Representations of Lucrezia Borgia and the Image of the Moral Exemplar in the Late Quattrocento and Early Cinquecento

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During the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century lifetime of Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI Borgia, Lucrezia profited from a carefully crafted image wherein comparisons were drawn between herself and saints, holy women, and moral exemplars from classical antiquity. This appropriation of imagery evolved as Lucrezia herself matured; the representations shift from those where Lucrezia completely disguises herself as a morally exemplary woman such as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, to those where she presents herself, in her role as Duchess of Ferrara, as a morally exemplary holy woman in her own right.

The progression of Lucrezia’s presentation in this manner can be viewed through images in a variety of media, including fresco, portrait medals, and engraving. Although there are no extant documentarily confirmed paintings of Lucrezia Borgia, I assert that the images of Catherine, Barbara, and Susanna in the Borgia Apartments are portraits of Lucrezia because of their date of production, physical similarities between the saints and eyewitness depictions of Lucrezia, and the implications of moral exemplarity expressed by the contents of the frescoes. Here, the young Lucrezia, on the cusp of her 1493 wedding to Giovanni Sforza (1466-1510), is disguised as these three holy figures in order to invite comparisons between herself and them. Ten years later, at a time of instability during her third marriage, to Alfonso d’Este of Ferrara (1476-1534), Lucrezia again appropriates the imagery of morally exemplary women. In portrait medals produced during the early years of her marriage, Lucrezia synthesizes imagery associated with virtuous ancient Roman women with her own name and her own portraiture. In the final stage of Lucrezia’s representation, she no longer found it necessary to take on the guise of a moral exemplar. Rather, in this stage, here represented by the engraved silver Saint Maurelio reliquary, Lucrezia presents herself as a moral exemplar. Because of her new role as mother to the heir of Ferrara, Lucrezia’s position at the ducal court had become secure. At this time, her
representation reaches its final form, culminating in imagery wherein Lucrezia is presented as the pious and magnificent Duchess of Ferrara, responsible for the propagation of the dynasty. Here, Lucrezia Borgia finally becomes a moral exemplar in her own right.

Lucrezia Borgia was born on April 18, 1480, to the Spanish Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia (1431-1503) and his longtime mistress, Vannozza Cattanei (1442-1518). Lucrezia had two older brothers, Juan and Cesare, as well numerous half-siblings on her father’s side.\(^1\) She did not grow up with the knowledge that her father was a high-ranking churchman, rather, she was under the impression that Rodrigo was her uncle. When she was still young, Lucrezia moved from her mother’s house to the house of her father’s cousin, Adriana da Mila Orsini.\(^2\) At the Orsini palazzo, Monte Giordano, Lucrezia received a thorough education.\(^3\) Here, Lucrezia became highly accomplished, learning many languages; in 1512 it was noted that “she spoke Spanish, Greek, Italian, and French, and a little Latin, very correctly, and she wrote and composed poems in all these tongues.”\(^4\) Even if Lucrezia had not learned all of these languages at Monte Giordano, she was certainly given an excellent basic education. Additionally, Lucrezia received a spiritual education to match her secular one. Ferdinand Gregorovius, whose analysis of primary sources concerning Lucrezia has become the basis of all modern biographies, theorizes that Lucrezia received her religious instruction at the convent of San Sisto on the Appian Way, because she would later return there at times of great stress.\(^5\) Throughout her life, Lucrezia was well-known and highly regarded for her piety, and it is likely that her religious fervor was sparked at the convent where she was educated.

During her preteen years, Lucrezia probably anticipated that her cardinal-uncle would find her a husband in the minor nobility, and indeed several suitors presented themselves.\(^6\) However, any plans that the then-Cardinal Rodrigo may have had for Lucrezia were shelved in
August 1492, when, in the first conclave to take place in the newly-built Sistine Chapel, he was elected pope. Rodrigo, who took the papal name Alexander VI, then claimed his children as his own, and started making marriage arrangements for Lucrezia that befit her newly-proclaimed status as the daughter of the most powerful man in the Christian world.

Soon after the election, the pope arranged for Lucrezia a marriage with Giovanni Sforza, the cousin of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, an ally who had been instrumental in Alexander’s selection. This marriage was a purely political match, meant to secure the relationship between the Borgia and Sforza families, rather than anything based in affection between the thirteen-year-old Lucrezia and Giovanni, a widower twice her age. The marriage was short-lived, however. The couple married in June of 1493 and divorced in 1497; this divorce was officially based upon charges of impotence on the part of Giovanni. However, it was common knowledge that the divorce was as politically-motivated as the marriage itself had been; the Sforza family was no longer important to the pope. A new link needed to be forged between the papacy and the Kingdom of Naples, and in 1497, Lucrezia was married a second time, to Alfonso of Aragon (1481-1500), who was the illegitimate son of the King of Naples. Like her first marriage, Lucrezia’s union with Alfonso of Aragon ended abruptly. This time, Lucrezia’s marriage ended in the murder of her husband, a crime that was almost certainly ordered by her own brother Cesare. After a two-year period of mourning, Lucrezia would make her third, final, and most advantageous marriage, to Alfonso d’Este, heir to the Duchy of Ferrara. Lucrezia would remain in Ferrara, creating a large family and serving as its duchess, until her death in childbirth in 1519.

Lucrezia was well served by the excellent education she received in her youth. Time and again she proved herself to be an able politician and shrewd businesswoman. In 1499, when she
was 19, Alexander tasked Lucrezia with the governance of the town of Nepi, a papal holding that needed a new ruler. In the next year, 1500, Lucrezia acted as regent of the Church while her father was inspecting fortresses around the Papal States. During Lucrezia’s marriage to Alfonso d’Este, she once again assumed a governing role, acting as the *de facto* ruler of Ferrara during the years 1508-1512, while her husband was fighting the War of the League of Cambrai.\(^\text{10}\)

Around the same time as his organization of Lucrezia’s first marriage, Alexander called for the artist Pinturicchio, and entrusted him with the decoration of his living quarters in the Vatican Palace. These quarters are now known as the Borgia Apartments.

Exact dates for the commission and completion of the work are unknown, as the contract between the pope and the artist has since been lost. Evelyn March Phillipps, in her monograph of Pinturicchio, states that “it is only from incidental mention in letters to and from Orvieto, and from payments made, that we can find out when the work was begun, and how long it lasted.”\(^\text{11}\) Through these documents, which include minor correspondence between artist and patron and a bill of sale for land purchased by Pinturicchio, it has been deduced that the decoration started in the autumn of 1492, and concluded in late 1494 or early 1495.\(^\text{12}\)

Pope Alexander was fond of Pinturicchio’s work. He commissioned the artist on multiple different projects. Along with the Borgia Apartments, Alexander also commissioned an altarpiece for the high altar of Santa Maria del Popolo.\(^\text{13}\) Another major commission, which is now lost, was a cycle of frescoes for the garden courtyard of the Castel Sant’Angelo, which Giorgio Vasari, in his *Life of Pinturicchio*, describes as depicting “stories of Pope Alexander, with portraits of the Catholic Queen, Isabella; Niccolo Orsino, Count of Pittigliano; Gianjacomo Trivulzi, and many other relatives and friends of the said Pope, in particular [Cesare] Borgia and his brother and sisters, with many talented men of those times.”\(^\text{14}\)
The six rooms that make up the Borgia Apartments are located in the Vatican Palace, directly below the Raphael Rooms and close to the Sistine Chapel (figure 1). These rooms, labeled I-VI on the map, are decorated with religious, theological, and allegorical themes.

Sabine Poeschel, who has written the most comprehensive modern study of the Apartments, notes that the decoration of this suite was remarkable because its program celebrated the pope and his family as well as the papal office itself – the first time that this was done in the Vatican Palace. This celebration of the Borgia family name was expressed by heraldic crests and colors, themes pertinent to the family, as well as other imagery associated with the Borgias. Alexander had spared no expense in their decoration. Pinturicchio was one of the most popular artists of late quattrocento Rome. He had been employed by the two preceding popes, Innocent VIII Cybo and Sixtus IV della Rovere. The churches of Rome were replete with chapels decorated by Pinturicchio, including the della Rovere and Basso della Rovere Chapels in Santa Maria del Popolo, and the Bufalini Chapel in Santa Maria in Aracoeli.

Despite Pinturicchio’s fame, Giorgio Vasari took a rather dim view of the painter, stating in his Lives of the Artists that his use of gilding and stucco “satisf[ied those] who understood very little about this craft, so that they would be more gaudy and lustrous.” The Borgia Apartments certainly impressed contemporary viewers; in 1495, King Charles VIII of France wrote that “it is a very beautiful lodging, and especially well-ornamented with all manners of things that I have never seen in palace or castle.”

Today, the word apartment denotes a private, personal space, but the Borgia Apartments were intended to function as a public one. For example, the Hall of the Mysteries was Alexander’s dining room, and the Hall of the Saints (figure 2) served as the papal audience chamber. Loren Partridge posits that Pope Alexander’s throne was placed directly under
Pinturicchio’s fresco of the *Disputation of Saint Catherine*, specifically, under the stuccoed Constantinian arch, a placement that was intended to visibly justify his position as the spiritual heir to the first Christian Roman emperor. Partridge states that “a petitioner or courtier would probably have approached the pope from the [Hall of the Mysteries] through the door in the east wall and would then have turned toward the south wall where the throne was probably located.”

A Florentine print from around 1500, *Saint George and the Dragon* (figure 3), borrows forms and figures from the frescoes of the Hall of the Saints, which suggests that the Apartments were accessible to members of the public. This Florentine *Saint George*, created by an anonymous artist, is a pastiche of multiple painted sources. The combat between the saint and the dragon is similar in composition to Raphael’s painting of the same subject from 1504. The Constantinian arch that “functions like a theatrical backdrop to the scene,” as well as the princess, appear to be directly copied from frescoes in the Hall of the Saints. The arch is certainly lifted from the fresco of the *Disputation of Saint Catherine*; although multiple artists of the period painted tripartite triumphal arches, the presence of a princess identical to Pinturicchio’s *Saint Barbara* indicates that the anonymous Florentine artist of this print was aware of these frescoes, and, if he had not viewed them himself, he was in contact with someone who had.

The six frescoed lunettes in the Hall of the Saints mainly depict hagiographical scenes, with the two exceptions being those representing the Visitation and Susanna and the Elders, which are both scenes from the Bible. The other four frescoes depict the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, the meeting of Saint Anthony and Paul in the desert, Saint Barbara’s escape from the tower, and the disputation of Saint Catherine. These six lunettes take up the top third of the wall.
Today, the remainder of the walls are now decorated with non-narrative fresco, but it is unknown what the original bottom of the wall looked like. Johannes Burchard, Pope Alexander VI’s Master of Ceremonies, described the Apartments’ decoration during Lucrezia’s 1493 wedding to Giovanni Sforza thus: “all the apartments… were prepared with most elaborate decorations of velvet coverings and tapestries.”

Tapestries were a costlier form of decoration than painting, and therefore a lack of decoration on the bottoms of the walls did not indicate a lack of money on the behalf of the patron, but the opposite – that they were wealthy enough to afford expensive tapestries. However costly they may be, textile decorations are both moveable and ephemeral. Even if they were not the most expensive part of the decoration of the Apartments, the frescoes that cover its walls were the most significant part of the decoration, specifically because of their permanence. The proud pope wanted to create an enduring monument to his family and to himself, and his desired perpetuation of the Borgia name was made possible by Pinturicchio’s employment of the Borgia crest and colors, as well as portraits of the pope and members of his family.

References to the papal family abound in the Borgia Apartments. The Borgia bull is present throughout the Apartments, both in the frescoes themselves as well as in the marblework, which was likely executed by Pinturicchio’s frequent collaborator, the sculptor Andrea Bregno. Red and blue, the heraldic colors of the family, feature heavily in the clothing of the frescoed figures. The ceiling of the Hall of the Saints, composed of two groin vaults, is decorated with mythological scenes from the ancient Egyptian Apis-Osiris cycle, depicting a fictitious mythical genealogy wherein the pope’s Borgia family was revealed to be descended from the ancient Egyptian Apis bull-god. In the fresco of the Resurrection, Pope Alexander VI himself kneels in front of the risen Christ.
Although the pope’s is the most easily recognizable portrait in the Borgia Apartments, it is not the only one. In the Hall of the Mysteries, the same room where Alexander prays in front of the risen Christ, there can be found another man in contemporary ecclesiastical dress, in a similar kneeling donor pose. He has not been securely identified, but Sabine Poeschel suggests that he is a Borgia cousin, possibly the cardinal Juan Borgia the Elder.²⁵ Other images of Borgia family members are not so immediately recognizable as portraits. Non-clergy members of the pope’s immediate family, especially his children, would have had to be disguised for the sake of propriety in the religious court of the Vatican. The fact that the Apartments celebrated the pope’s family lineage was already revolutionary and including outright portraits of his illegitimate children would have been seen as a step too far. Even so, in the day, likenesses of the papal family were recognized for what they were; Giorgio Vasari understood that hidden portraiture was present in the Apartments, noting in his Life of Pinturicchio that “over the door of one of the chambers, he also painted the portrait of Signora Giulia Farnese [the pope’s mistress] in the face of a Madonna.”²⁶

Representing secular patrons in a sacred narrative was not a revolutionary concept in itself. For instance, Domenico Ghirlandaio’s 1486-1490 decoration of the Tornabuoni Chapel in Florence’s Church of Santa Maria Novella features, in one of its frescoes, a procession of Tornabuoni women witnessing the birth of the Virgin Mary (figure 4). While it is true that there is a distinction between patrons being represented as themselves and patrons being disguised as players in the narrative, both of these things did happen. In one of Girolamo Savonarola, the firebrand Florentine Dominican preacher’s, Lent 1497 sermons on the Book of Zachariah, he rails against patrons being painted as saints: “the images of your God are the images and likenesses of the figures you have painted in churches, and then the young men go around
saying... ‘that girl is the Magdalene, that other girl is Saint John,’ because you have the figures in churches painted in the likeness of this woman or that other one.”

Here, I will focus on the lunettes in the Hall of the Saints, the most publicly accessible room in the Apartments. In particular, emphasis will be given to those depicting Saints Catherine and Barbara, and the Old Testament heroine Susanna. These three holy figures were morally exemplary women with whom the pope likely wished to associate his beloved daughter. There are obvious physical similarities between Lucrezia and these women. Most prominently, they all share the same light coloring of hair and eyes. Lucrezia herself was described by the courtier Niccolo Cagnolo of Parma as being “of medium height and slender figure. Her face is long, the nose well defined and beautiful; her hair a bright gold, and her eyes blue; her mouth is somewhat large, the teeth dazzlingly white; her neck white and slender, but at the same time well rounded. She is always cheerful and good-humored.” Catherine, Barbara, and Susanna resemble this written description, and, just as importantly, all three of these women appear similar to one another. Evelyn March Phillipps remarks upon this, stating that the same model posed for the figures of both Catherine and Barbara. Sabine Poeschel does not make any identifications between Lucrezia and the painted saints, but states that the women in the frescoes adhere to the beauty standards of the time, especially in their blonde hair and fair complexions.

Additionally, the figure of Catherine resembles a confirmed image of Lucrezia, the *Amor bendato* medal (figure 9), which will be discussed at length later in this study. Specifically, the two women share the “well defined” nose of the Cagnolo description as well as a similar loose hairstyle wherein sections are pulled back at the temples to keep the woman’s hair from falling in her face. The artist of the medal may have drawn inspiration from the figure of Saint Catherine in the Hall of the Saints. The first occurrence of the *Amor bendato* portrait type was a medal struck
and distributed to commemorate her marriage to Alfonso d’Este in 1502. Dowry negotiations, as well as Lucrezia’s marriage by proxy had occurred at the Vatican, and it is likely that the medal’s artist accompanied the Ferrarese embassy to Rome and borrowed the features of Lucrezia-as-Catherine to use as a basis for the medals, so that they could be struck more quickly in Ferrara. This ‘borrowing’ of one portrait type to use for another was common and is apparent in some of Lucrezia’s later portraiture. Lucrezia’s features on a later portrait medal, which I call the coazzone type (figure 10), are identical to those on the Saint Maurelio reliquary (figure 11), and it is likely that one artist derived their image of Lucrezia from the other.

Nothing regarding the Pope’s intentions for the iconographic program of the room can be directly stated because of the lack of a surviving written contract, but scholars have gone to great lengths to discern its meaning. N. Randolph Parks, in his landmark study of the Hall of the Saints, argues that the iconographic theme of the room is Christian salvation. The saints, he states, are all represented in the moment when they are “delivered from tribulations of one kind or another.”\(^{31}\) Parks also remarks that the miraculous rescue of the saints is intended to metaphorically represent God’s “divine assistance” to the Church itself during times of need.\(^{32}\) Julian Raby, an art historian who focuses on interactions between the Islamic world and Europe during the early modern period, agrees with Parks’ theory, stating that the saved saints are “emblematic of the Church,” and that the largest fresco in the room, the *Disputation of Saint Catherine*, was intended to convey the Pope’s desire for a Christian victory over, or, perhaps even divine deliverance from the encroaching threat of the Ottoman Turks.\(^{33}\) Salvation, it would seem, is essential to all interpretations of the decoration of the Hall of the Saints.

The female saints are represented at specific moments of salvation. However, what differentiates these three – Saints Catherine and Barbara, along with the Old Testament heroine
Susanna – is the fact that they take an active role in the procurement of their own salvation. In Pinturicchio’s frescoes, these three holy women are depicted at moments during which they are exercising their agency, taking action to ensure that there is a place waiting for them in heaven. In contrast, the male saints in the room take a more passive role; in the *Meeting of Saints Paul and Anthony in the Desert*, the titular saints are given bread from a bird to break their fast, while in the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, Sebastian, tied to a pillar, is relieved of his suffering by an angel.

I theorize that the representation of holy women in this active manner is a synthesis of the conservative religious mores of the time, perpetuated by preachers such as Saint Bernardino of Siena, combined with the realities of the strong, powerful women of the day. The representation of holy women such as Catherine, Barbara, and Susanna taking charge of their own salvation was a way to reconcile the two different conceptions of female power.

Saint Bernardino of Siena, a Franciscan who preached to enormous crowds throughout Tuscany in the early fifteenth century, gave sermons specifically dealing with the position of women in contemporary society. In his sermons based on Luke 10:27, preached in Siena during August and September 1427, Bernardino discusses the nature of marriage and the inherent roles assumed by men and women.\(^{34}\) Bernardino denounces the worldly, stating that were he the pope or emperor, he would decree that all women must dress in the same modest fashion. His reasoning for this was so that they would be judged on their spirituality and merits, rather than the richness or beauty implied by their manner of dress. Bernardino asserts that women are “cleaner and daintier” than men because of the nature of their creation in Genesis.\(^{35}\) Women, he says, were not created out of the dirt, but out of Adam’s rib. Therefore, women are not intended to get as ‘dirty’ as men – in both the physical and metaphorical sense. By Bernardino’s logic, this
also means that men are more tranquil than women – because women are made of bone, and bone is “always rattling.” This also implies that men are better suited to hold political power, because they are calmer and more rational.

Despite Bernardino’s warnings to the contrary, women of the *quattrocento* proved themselves to be apt and able rulers. A near-contemporary of Lucrezia, Caterina Sforza (1463-1509), epitomizes the idea of the *virago*, the strong woman who comports herself in a masculine fashion. Caterina, the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Milan, received a thorough humanistic education alongside her legitimate half-brothers. At the insistence of her paternal grandparents, she was also educated in statecraft. In a political move by her family, Caterina was married to Girolamo Riario, the cousin of Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere. The couple moved to Rome and enjoyed a comfortable position in the Vatican court. Upon Sixtus’ death in 1484, Caterina militarily occupied the Castel Sant’Angelo in an effort to control the outcome of the next papal election. After her husband’s death, she served as regent for their young son Ottaviano, ruling the city of Forli in his name until the city’s 1500 conquest by Cesare Borgia.

A new idea of female virtue was needed, one that emphasized the religious ideals put forth by preachers such as Bernardino, while still retaining the high esteem and respect in which strong women such as Caterina Sforza were held. The ambitious, outspoken, and seemingly ‘masculine’ qualities of the woman were tempered and made more acceptable because, when they were employed by the virtuous and holy woman, they were used in the advancement of a woman’s personal salvation – a worthy goal.

Lucrezia was represented as these active holy women in order to herself come across as a woman who was educated, politically savvy, and interested in her own faith and salvation. This was an ideal demonstration of Lucrezia’s virtues, which were being visibly demonstrated to her
new Sforza relatives during the marriage, which took place partially in the Hall of the Saints. During the marriage ceremony and celebrations, the young bride Lucrezia would have been visibly compared to the saints on the walls, which shared with her physical features, and, by extension, also shared goals, qualities, and virtues.

Sarah Gwyneth Ross, in her book *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England*, discusses a new Renaissance definition of female virtue. Ross notes that, beginning in the fifteenth century, education became a prerequisite for a woman to be considered virtuous. The idea of female virtue shifted from being synonymous with chastity to a composite of erudition and Christian morality. This new conception of virtue is present in Pinturicchio’s representation of these holy women, especially Saint Catherine, the highly educated princess-saint.

The *Disputation of Saint Catherine* (figure 5) is the largest narrative fresco in the Hall of the Saints. Indeed, it is the largest in the entirety of the Borgia Apartments, taking spatial precedence over such important theological moments as the Nativity and Resurrection of Christ. It can therefore be inferred that the *Disputation* is the most important fresco in the suite of rooms. Here, the splendor of the Borgia pope is on full display. All of the frescoes in the Apartments employ the use of gilded stucco, but nowhere is it applied so heavy-handedly as in the *Disputation*. Even today, when the light in the room is diffused by sheer curtains, they glitter and shine splendidly. One can only imagine their magnificence during the age of Alexander VI, when the windows would have been open wide, and courtiers addressing the pope, sitting on his throne under the *Disputation* would have had to shield their eyes from the gold’s blinding opulence.
The painted subject matter of the *Disputation* fresco is equally as splendid as its gold ornament. Here represented is the court of the emperor Maxentius, its personages perhaps reflective of those who would gather in the Hall of the Saints and hope to catch the Pope’s ear. Saint Catherine, costumed in Borgia red and blue, has certainly caught the ear of Maxentius, who sits, rapt with attention, at the edge of his ornate throne.

The source material for Pinturicchio’s *Disputation of Saint Catherine*, and indeed for the other frescoes of saints in this room, was Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century text. Jacobus’ hagiographical compilation was beloved during the medieval period and the early Renaissance, with over eight hundred manuscript copies surviving to this day.⁴⁰ The popularity of the *Golden Legend* did not wane with the rise of the printing press. Rather, demand exploded, and by 1501 there were more printed editions of the *Legend* than there were editions of the Bible itself.⁴¹

In Jacobus’ hagiographical text, Catherine was a niece of the emperor Constantine, and, as princess, ruled over the Egyptian city of Alexandria. She was highly educated and converted to Christianity at age fourteen after a mystical vision of the Virgin Mary. When the Roman emperor Maxentius arrived in Alexandria and started persecuting Christians, Catherine confronted the emperor, arguing for the superiority of Christianity over paganism. Maxentius, noting Catherine’s erudition, summoned fifty pagan philosophers to dispute with her and to bring her back into the pagan fold. After Catherine converted the philosophers to Christianity, Maxentius had them put to death, then turned his sights to Catherine herself. He offered her a pagan salvation – if she agreed to marry him, he would save her from persecution. Catherine declined, and was subsequently martyred.⁴²
Pinturicchio has chosen to depict Catherine’s argument with Maxentius and his philosophers. In the *Golden Legend*, they number fifty, but here, the artist has drastically reduced that number. The landscape, with its verdant, rolling hills resembling the Italian countryside more than the Egyptian port city, is dominated by a large triumphal arch resembling that of Constantine. This arch is topped with a large golden bull which stands directly above the arch’s inscription: *Pacis Cultori* Latin for “cultivator of peace,” and one of Pope Alexander’s personal mottos.\(^43\) The Alexandrian court is assembled on the green grass below the arch, gathered to watch the argument between the saint, the emperor, and his philosophers. The haloed and crowned Catherine, dressed in a splendid gown of the early 1490s rather than the contemporary Turkish-inspired ‘eastern’ dress of the rest of the courtiers, counts off the points of her theological argument on her fingers.\(^44\) Her mouth is open. We have caught her mid-argument. To the immediate left of the saint, the emperor Maxentius is enthroned on a dais. Scattered on the steps of the dais are open books; their contents are unreadable, but the red-and-black text indicates that they are Christian bibles. Catherine is not centered, but she is certainly the focal point of the composition; nobody else wears clothing as vivid as hers, and, additionally, she is the only woman in the male-dominated scene.

Pinturicchio derived inspiration for the figures in this composition from a number of sources. The figure of Saint Catherine, particularly, the gesture that she makes with her fingers, comes from Masolino’s treatment of the same subject at the basilica of San Clemente (figure 6). In the basilica’s Saint Catherine chapel, which dates from 1428-1431, an entire wall is dedicated to Catherine’s hagiographical cycle. In the panel representing her disputation, Masolino’s Catherine makes an identical gesture. In both Masolino and Pinturicchio’s frescoes, Catherine stands in front of the emperor and his amassed pagan philosophers, her mouth open in argument
and her fingers counting off the main points of her disputation, in a rhetorical gesture that calls to mind ancient Roman orators such as Cicero and Quintilian.45

The east wall of the Hall of the Saints, adjacent to the Hall of the Mysteries, is the location of the next two frescoes that will be discussed. Closest to the Disputation of Saint Catherine is the fresco of Saint Barbara Escaping the Tower (figure 7). There are many similarities between the two frescoes and the narratives of the two virgin martyrs. Jacobus de Voragine also treated Barbara’s hagiography in the Golden Legend. Like Catherine, Barbara was royalty – the daughter of a pagan king. Her father had had her confined into a tower after she had refused to marry a pagan prince, for she had secretly become a Christian. Before her father left on a long voyage, he ordered a bathhouse to be built for Barbara’s personal use. After his departure, Barbara, in a show of architectural patronage, ordered the builders to add a third window to the structure, as a reference to the Holy Trinity. After construction was completed, Barbara was finally baptized in the bathhouse. Soon afterwards, her pagan father returned and demanded to know why a third window was added, and Barbara revealed her new faith to him. Upon hearing of his daughter’s conversion, Barbara’s father moved to kill her with his sword, but her prayers summoned a lightning bolt from God which cracked the wall of the tower and allowed her to escape. However, as with so many of the early Christian saints, Barbara was eventually martyred.46

Like the Disputation of Saint Catherine, Saint Barbara Escaping the Tower is dominated by an architectural form – here, Barbara’s tower. This structure is an amalgamation of the tower and the bathhouse, of prison and patronage. The specific scene from Barbara’s hagiography that is represented here is the moment when the young saint runs from the lightning-struck tower. Barbara is shown in motion; her golden-blonde hair billows behind her, and her red skirts cling
to her legs as she runs away from her sword-brandishing father. Her hands, at the ends of her tight blue sleeves, are clasped in prayer, and she raises her light blue eyes to heaven to thank God for her salvation. Barbara’s father, similarly dressed in red and blue, hunts for his daughter with the help of two young soldiers. But, in an act of divine providence, the three men run in the other direction. For now, Barbara has been saved through the power of her prayers. In the foreground, Barbara sprints away from her lightning-struck tower, which in Pinturicchio’s fresco is an amalgamation of her prison and her patronage. Barbara’s architectural patronage is just as important as her flight from the tower, even if the act itself of patronage is not as immediately visible. Behind the tower, in the background, Pinturicchio has represented another scene from Barbara’s hagiography, or, more accurately, a continuation of the scene in the foreground. To the right, Barbara runs away from her father, assisted by another future martyr, and to the left, her father is turned in the wrong direction by a shepherd.

In a room filled with scenes from the lives of early Christian martyrs, the inclusion of *Susanna and the Elders* appears unusual; N. Randolph Parks goes as far as calling it “exceptional.” Parks then states that Susanna, because of her chastity in the face of adversity, functions as a symbolic prefiguration of the Church as the ‘Bride of Christ.’

The story of Susanna, which comes out of the Old Testament’s Book of Daniel, was well-known and recognizable to fifteenth-century audiences. In the biblical account, Susanna, a young and faithful Jewish housewife of Babylon, bathed daily in her husband’s enclosed garden. One day as she took her bath, two lust-filled elders accosted her. The elders tried to blackmail Susanna into sleeping with them, saying that, if she refused, they would tell everyone in Babylon that they had caught her meeting her lover in the garden. At the cost of her reputation, Susanna chose to conserve her virtue, and refused to submit to the elders’ demand for sex. During
Susanna’s public trial, the prophet Daniel came along, and proved Susanna’s innocence through a series of puns.

Pinturicchio’s *Susanna and the Elders* (figure 8) depicts the initial moments of Susanna’s assault. This takes place in the enclosed garden, where a large fountain, made of gilded and raised stucco, serves as the architectural focus of the fresco. Below the fountain, Susanna has only started to disrobe; there is a crumpled piece of gold and red cloth, possibly an overdress, on the ground beneath her. Susanna is still modestly dressed; still covered in a blue-and-white underdress, she has no need to bodily cover herself, and this gives her the opportunity to use her arms to push her assailants, two old men in eastern dress, away from her. Like Catherine and Barbara, Susanna has light eyes and blonde hair. Unlike the two virgin martyrs, Susanna’s hair is bound, which emphasizes her status as a married woman.

Susanna seems the odd woman out, both because of her status as a character from the Old Testament as well as her relative passivity. However, contemporary writers took a different view. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, the mother of Lorenzo de’ Medici (“the Magnificent”), expressed her extreme piety through the writing of religious poetry. Among these are her five *storie sacre*, ‘sacred narratives’ that recount the lives of Old Testament heroes in vernacular verse, written in the late 1470s. The poem which treats the story of Susanna is remarkable for its *petrarchismo* and sympathy for its protagonist. Jane Tylus, the translator and editor of the poems, states that Tornabuoni’s emphasis on the paradisiacal setting of the garden is what makes the atmosphere “distinctly Petrarchan,” it is notable that Tornabuoni also attempts to contempiorize the Biblical narrative.48 Lucrezia’s Susanna, originally a Jewish woman living in Babylon, turns into a blonde woman (“she would gather flowers and jasmine and often entwine them into little garlands as she wove them into her blonde hair”) who tells the time according to the bells of “vespers and
Lucrezia Tornabuoni recreates the story of Susanna to fit a fifteenth-century Florentine context.

A significant deviation from the Book of Daniel can be found when Susanna prays to God after her assault. Although Susanna prays in the Biblical tale, her prayer in Tornabuoni’s version is much longer, taking eleven lines of poetry. Here, Susanna implores God to save her, at the end proclaiming: "My every hope is in you, O my God, liberate me, Lord, if you choose, from such false and evil torments!" The revelation of Susanna’s innocence is no longer simply the result of Daniel’s intervention. Rather, Susanna takes an active role in her own salvation by offering this prayer and an additional one during her trial. The trial prayer, which is not in the Biblical account, details her innocence and her trust in God to deliver her from this situation. God’s reaction is immediate. “Instantly her petition was heard, and she did not become a martyr, for her devout prayer was pleasing to God, and he exalted his humble handmaiden and abundantly showed that she was just.” Lucrezia’s Susanna takes control of her own deliverance by offering prayers to God. This role is not as physically engaged as those of Catherine and Barbara, but it is still significant because it is an event that does not have Biblical precedent, and the poem directly implies that Susanna’s prayers led to her salvation.

Pinturicchio’s Susanna is not based on Tornabuoni’s Susanna, but both representations of the Old Testament woman are representative of contemporary attitudes towards this Old Testament woman. Susanna is viewed as a woman struggling against the horrible situation that she finds herself in, and looking for a method of salvation. Susanna’s piety and her faith in God are what save her; her prayers summon Daniel, who acts as the executor of God’s will when he punishes the harassing elders.
Lucrezia certainly must have felt God’s will and wrath in the ten years between the decoration of the Hall of the Saints and the next iteration of her portraiture. In 1497, a mere four years after the start of her marriage to Giovanni Sforza, the union was annulled. The political union between the families was no longer convenient, and the alliance between the Sforza and the Borgia ended in a messy divorce. Soon afterwards, Lucrezia was married again, to Alfonso of Aragon, bastard son of the King of Naples, to whom she bore a child. When this union, like that between her and Sforza, was no longer politically attractive, her family knew that it had to end. However, as Lucrezia had had a child with this husband, a divorce could not be demanded. Her husband was clearly not impotent, as was the claim with Giovanni Sforza. Instead, her brother had her husband murdered. After this brutal slaying, Lucrezia ran away to the town of Nepi to mourn, but came back when her father ordered her to marry Alfonso d’Este, the heir to the Duchy of Ferrara. Lucrezia was not the only Borgia having a tumultuous decade. Her brother Juan had been murdered in 1497, soon after the divorce from Giovanni Sforza. After the murder of Juan, Cesare had renounced his cardinalate and become a secular military commander, who attempted to conquer the lands of the Romagna in order to carve out a Borgia empire that would outlast his father’s tenure as pope.52

In the exceptionally hot August of 1503, which Pope Alexander VI dubbed “a bad month for fat men,” he celebrated the eleventh anniversary of his elevation to the papal throne.53 At this time, both he and Cesare fell extremely ill, most probably of malaria.54 Even though Vatican doctors treated the pair in the utmost secrecy, it was apparent that they were both close to death, with Cesare’s case seemingly the more severe of the two.55 However, on 18 August, it was the pope who died and his son who survived.56 Without a Borgia presence on the papal throne, the political tide in Italy was rapidly turning against Cesare and Lucrezia.
Cesare had been anticipating his father’s death for years, because the pope had often been in ill health; as soon as he learned about it, he immediately sprang into action. Despite being in a weakened state himself, Cesare ordered his mercenaries to march on Rome, and, upon their arrival, organized the occupation of both the Vatican and the Castel Sant’Angelo.\textsuperscript{57} Two months after the death of Alexander, Cesare told Niccolo Machiavelli, the Florentine ambassador to Cesare’s itinerant court, that he had thought he had planned for all possibilities after his father’s death, but the one thing that he had not anticipated was his own illness at the same time.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite the setback of his illness, Cesare manipulated the College of Cardinals into electing his favored candidate, Francesco Piccolomini, who took the name Pius III. Pius, however, was in extremely ill health and died in October 1503.\textsuperscript{59} His 26-day pontificate was one of the shortest in history. The ensuing papal election was also brief. Giuliano della Rovere, the old enemy of the Borgia family, was elected to the papacy in just ten hours.\textsuperscript{60} This new pope, who dubbed himself Julius II, set about tearing down the fledgling Borgia state in the Romagna. Cesare, after trying unsuccessfully to curry favor with Julius, was betrayed by one of his Spanish allies and sent to prison in Spain.\textsuperscript{61} His lands in the Romagna were seized, and, after he escaped from prison, he never again returned to Italy. He died in a minor border skirmish in 1507, fighting for his brother-in-law, the King of Navarre.\textsuperscript{62}

During this dramatic reversal of the Borgia family’s fortune, Lucrezia was in Ferrara, far away from Rome and unable to affect her family’s fortunes. Lucrezia and her retinue had left for Ferrara on January 6, 1502, and Lucrezia would remain in northern Italy until her death in 1519.\textsuperscript{63}

After Cesare’s unceremonious departure from Italy, Lucrezia was completely cut off from her once-close-knit family. She had never been so removed from her emotional and
political support system; though in 1499, she had served as governor of the town of Spoleto, she had, during this time, remained in constant contact with her father and brother.\textsuperscript{64} The contract for her marriage to Giovanni Sforza had stipulated that she and her husband stay at the Vatican for the first year, and she and her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon had lived in Rome during the entirety of their short marriage.\textsuperscript{65} Lucrezia was unused to this sense of isolation, and she now found herself adrift in the Estense court in Ferrara. The Este family was equally as brutal as the Borgias. Bitter familial rivalries abounded, often ending in bloodshed.

It had been immensely difficult and expensive for Alexander to secure this marriage. Lucrezia’s biographer Ferdinand Gregorovius notes that the dowry she brought to Ferrara in 1502 was larger than the one “Bianca Sforza had brought the Emperor Maximilian” eight years before.\textsuperscript{66} In addition to two hundred thousand ducats, Lucrezia’s dowry also included material goods and lands. To put this into perspective, Michelangelo was paid 3,000 ducats in 1512 for the decoration of the vault of the Sistine Chapel, an agricultural laborer would earn approximately 13 ducats per year, and it cost one fifth of a ducat for a \textit{braccia} (about a yard) of wool.\textsuperscript{67} Some of the Ferrarese demands had even broken canon law; Lucrezia’s future father-in-law, Duke Ercole I d’Este (1431-1505) had demanded a remission of the tax money that Ferrara had paid to the Church, as well as control of some cities that belonged to the Bishopric of Bologna.\textsuperscript{68} Lucrezia was certainly well aware of the great expense of her marriage; she too had been involved in the dowry negotiations. Gregorovius describes her as Duke Ercole’s “most able advocate in Rome,” arguing finances with her father on the Duke’s behalf.\textsuperscript{69} An enormous amount of time, effort, and money had gone into the procurement of this alliance, which was intended to stabilize the Borgia family and Lucrezia in particular, but thanks to the political climate after the death of Alexander, was becoming increasingly unstable.
Adding to Lucrezia’s potentially precarious situation was her failure to produce an Estense heir. In September 1502, she gave birth to a premature and stillborn daughter, and herself nearly died of childbed fever.\textsuperscript{70} Lucrezia was wretchedly ill throughout this pregnancy and would not carry a child to term until after the death of her father-in-law, Duke Ercole, in 1505. In 1507, Lucrezia gave birth to a son who the couple named Alessandro after Lucrezia’s father. Alessandro died in infancy, and the following year, Lucrezia bore the Estense heir, named Ercole in honor of his paternal grandfather.

Lucrezia’s inability to bear a child during the time that her husband was heir to the Estense ducal throne was a direct contributor to the instability of her position. As Lucrezia’s husband Alfonso was not yet the duke of Ferrara, she was not yet its duchess; she held no titles of nobility in her own right and had relinquished what titles she once possessed upon her previous divorce and widowhood. Without a papal father, and without an Estense son, Lucrezia had no official noble standing in Ferrara. She must have been painfully aware of this fact and manipulated her image in order to justify her presence in the Estense court.

Even though Lucrezia was not yet the duchess, the population of Ferrara considered her as such instantly. Lucrezia’s wedding medal, struck in 1502, names her as the Estense duchess, despite the fact that her father-in-law, the widower Ercole I d’Este, would live for another three years. There had not been a dominating female presence in the Castello Estense since the death of Alfonso’s first wife, Anna Maria Sforza, in 1497. The previous duchess, Alfonso’s mother Eleonora of Aragon, had died in 1493. When Lucrezia entered Ferrara in February 1502 in an elaborate procession, she was immediately recognized as the most powerful and important woman in the city.
The Ferrarese chronicler Bernardino Zambotti noted that the people of the city were pleased by her, and, upon her arrival into Ferrara, gathered in the streets to praise her.\textsuperscript{71} It is notable that much of the praise that Zambotti records has to do with Lucrezia’s status as daughter of the pope; he states that they rejoiced in the terms of her dowry, which would allow the people of Ferrara to pay fewer taxes to the Church, and anticipated special favors from the Pope, “who love[d] this daughter of his above all things.”\textsuperscript{72} During this procession, Lucrezia wore some of the Este family jewels, including a necklace and headdress that had belonged to the previous duchess, Eleonora of Aragon.\textsuperscript{73} At the end of the procession, Lucrezia was gifted more of the family jewels, and shown to her living quarters in the Castello Estense, which had also belonged to Eleonora.\textsuperscript{74}

Although the Ferrarese populace rejoiced in the fact that they had a new duchess, who brought with her a substantial dowry and relief from taxes, not everyone was pleased with Lucrezia’s new position. Her new sister-in-law, Isabella d’Este, the Marchesa of Mantua (1474-1539), took an instant dislike to Lucrezia, and the rift between the two women would remain strong throughout the rest of Lucrezia’s life. It is commonly held that the enmity between the two women was purely based on vanity and jealousy. It is true that Isabella was extremely selective about the image she wanted to put forward, and in her sixties commissioned Titian to paint her as a teenager.\textsuperscript{75} However, to reduce the animosity between the two women to an appearance-based rivalry negates the knowledge and political savvy that both Isabella and Lucrezia possessed. While it is possible that Isabella felt somewhat jealous of Lucrezia, who was six years younger and extremely fashionable, Isabella was proud of her family and lineage. Lucrezia was the illegitimate daughter of a foreign pope, one who it was popularly believed had bribed his way to the Chair of Saint Peter. Isabella, on the other hand, was the direct and
legitimate descendant of two ancient European ruling houses. While it is unknown whether Isabella was involved in the dowry negotiations to the same extent as Lucrezia, she likely saw the marriage for what it was: a business transaction. She may have, as Sarah Bradford supposes, felt “resentful that anyone with Lucrezia’s background should occupy her mother’s place.”

Lucrezia tried to make overtures to Isabella, but she was continually rebuffed by her new sister-in-law. Isabella’s husband, Federico II Gonzaga, was far more receptive to Lucrezia. The two of them possibly engaged in a love affair, which certainly did no favors to the relationship between the two women. Cesare’s conquests in central Italy also added to Isabella’s dislike of Lucrezia; soon after Lucrezia and Alfonso’s marriage, Cesare conquered Urbino, displacing Isabella’s sister-in-law, Elisabetta Gonzaga. Later that year, Cesare marched on Mantua, but left it unconquered after difficult negotiations with Isabella herself. In 1508, Lucrezia purchased a copy of Isabella’s famed Sleeping Cupid statue, a rare secular acquisition for the pious Duchess of Ferrara. Isabella was outraged that Lucrezia should try to copy her in this way, and any semblance of a good relationship between the women was never recovered.

In 1503, after the death of her father, Lucrezia knew that her position in the Estense court was unstable. Both of her previous marriages had been ended when it was politically expedient to do so; Lucrezia’s union with Giovanni Sforza had been annulled once his family was no longer important to hers, and her second husband, Alfonso of Aragon, was murdered under similar circumstances. Now that the papal throne was occupied by Giuliano della Rovere, an enemy of Lucrezia and her family, she had not only lost her ecclesiastical advocates, but gained enemies in Rome. Lucrezia now needed to navigate life in the Ferrarese court on her own, without the backing of her family at the Vatican.
One way in which Lucrezia could fend for herself was by cultivating her own image. In the beginning of Lucrezia’s Ferrarese residency, she employs similar tactics to those in place in her representations in the Borgia Apartments. This is to say, Lucrezia continues to hide behind the imagery of a moral exemplar. In portrait medals, the earliest extant confirmed images of Lucrezia Borgia during her Ferrarese period, she appropriates bridal imagery and imitates morally exemplary Roman women, in order to put forth the image of herself as a morally exemplary woman, indispensable for the future and welfare of Ferrara.

Allyson Burgess Williams has written at length about Lucrezia’s image in Ferrara. In her book chapter *Rewriting Lucrezia Borgia: Propriety, Magnificence, and Piety in Portraits of a Renaissance Duchess*, Williams focuses on Lucrezia’s use of bridal imagery, stating that she employed it in an attempt to present herself as a woman unaffected by her two previous marriages. She notes that “there was a great deal at stake in fashioning a regal and unassailably virtuous persona for this duchess,” and that Lucrezia’s use of this imagery was an attempt to separate herself from her salacious past in the city of Rome.80

One of the images that Lucrezia likely had a say in was a portrait medal that was struck in 1505 by an anonymous Mantuan artist working in the style of Giancristoforo Romano (figure 9). This medal, known as the *Amor bendato* medal because of the motif on the reverse, depicts Lucrezia in profile on the obverse.81 This is the same portrait, from the same mold, as the 1502 medal that was struck to commemorate her third marriage.82 This marriage medal had a portrait of Alfonso d’Este in armor on the obverse, and a portrait of Lucrezia on the reverse.83

What is notable about Lucrezia’s representation in the *Amor bendato* medal is the clothing she wears. Lucrezia is depicted in a draped fabric that approximates classical dress. Williams remarks that this drapery is held together with a *brochetta di spalla*, an “unarticulated
brooch” that typically adorned the shoulders of brides in the _quattrocento_. According to Adrian W.B. Randolph, the _brochetta di spalla_ was an important piece of wedding jewelry, represented both in portraits of newlywed brides as well as in representations of the Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine, where it can be seen pinned to the gown of the saint, who is undergoing a holy wedding ceremony to the Christ Child. The _brochetta_ can be viewed as a fundamental piece of imagery linking the woman represented to her role as a bride, and Lucrezia’s appropriation of this piece of bridal jewelry is therefore intended to reinforce her status as a newlywed.

The “Roman-style drape of fabric” to which the _brochetta di spalla_ is affixed is itself significant. Williams makes a comparison between this classicizing imagery present on Lucrezia’s portrait medals and Roman coins depicting virtuous empresses. Roman coins were collected in the _quattro- and cinquecento_, and Alfonso d’Este himself had an extensive numismatic collection, which he displayed in his _studiolo_. At this time, one of the most celebrated of the Roman empresses was Faustina the Elder, wife of Antoninus Pius, who ruled the Roman Empire from 138-161. Faustina was renowned for her charitable works in the city of Rome, and Williams posits that Faustina’s support of her husband’s military campaigns made her an especially attractive woman for Lucrezia, herself married to a _condottiere-_prince, to compare herself to.

Williams touches briefly on the comparisons between the Roman matron Lucretia and Lucrezia Borgia, stating that Lucrezia too wanted to be seen as the “loyal wife of a great man.” The comparison with Lucretia, which followed Lucrezia throughout her life, is likely the main reason for her representation in classicizing clothing on the _Amor bendato_ medal type. During Lucrezia’s lifetime, the Roman Lucretia was celebrated for her faithfulness to her husband and her bravery in the face of dishonor, serving as a moral exemplar in the same vein as the biblical
Susanna. Lucrezia herself was confronted with these comparisons to Lucretia around the time of her second and third weddings.

During the celebrations of Lucrezia’s wedding to Alfonso of Aragon in 1497, which had been organized by her brother Cesare, the wedding party was presented with sugar statues after the dinner. “Then came ‘diverse and very beautiful inventions’ – sugar statues presented by Cesare with diverse motifs… for Lucrezia a woman supposed to be the Roman matron Lucretia.”

On the road to Ferrara in January 1502, Lucrezia and her retinue made a stop at the town of Foligno, where they were presented with a celebratory masque, described by the Ferrarese ambassadors Gianluca de Pontremoli and Geraldo Saraceno thus:

Lucrezia was met near the city gate by a chariot above which was a figure representing the Roman Lucretia with a dagger in her hand. She recited some verses, saying that she would give way to Her Ladyship, who surpassed her in modesty, prudence, and constancy. Then, on the square, there was a triumphal chariot with a small Cupid in front of it. On the chariot was Paris, with the golden apple in his hand, who recited some poetry. He said that he had already assigned the apple to Venus, who was more beautiful than Juno and Pallas Athena. Now, however, he would have to revoke his judgment, and give the apple to Her Ladyship because she was superior to those three goddesses, since she had more beauty, wisdom, and wealth.

Clearly, Lucrezia was conscious of the comparisons that could be drawn between herself and the historical Lucretia and took advantage of these comparisons to further her own reputation. The two women already shared a name that came with connotations of virtue and fidelity. Others reveled in this play on identity between Lucretia and Lucrezia, and Lucrezia herself would exploit it. The Amor bendato type medals are proof of this exploitation; not only does Lucrezia adopt the ancient Roman spelling of her name (which was typical for most portrait medals), but she also appropriates Roman dress in order to heighten the comparison between herself and this virtuous woman from the ancient world.
Women were typically depicted in contemporary dress on their portrait medals. Relatively few wore this kind of classicizing drape. Two of Lucrezia’s contemporaries who also chose this method of representation were Caterina Sforza and Vittoria Colonna. The British Museum, which houses Caterina’s classicizing medal, dates it to 1495. However, Joyce de Vries, in her article about Caterina’s self-presentation through medals, dates this particular medal type to 1480-84, during which time Caterina lived in Rome with her first husband, Girolamo Riario. De Vries states that Caterina’s draped clothing and “classically inspired hairstyle” are intended to call to mind classical moral exemplars, especially the first empress, Livia, and thus emphasize Caterina’s propensity to be the virtuous wife of a fifteenth-century Roman nobleman.

In Vittoria Colonna’s early portrait medals, she is also represented in a classicizing drape. These medals date from the period of her marriage to Ferrante d’Avalos, which was from 1510 to 1525. Like that of Lucrezia, the earliest of Vittoria’s classicizing portraits was part of a medal that depicted the woman on one side and her husband on the other. Vittoria’s use of the drape, as well as her classicizing hairstyle, are intended to invite comparisons between Vittoria, a celebrated poet, and the image of Sappho in Raphael’s Parnassus fresco in the papal apartments of Julius II.

While Caterina Sforza and Vittoria Colonna both wear classically-inspired clothing like Lucrezia, they lack the brochetta di spalla. The fusion of the drape and the brooch is what makes this representation of Lucrezia so remarkable. By employing both pieces of imagery, Lucrezia consciously presents herself as both a Roman matron and as a newlywed, creating a cautious reconstruction of identity that synthesizes Lucrezia’s previous experience as a mother with her future as the new bride of Alfonso d’Este.
The National Gallery of Art owns two of Lucrezia Borgia’s portrait medals. The Gallery dates both medals to 1502, a dating which I believe is not wholly accurate. The medal with the classicizing drape, of the Amor bendato type, is likely from the 1502 mold—the first occurrence of this portrait type was the ducal couple’s wedding medal. However, the Washington Amor bendato type medal lacks a reverse, and therefore, it is impossible to place it within the chronology of Lucrezia’s other uses of this portrait type.

The second medal (figure 10), which boasts the same inscription as the first, represents a heavier-set Lucrezia, wearing contemporary clothes and a bound hairstyle. This hairstyle consists of a long braid, called a coazzone, at the back, a hairnet, and a cord, or lenza, across the forehead. Comparison with a confirmed image of Lucrezia from the 1510s disproves the National Gallery’s 1502 dating for the coazzone medal. Lucrezia’s profile in this portrait medal is nigh identical to that on the Saint Maurelio reliquary (figure 11), itself unquestionably an image that dates from after 1512. Of course, the viewer is then faced with the chicken-and-the-egg question: was the reliquary made first, or was the medal? Adding to this confusion is the fact that neither is dated by the artist.

Despite the issues caused by a lack of a solid date, the visual similarities between the two images, as well as their content, lend credence to the idea that the coazzone medal represents Lucrezia in the 1510s; in the Amor bendato type medals, Lucrezia’s hair is allowed to flow free, with portions at the temples tied back to keep the hair off of her face. Like the brochetta di spalla she wears on her shoulder, Lucrezia’s loose hair in this portrait medal is intended to call to mind her position as Alfonso’s new bride. Similarly, in the Saint Maurelio reliquary, where Lucrezia is presented as the mother of the Estense heir, her hair is bound, which was typical for married women of the early cinquecento. It seems highly improbable that Lucrezia, who appropriated
bridal imagery upon her arrival in Ferrara, would choose to present herself as a matron before she bore Alfonso d’Este a child. The *Amor bendato* medal type, then, should be understood as the earliest iteration of Lucrezia’s self-made image in Ferrara.

Although the reverse of the *Amor bendato* medal does not contain another portrait of Lucrezia, its decoration is an equally important part of her self-fashioning. Lucrezia was certainly involved in the decoration of the medal’s reverse. In a letter to the poet and courtier Pietro Bembo, dated 8 June 1503, Lucrezia asks for his advice in the matter:

> Trusting in your skill which I appreciated these past days when considering certain designs for medallions, and having decided to have one made according to that most subtle and most apt suggestion you gave me, I thought I would send it to you with this letter, and lest it be mixed with some other element that could detract from its value I thought also to ask you herewith kindly to take the trouble for love of me to think what text should be put upon it; and for both the one matter and the other I shall remain as obliged to you as you deserve and the work must be esteemed. I await your reply with great anticipation.98

Lucrezia had originally planned on a burning fire for the medal’s reverse, for which Bembo suggested the motto “Est Animum,” which would link the imagery of the eternal flame to the idea of deep spiritual love. However, Lucrezia never used this design in any of her medals. What she chose instead was a blindfolded cupid, tied to a tree and surrounded by his broken instruments of seduction. This was not a unique choice for a medal’s reverse; two other medals of contemporary women from the Romagna, Maddalena Rossi and Jacoba Correggia, utilize the same motif.99 However, as de Vries notes, the reverse of a portrait medal did not have to be unique. Clients of medal-makers “could easily choose their personalized configuration from the many emblems and mottos that were on display at [the artist’s] prosperous workshop,” or could have adopted a reverse after seeing a medal they particularly admired in someone else’s possession.100
In the representation on the *Amor bendato* type medals, Lucrezia looks both to the future and the past. She presents herself as a faithful and virtuous bride for Alfonso through her appropriation of bridal imagery, and, through her manner of dress, invites comparisons between herself and virtuous ancient Roman matrons, specifically Lucretia and Empress Faustina the Elder.

Though neither of these women are ‘holy women’ in the same manner as the saints in the Borgia Apartments, they are, like the saints, moral exemplars with which Lucrezia wished to identify herself. This medal is representative of a transitional period in Lucrezia’s representation. Here, she no longer fully hides behind the disguise of a saint, but rather, identifies herself as Lucrezia Borgia, while also identifying herself with Lucretia and Faustina.

The only extant confirmed full-length portrait of Lucrezia Borgia is an engraving on a silver plaque, one of three that composes a reliquary for a relic of Saint Maurelio, the first and martyred bishop of Ferrara, and one of the city’s patrons (figure 1). Created by the goldsmith and engraver Giannantonio da Foligno, the Saint Maurelio reliquary is housed in the Basilica di San Giorgio Fuori le Mura in Ferrara. Originally, these three plaques were placed on the sarcophagus of the saint, but in 1916, when the relics were moved into a glass coffin, the plaques were removed from public display.

In her biography of Lucrezia Borgia, the historian Sarah Bradford states that the ducal couple commissioned the plaques jointly, while the art historian Allyson Burgess Williams states that the patron could have been either Lucrezia, Alfonso, or the pair together. As no documentary evidence of the commission remains, it is impossible to discern the reliquary’s exact patronage. Even so, there is circumstantial evidence that suggests that Lucrezia was the primary patron of the reliquary. Bradford notes that Giannantonio da Foligno “carried out
commissions for the nobility [of Ferrara] and particularly for Lucrezia,” with his work being mentioned in her Inventory of Jewels from 1516-1519.¹⁰⁴

Unlike his wife, Alfonso d’Este rarely commissioned religious artwork. Titian’s Christ with the Coin of 1516, intended to serve as the cabinet cover for his large collection of ancient coins, was a rare exception.¹⁰⁵ Rather, Alfonso’s artistic tastes ran similar to those of his sister Isabella. The siblings preferred secular and mythological scenes; Alfonso’s most well-known commission was a series of mythological paintings by Titian and other northern Italian painters, intended to hang in his camerino d’alabastro, a private chamber in the Castello Estense. This series of four Bacchic scenes is representative of Alfonso’s typical artistic tastes. Alfonso was also a great enthusiast of majolica painted pottery; Gregorovius goes as far as to state that Alfonso himself painted majolica.¹⁰⁶

Lucrezia’s tastes in art reflected her upbringing in the Vatican. She was a great patron of religious art, commissioning many paintings and devotional objects. It is only through documents that scholars know what art was in Lucrezia’s possession, as the provenance of no existing paintings have been traced back to her art collection. However, we do know that Lucrezia’s tastes ran more religious than those of her husband; some of the paintings that she owned included a head of Christ by Fra Bartolommeo, multiple half-length devotional images by Bartolommeo Veneto, and a sacra conversazione between Saints John and Jerome.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, she owned many devotional objects, one of the most remarked-upon being a large silver altarpiece decorated with statues of saints as well as Borgia crests.

The Saint Maurelio reliquary is made up of three engraved silver plaques. The first of these plaques depicts Alfonso kneeling in armor in front of Saint Maurelio, who gives him a blessing. Two grooms hold Alfonso’s horse, from which he may have just descended, in order to
stop it from bolting into the rolling hills of the background. In the second plaque, the abbot of San Giorgio kneels and is given a similar benediction from the saint. This scene is set in a Ferrarese landscape; the Herculean Walls, Po River, and the church, campanile, and cloister of San Giorgio are identifiable.

The third plaque, which Williams asserts is “by far the most detailed,” represents Lucrezia and her son Ercole in communication with Saint Maurelio, surrounded by unidentified members of the Ferrarese court. The fact that Lucrezia’s panel is the reliquary’s most elaborate, having the most human figures, suggests that she, rather than her husband, was likely Giannantonio’s patron.

The narrative of this panel takes place in an architectural space, as opposed to the exterior scenes of Alfonso and the abbot’s panels. Here, the nine figures stand on a checkered tile floor, and a deacon and donzella loom in brick doorways at the left and right edges of the panel. Lucrezia, the unquestionable and magnificent Duchess of Ferrara, takes center stage. She is depicted in strict profile, facing to the left. It is important to note that Lucrezia’s profile in this reliquary is identical to that in her later portrait medal, down to the placement of woven strips in her hairnet.

Lucrezia and her five female companions are all extravagantly dressed, the long trains of their gown trailing on the ground behind them and their arms concealed under large, baggy dogalina sleeves. Lucrezia’s gown is the most elaborate of all, because it is striped. Lucrezia’s hair is tied back in a braid and covered with a complex hairnet. This net is secured with a lenza, a string that stretches across the forehead. Lucrezia looks directly at Saint Maurelio and holds the hand of her son and heir Ercole. Ercole, his back to the viewer, holds his hat in his hand so that Saint Maurelio can lay hands upon his head in a blessing. Only Lucrezia and her son seem to be
aware of the saint’s presence. The *donzelle* chatter away, caught up in worldly gossip and unconscious of the holy scene that is happening right in front of them. The duchess and the heir are in direct communication with the patron saint of their city, which establishes a liaison between the ducal and the divine. Lucrezia no longer hides behind the costume of a saint, but rather presents herself as a fully human woman, who, by her piety and her familial connections, is allowed to communicate with the saints.

In the plaque on the Saint Maurelio reliquary, Lucrezia serves as a liaison between the past and the future of Ferrara. She communes with the first bishop of the city, while at the same time presenting to him her son, the future Duke Ercole II d’Este. Lucrezia is presented on equal footing with the saint, which emphasizes her own piety and holiness. Unlike her husband and the abbot of San Giorgio, Lucrezia stands in the presence of the saint, and she looks him in the eye. It is as if they are almost equals. With her equalizing stare, Lucrezia places herself as a counterpoint to the city’s patron saint. They are both equally invested in the future and piety of her son and her adopted city.

The plaques were likely created between 1513 and 1514, as a votive for “safe deliverance from the tumultuous events” of the year 1512. These tumultuous events included prolonged warfare that kept Alfonso away from the duchy, the excommunication of the entire city of Ferrara, and the death of Rodrigo of Aragon, Lucrezia’s son from her second marriage.

The appropriation of the imagery of moral exemplars was employed throughout Lucrezia’s life, permeating most if not all of her instances of portraiture, in multiple media. Even so, this was an evolving form of appropriation. In her early life, when she did not have much worldly experience, her father chose for her to take on the guise of saints who shared her young age and had experience as well as qualities that were important for the young Lucrezia to put
forth. A decade later, when Lucrezia had gained experience but lost her political footing, she once again appropriated the imagery of moral exemplars, this time, synthesizing bridal and classicizing imagery that called to mind both her status as the newlywed bride of Alfonso d’Este as well as her previous experience as a mother and matron in the city of Rome. In the final iteration of Lucrezia’s portraiture, she no longer feels the need to hide behind other women. She, now Duchess of Ferrara, has become powerful in her own right, as she has given birth to the heir to the ducal throne. Now, she presents herself as a moral exemplar, communicating with the city’s patron saint and first bishop, while at the same time presenting herself and her son as the future of Ferrara.

2 Adriana da Mila was not only Rodrigo’s cousin, but also the mother-in-law of his young mistress Giulia Farnese. Giulia’s marriage to Adriana’s son Orsino Orsini was largely regarded as a marriage in name only, and a way through which Rodrigo would have nearly-unfettered access to her. Gregorovius, 25.
3 Adriana da Mila would later brag that she was responsible for Lucrezia’s education; at Lucrezia’s wedding in 1493, she stated that Lucrezia had been “educated in [her] own house.” From a June 1493 letter by the Ferrarese ambassador to Rome, Gianandrea Boccaccio, to Duke Ercole d’Este. Quoted in Gregorovius, 24.
4 This praise may be slightly overblown; none of Lucrezia’s poetry, in any language, survives, and her father stated that she only knew enough Latin to understand official correspondence. From the memoirs of the French mercenary and ‘adventurer’ the Chevalier Bayard, who met Lucrezia when she was Duchess of Ferrara. Quoted in Gregorovius, 31.
5 Gregorovius, 24.
6 Before 1492, Lucrezia had been betrothed twice, both times to Spanish noblemen. Gregorovius, 42.
7 Gregorovius, 45.
8 Alfonso was killed rather than divorced for multiple reasons. Primarily, Lucrezia could not be divorced from Alfonso because the couple had had a child (Rodrigo of Aragon), and therefore, impotence could not be claimed as it had been with Giovanni Sforza. Additionally, Cesare Borgia’s reputation for violence was not unfounded, and Alfonso of Naples found himself one of many victims of Cesare’s violent streak. Gregorovius, 121.
9 Numerous biographies of Lucrezia Borgia have been written, but many of the earlier biographies suffer from terrible research and make many inaccurate assumptions about Lucrezia, her life, and her family. In my opinion, the best scholarly biography of Lucrezia that is currently available in English is Gregorovius’ *Lucretia Borgia*, which is made up of primary sources translated and compiled by the author. A more readable biography for a modern audience, which is still excellently researched, is Sarah Bradford’s *Lucrezia Borgia: Life, Love, and Death in Renaissance Italy*. Bradford’s *Cesare Borgia* is also excellent, but is increasingly difficult to find in print in the United States.
10 See Gregorovius.


A collaboration with Andrea Bregno. Bregno’s marble altar survives and is now housed in the church’s sacristy. Pinturicchio’s painting was not so lucky; it has since been lost. Stollhans, Cynthia. “Vannozza Cattanei: Papal Mistress and Pious Art Patron.” Lecture, College Art Association Annual Conference, Washington, D.C., February 3, 2016.


Vasari, 253.

“C’est ung trebeau logis et aussi bien acoustre de toutes choses que palais ni chasteau je vis jamais.” Thanks to Dr. Brooke diLauro for assistance with the renaissance French translation. Poeschel, 62.


Partridge, 145.


Phillipps, 67.

Poeschel, 65.

This roundel of the Madonna and Child is above the doorway leading from the Hall of the Saints to the Hall of the Mysteries. Vasari, 253.


This description comes from the time of Lucrezia’s entrance into Ferrara, in early 1502. Gregorovius, 248.

Phillipps, 80.

Poeschel, 63.

Parks, 292.

Ibid., 293.


Luke 10:27: “And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.” Bernardino of Siena. “Two Sermons on Wives and Widows.” Translated by C.G. Coulton. Internet History Sourcebooks Project. Fordham University. Accessed February 22, 2018. <sourcebooks.fordham.edu/>

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid., 6.


Ibid.


In Pinturicchio's visual vernacular, Turkish-inspired eastern dress denotes biblical and early Christian subjects as much as a classically-inspired drape might. Pinturicchio's use of Turkish clothing forms is one of the few reminders that most of the scenes in the Hall of the Saints take place in the Levant.


Parks, 294.


Ibid., 64.

Ibid., 66.

Ibid., 67.

Ibid., 67.

Ibid., 66.

Ibid., 64.

Ibid., 62.

Ibid., 65.

See Gregorovius.


Despite the fact that both men displayed symptoms of malaria, rumors of poisoning abounded. One of the more popular of these rumors stated that the Borgias themselves had intended to poison the host of the dinner party, a Cardinal Adriano da Corneto, but there had been a mix-up in the kitchen and the flagon of poisoned wine had been served to the Pope and his son instead. This rumor was written down by contemporary chroniclers including Giovio, Bembo, and Guicciardini, and even “reached the ears of Luther”. Bradford, Sarah. *Cesare Borgia: His Life and Times*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976. 222.

Bradford 1976, 225

Ibid., 226.

Ibid., 233.


Murphy, 42.


Bradford 2004, 270

Gregorovius, 222.
Lucrezia left on August 8 of that year, carrying a letter from her father the pope, which was addressed to the priors of Spoleto and told them to give her everything she wanted. Gregorovius, 117-118.

Lucrezia would live in Pesaro for less than a year, between summer 1494 and spring 1495. Otherwise, she stayed in Rome, living in the palace of Santa Maria in Portico with her father’s cousin Adriana da Mila, and his lover Giulia Farnese. Bradford 2004, 52.

This marriage had taken place in 1494. Gregorovius 183.


Gregorovius 183.

Ibid., 184.

Ibid., 176-77.

Quoted in Gregorovius, 247.

Ibid.


Williams 2016, 178.

Murphy, 136.

Bradford 2004, 159.

Ibid., 218.

Bradford 1976, 145.

Williams 2016, 175.


Williams 2012 81.

Ibid.

A copy of the Amor bendato type medal, lacking decoration on its reverse, is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.


Ibid., 188.

Williams 2012, 81.


Williams 2012, 82.

Ibid.

From an account written by Sancia of Aragon, Lucrezia’s sister-in-law through her marriage to Alfonso. Quoted in Bradford 2004, 74.


Ibid., 25.


“LUCRETIA ESTN DE BORGIA DUC”, Ibid., 138.


Williams 2012, 83.

De Vries 25.

When I visited San Giorgio Fuori le Mura, I tried to obtain access to the reliquary, in order to see how large it was. I spoke to one of the Olivetan monks who still live at San Giorgio, asking him if it was possible to see the reliquary, thinking that it was located in the church’s sacristy. Unfortunately, he told me that it is completely out of public display, locked in a secure location that most of the monks cannot access.

Even though the plaques are not on view, the modern people of Ferrara are proud of this image of their famous duchess. Lucrezia’s portrait from this plaque decorates didactic markers that are placed around the city, at sites that were important to Lucrezia during her lifetime. Thanks to Hannah Dorsey for assistance with this source. Giovannucci Vigi, Berenice. “Lucrezia Borgia: ricerca di un identità,” in *Cultura figurativa ferrarese tra XV e XVI secolo: in memoria di Giacomo Bargellesi,* edited by Giacomo Bargellesi, 191-223. Venezia: Corbo e Fiore, 1981. 202.

Bradford 2004, 309; Williams 2012, 89.


Nygren, 254.

Gregorovius, 304.

Williams 2016, 182.

Williams 2012, 90.

See Vecellio for descriptions of costume.

Williams 2012, 87.

(figure 2) Pinturicchio, *The Hall of the Saints*, 1492-95, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy.
(figure 4) Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Birth of the Virgin*, 1486-90, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy.

(figure 5) Pinturicchio, *The Disputation of Saint Catherine*, 1492-95, Hall of the Saints, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy.
(figure 6) Masolino, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1428-31, Saint Catherine Chapel, Basilica of San Clemente, Rome, Italy.
(figure 7) Pinturicchio. *Saint Barbara Escaping the Tower*, 1492-95, Hall of the Saints, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy.
(figure 8) Pinturicchio, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1492-95, Hall of the Saints, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy.
(figure 10) Anonymous Mantuan Artist, *Portrait Medal of Lucrezia Borgia*, 1510s, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

(figure 11) Giannantonio da Foligno, *Lucrezia Borgia Presenting her Son Ercole to Saint Maurelio*, panel from the *Saint Maurelio Reliquary*, 1513-1514, San Giorgio Fuori le Mura, Ferrara, Italy.
Bibliography


