significance in his full collection of diary entries, titled *Liber Notarum*. Dunant references this text only a page later, in *Blood and Beauty*, for details on Lucrezia's wedding ceremony.

...The great hall and other rooms were covered abundantly with tapestry and velvet hangings, decorated and a throne was set up for the pope... On the pope's orders, Don Juan Borgia, Duke of Gandia, son of the pope and brother of the bride, escorted his sister from the palace of Cardinal Zen, where she lived with her aunt, Giulia Farnese. They processed through the rooms, Don Juan on the left of his sister, whose robe had a long train carried by a young

negro girl. She was followed by Battistina, the daughter of Teodorina, the daughter of Innocent VIII...After her came Giulia Farnese, mistress of the pope, followed by some hundred and fifty Roman ladies ... despite my scolding none of the ladies genuflected when they passed the pope on his throne except for his daughter and one or two others who were near her...when all the ladies had kissed the pope's foot, the Lord of Pesaro, the groom, and Lady Lucrezia, the bride, knelt on two cushions... (Hollingsworth 183-184)

While Dunant's description of the wedding ceremony is not as comprehensive, she does seek to embellish readers with other major details in later pages. For instance, the Duke of Gandia's lavish dress, which is always worth the most in ducats, and overtly eye-catching in style.

Things did not begin well. At the hour of the marriage ceremony Alexander sits magnificent on his throne, surrounded by cardinals, ready to receive his guests, when the doors open on the flock of Lucrezia's gentlewomen who, reduced to starling status again by the thrill of the moment, fling themselves into the room in such high spirits that they forgot to kneel at the Pope's feet before taking their place in readiness for the bride. A look of pure anguish passes over Burchard's face, as if that very moment he might be struck dead and his body pulled into hell by a troop of devils. Later, the Pope himself is moved to excuse him of any fault. It doesn't help: it is not the Pope's feelings he is worried about, but the insult to the office. It will be his punishment to survive the incident with his shame intact.

For the rest, well, it is a wedding like any other between two great families: an exercise in status, ostentation, sentiment and pleasure... the Duke of Gandia's fanfaronade entrance—a chest of jewels masquerading as a suit of clothes—is greeted with remarkable good humor. In contrast, the bridegroom's necklace speaks of both taste and dignity, and Lucrezia's palpable purity and vulnerability as she approaches to kneel beside him on the velvet cushions, the little

Negress a shimmering black sprite at her heels, plays on everyone's heartstrings. (Dunant 101-102)

According to Sarah Bradford—who claims that her biography on Lucrezia allows her to speak for herself—Lucrezia's wedding dress was worth 15,000 ducats. Bradford also includes Sforza borrows jewelry from the Milanese Gonzaga, so as to not look like a fool (29). Dunant includes another minor, yet important detail to capture the grand scope of the Borgia grandeur, in which Giovanni anxiously begins to plan out his garb for the wedding ceremony, weeks in advance (Dunant 91). Lucrezia and Giovanni Sforza are married for nearly four years, before Rodrigo decides that it is time to make a new alliance for Rome, with another marriage.

In year 1497, Lucrezia's brother Juan Borgia, 2nd Duke of Gandia is murdered and her father spends months away from the family, in recluse. By December, it is officially time for the annulment of the Borgia-Sforza marriage, and Lucrezia returns to Rome after her religious retreat in the Convent of San Sisto.

she [Lucrezia] was summoned to the Vatican on December 22 for the promulgation of the sentence of her divorce, and she had to hear herself solemnly referred to as *virgo intacta*, Yet she went, she listened and she smiled...she made a speech of thanks in Latin 'with such elegance and sweetness'...she possessed all the Borgia qualities of courage and dissimulation in a high degree. (Bellonci 109)

Dunant illustrates this moving scene in Part VI of *Blood and Beauty*, titled "A Very Papal Divorce." Lucrezia is coaxed into declaring the impotence of her husband to the College of Cardinals, after hearing that he falsely accuses her father of demanding the divorce for his own perverse interests of having her for himself (Dunant 285).

She [Lucrezia] spends the time memorizing the composed address that she must give and deciding which outfit will offer the best message of purity...Her marriage is ended and there is no going back. Alexander, who inspects her before she enters the court, sheds tears as he embraces her. “Ah, you are a sight for the sorest of eyes. Like a virgin saint standing out before torture to reach God.”

... After the interrogation comes the examination: ...two nervous midwives lift her skirts and probe gently in the direction of her most private places, though never quite stepping over the threshold. When she returns to court...she is *virgo intacta* and her marriage to Giovanni Sforza herewith annulled. (Dunant 300-301)

According to one of the Sforza ambassadors, the speech delivered by Lucrezia was one worthy of the great Cicero in its eloquence (Bradford 66).

Many historians divide the life of Lucrezia into two different segments—the first with her life as a daughter of Rome, and the second being her reign as Duchess of Ferrara. *Blood and Beauty* draws to a close soon after Lucrezia mothers her first child to Alfonso d’Aragona—her second husband and bastard born to the King of Naples (Dunant 372). In Chapter 54, Lucrezia is found screaming in hysterics after learning that Cesare murders Alfonso, whom he claims had been plotting treacherously against him (Dunant 446-452). It is at this point in the story that Lucrezia begins to open her eyes to the world and the ways of men. Cesare later goes to his sister, seeking her forgiveness, and is met with icy and unwelcoming derision. He reassures her safety in Rome and Lucrezia answers, choking back tears, “After what has happened I will never be safe in Rome again” (Dunant 452).

Rodrigo also tries to console his daughter by telling her that it will be through yet another marriage that she will achieve happiness. Lucrezia answers Rodrigo sharply, comparing her very

existence to that of the *Latrodectus* spider, commonly referred to as the black widow: “You will marry me again and I will kill someone else. Because I will. I am like that—the spider of death, which once it has mated destroys its own husband” (Dunant 454).

Dunant expands upon this growth in her character on the following page:

Lucrezia, though she would probably deny it if it was suggested to her, is discovering disobedience. She, who has been brought up to honor her family and to do everything she is told. She, who has asked only for two things directly in her life: that the two men for whom she felt affection should be spared, only to see both of them slaughtered. She, who has been so good for so long, is being good no longer. And though her rebellion will not bring back her husband, it is keeping the blood flowing in her veins.

Lucrezia seeks papal permission to leave Rome for her small palace, in the quaint town of Nepi (Dunant 455), and achieves final deliverance from Borgia control with her betrothal to Alfonso d’Este of Ferrara. She happily departs from Rome with the promise of a brighter future; meanwhile the Borgia Pope is left in tears, at the feet of Burchard (Dunant 500).

In the Historical Epilogue of *Blood and Beauty*, Dunant addresses the notion of there being various contested events of historical inaccuracy, for which she fills in the blanks wither imaginative power as a writer. This “is where the pleasure and challenge of fiction comes in” (Dunant 503-504). Dunant also promises a sequel to *Blood and Beauty*, where readers will accompany Lucrezia on her journey to a new life in Ferrara.

IV. Denouement

In many ways, the historical figure of Anne Boleyn is easily comparable to Rome’s most beloved princess, Lucrezia Borgia. Both led difficult lives confined to their stations as women, under their male counterparts. The historical accuracy of each of their life events has been skewed,

due to the fact that the rumor and slander surrounding their names were incorporated into historical record without question. What we have left of these famed femme fatales are letters written in their own hand—between Anne Boleyn and King Henry VIII, and Lucrezia Borgia’s correspondence with the poet, Pietro Bembo, in *The Prettiest Love Letters in the World*. It is because of these harmlessly lyrical letters that Lucrezia is once again, Rome’s alleged “greatest whore”.

Finally, Dunant proves to be the superior writer of historical fiction, based on how she tackles the rumors of Borgia incest in *Blood and Beauty*. In the following scene, Dunant comments on the greatly enmeshed nature of Lucrezia’s and Cesare’s familial love, while also teetering on the possibility that it very well could have been taken much further.

She [Lucrezia] takes a breath, the tears finally stilled now. “I love you, brother.”

“And I love you, little sister.” He [Cesare] lifts her right hand and brings the palm to his lips to kiss.

...She laughs a little, and then returns the gesture...he brushes her lips. He breaks away to look at her. Her face is flushed, naked, and she is utterly still, though whether it is because of how firmly he is holding her is not clear.

“Cesare?” she says, on a half-breath, just before he kisses her again. Only now the kiss continues. His tongue moves around the edge of her lips, then slips softly inside. She lets out a tiny breathless moan but does not resist. Her eyes are tightly closed and her hand hovers close to him, as if not knowing where to go. He lifts his mouth from hers. “It’s all right,” he says and his voice is very gentle. “There is nothing to fear. My beautiful sister, my love... You have the sweetest lips, Lucrezia,” he says lightly. “So sweet, they deserve kissing. And only a brother who loves you...”—he hesitates—“as deeply as I do, has the right.” (Dunant 245)

Speechless, Lucrezia then turns to her brother who tells her that “nothing happened,” and that it was simply “a moment of love” (Dunant 246). Dunant gives notion to there being a line between familial and incestuous love within the Borgia family and yet, she tactfully decides against drawing this line herself. Mantel mentions but does not seek to exploit the possibilities of incestuous crime and other uncertainty, surrounding the House of Borgia’s controversial reign.

Kirkus Reviews has stated that “Dunant's biggest and best work to date, this intelligently readable account of formative events and monster players has Hilary Mantel-era quality bestseller stamped all over it.” *Blood and Beauty* will undoubtedly continue to be compared against its predecessor, award-winning historical fiction, *Wolf Hall*. However, Dunant uses *Blood and Beauty* to redeem Borgia history of its tremendously concomitant image of scandal. Dunant’s use of her imaginative power helps to bring the story of one of history’s most talked about women closer to the truth.

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