VICTOR HUGO

LUCREZIA BORGIA

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PREFACE

As he promised to do in the preface to his last drama, the author has reverted to the occupation of his whole life, art. He has resumed his favorite task, even before he has altogether adjusted matters with the petty political opponents who have been annoying him for two months past. And then, to bring forth a. new drama six weeks after the proscription of the other was one way of speaking plainly to the present government. It was equivalent to showing it that its trouble was thrown away. It was equivalent to proving to it that art and liberty can spring up again in one night beneath the very foot which tramples on them. It is his purpose, therefore, to go forward henceforth with his political strife, so far as occasion requires, and his literary work, *pari passu*. One can do his duty and his task at the same time. The one does not interfere with the other. Man has two hands.

Le Roi s’Amuse and Lucréce Borgia resemble each other not at all either in form or substance, and the fate of the two works has been so different, that the one will perhaps someday mark the principal political date, and the other the principal literary date in the author’s life. He deems it his duty to say, however, that the two dramas, different as they are in form, substance and destiny, are very closely coupled in his thought. The idea which gave birth to Le Roi s'Amuse, and the idea which gave birth to Lucréce Borgia, were born at the same moment in the same corner of the

heart. What is, in fact, the fundamental thought, concealed under three or four concentric envelopes, in Le Roi s'Amuse? It is this. Take the most hideous, the most repulsive, the most unrelieved *physical* deformity: place it where it stands out most prominently,—on the lowest, the farthest underground, the most despised story of the social structure: let the glaring light of contrast shine in from all sides upon the wretched creature: and then cast into it a soul, and endow that soul with the purest sentiment which man can feel, the sentiment of paternity.

What will take place? The sublime sentiment, warmed to life according to certain conditions, will transform the degraded creature under your eyes: the petty will become great: the deformed will become beautiful.

That is the substance of Le Roi s'Amuse.

And now, what is Lucréce Borgia? Take the most hideous, the most repulsive, the most unrelieved moral deformity: place it where it stands out most prominently,—in a woman's heart, with all the surroundings of physical beauty and regal grandeur, which give notoriety to crime! and now mingle with all this moral deformity, a single pure sentiment, the purest and holiest that a woman can feel, the sentiment of maternity: inject a touch of the mother into your monster, and the monster will arouse your interest, and the monster will bring tears to your eyes: the creature which terrified you will move you to pity, and the deformed soul will become almost beautiful to look upon. Thus Le Roi s'Amuse represents paternity sanctifying physical deformity: Lucréce Borgia, maternity purifying moral deformity. If *bilogie* were not a vulgar word, the author could well express his thought by saying that the two pieces were naught but a *bilogie sui generis*, the title of which might well be "The Father and Mother." Fate separated them, however, and what does it matter? One has been successful, the other was paralyzed by a *lettre de cachet*! the idea upon which the first is based will, it is

probable, be hidden from many eyes for a long time to come, by innumerable prejudices! the idea which gave birth to the second, seems, if we are not deluded, to be accepted and understood every evening by an intelligent and sympathetic multitude. *Habent sua fata!* but whatever may be the fate of the two plays, which have no other merit than the consideration which the public has been pleased to bestow upon them, they are twin sisters, the laurel-crowned and the proscribed were planted side by side, like Louis XIV. and the Iron Mask.

Corneille and Moliére were accustomed to answer in detail the criticisms called forth by their works, and it is extremely interesting to-day to see how these giants of the stage struggled and squirmed in *prefaces* and *notices* to the reader, under the inextricable network of criticisms which contemporary critics were constantly weaving about them. The author of this drama deems himself unworthy to follow such great examples. He prefers to hold his peace in the face of criticism. That which becomes men of authority, like Moliere and Corneille, does not become others. Moreover, there has probably never been any other than Corneille in the world, who could remain grand, yes, sublime, at the moment when he was on his knees to Scudéri or Chapelain, inditing a preface. The author is far from being a Corneille; the author is equally far from having a Scudéri or a Chapelain to deal with. The critics, with a few noticeable exceptions, have been loyal and kindly to him.

Doubtless he might be able to meet more than one objection. To those, for example, who consider that Gennaro in the second act allows himself to be poisoned by the duke altogether too meekly, he might propound the question, whether Gennaro, a character originating in the poet’s brain, is required to be drawn more in accordance with *probability*, than the historical Drusus, of Tacitus, *ignarus et juveniliter hauriens*. To those whoreproach him

for exaggerating the crimes of Lucrezia Borgia, he might say: “Read Tornasi, read Guicciardini, and above all read the *Diarium*.” To those who blame him for having given credence to certain popular, half-fabulous rumors touching the deaths of Lucrezia’s various husbands, he might reply that the fables of the people are often the poet’s verities: and thereon he might once more cite Tacitus, the historian being under greater obligations than the dramatic poet to be careful as to the accuracy of his facts.

He might go much more into detail with his explanations, and examine with the critics all the parts of his structure one by one: but he takes greater pleasure in thanking than in contradicting them: and, after all, he prefers that the reader should find the replies he might make to their criticisms in the drama itself, if they are to be found there, rather than in the preface.

He trusts that he may be forgiven for saying nothing more on the purely aesthetic part of his work. There is an altogether different line of thought, no less lofty in his opinion, which he would be glad to have the leisure to suggest and examine into apropos of this play of Lucréce Borgia. In his view many social questions are involved in literary questions, and every work in the field of letters is a fact to be considered. That is the subject upon which he would gladly dilate if time and space were not lacking. It cannot be repeated too frequently that the stage in our day is of immense importance, and its importance tends to keep pace with the advance of civilization itself. The stage is a platform.

The stage is a pulpit. The stage speaks loud and strong. When Corneille says:

Pour être plus qu’un roi tu te crois quelque chose,‘

Corneille is Mirabeau. When Shakespeare says: *To die, to sleep*, Shakespeare is Bossuet.

The author of this drama is well aware how great and how serious a thing the stage is.

He knows that the drama, without going beyond the impartial bounds of true art, has a national, a social, a human mission. When, evening after evening, he sees the intellectual, cultivated people, who have made Paris the very centre of the world's progress, swarming before a curtain, which is to rise a moment later upon the creature of his, a paltry poet's, brain, he feels how small a thing he is, in the face of all that expectation and interest: he feels that if his talent amounts to nothing, his probity must be everything: he catechizes himself sternly and collectedly as to the philosophical tendency of his work: for he realizes his responsibility, and he does not wish that that audience should call him to account someday for what he may have taught them. The poet also has the custody of souls. The multitude must not be allowed to go forth from the theatre, without having imbibed some austere and profound moral precepts. And so he hopes, that, with God's help, he may never exhibit upon the stage (at least while the present grave and serious times endure) any work that does not overflow with useful lessons and sound advice. He will always gladly introduce the cofl-in into the banquet-hall: the prayers for the dead will mingle with the refrain of drinking songs, and the monk's hood appear beside the mask.

If he sometimes allows the carnival to figure in scant attire in the foreground, he will not cease to cry out to it from the rear of the stage: *Memento quia pulvis es*. He knows full well that art alone, pure art, art properly so-called does not demand all this of the poet: but he is of opinion that on the stage, of all places, it is not enough to satisfy the bare requirements of art. As for the wounds and suffering of mankind, whenever he exhibits them in his drama, he will endeavor to throw the veil of a solemn, comforting thought over what might otherwise be too

painful in their nakedness. He will not bring Marion de Lorme upon the stage, without purifying the courtesan with a touch of real love: he will endow Triboulet the hunchback with a father’s heart: he will give to Lucrezia, the monster, a mother’s entrails. And by this means, he will at least ensure the tranquility and repose of his conscience touching his work. The drama of which he has dreamed, and which he is trying to make an accomplished fact, will be able to touch on any and every subject, without being defiled. Let a compassionate, moral thought pervade whatever you do, and nothing will be deformed or repulsive. With the most hideous conception mingle the idea of true religion, and it will become pure and holy. Nail God to the gibbet, and you have the cross.

12TH FEBRUARY, 1833.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DONNA LUCREZIA BORGIA
DON ALPHONSO D'ESTE
GENNARO
GUBETTA
MAFFIO ORSINI
JEPPO LIVERETTO
DON APOSTOLO GAZELLA
ASCANIO PETRUCCi
OLOFERNO VITELLOZZO
RUSTIGHELLO
ASTOLFO
THE PRINCESS NEGRONI
AN USHER
MONKS

Noblemen Pages Guards
Venice—Ferrara 15 . . .

ACT FIRST. INSULT UPON INSULT

FIRST PART

A terrace of the Barbarigo Palace at Venice. An evening party is in progress. Masks are crossing and recrossing the stage. At both sides of the terrace the palace is seen, brilliantly illuminated, and a flourish of trumpets is heard at intervals. The terrace is in shadow, and covered with plants and greenery. In the background, at the foot of the terrace, the Zuecca Canal is supposed to flow, and gondolas are constantly seen passing back and forth in the dim light, laden with masks and musicians. From each gondola, as it glides across the back of the stage, arise strains of music, sometimes graceful and lively, at other times sad and plaintive; they gradually die away in the distance. In the background lies Venice in the moonlight.

SCENE I

Young noblemen, magnificently dressed, holding their masks in their hands, are talking together on the terrace.

GUBETTA, GENNARO, in a captain’s uniform; DON APOSTOLO GAZELLA, MAFFIO ORSINI, ASCANIO PETRUCCI, OLOFERNO VITELLOZZO, JEPPO LIVERETTO.

OLOFERNO.

We live in days when ghastly deeds are done so commonly that men long since have ceased to speak of this; yet surely never aught befell more damnable and more mysterious.

ASCANIO.

A fiendish deed and done by fiendish men.

JEPPO.

I know the facts, my lords, I hold them from my cousin, the most eminent Cardinal Carriale—Cardinal Carriale, you know, who had the fierce dispute with Cardinal Riario, touching the war against Charles Eighth of France.

GENNARO (yawning).

Ah! Jeppo has one of his tedious tales to tell! For my part I'll not listen to it. I'm spent enough already without that.

MAFFIO.

Such matters have no interest for thee, Gennaro, nor is the reason far to seek. Thou art a gallant captain of adventure. The name thou bearest is imaginary. Thou knowest not thy father nor thy mother. None can doubt that thou art gently born who ever saw thee handle thy good sword; but all we know of thy nobility is that thou fightest like a very lion. Upon my soul, we are true comrades in arms, and what I say, I say not to offend thee. At Rimini thou didst save my life, and at Vicenza I saved thine. We swore a solemn oath always to bear each other aid in danger as in love, each to avenge the other when occasion called, and to know no other foes, I than thine and thou than mine. A soothsayer foretold that we should die the selfsame day, whereon we gave him ten gold sequins for his prophecy. We are not friends, but brothers. But thou hast the good fortune to be called simple Gennaro, thou hast no ties of kindred, and at thy heels do follow none of those fatalities, often hereditary, which cling to names that have a history. Happy thou art in that! What matters it to thee what happens now, or what has happened, so that there be

always men for war, and women for love? What hast thou to do with towns and families, —thou, child of the flag, who hast no family or town? But with us, Gennaro,'t is different, as thou seest. It is our right to feel an interest in the catastrophes of our time. In tragedies like this our fathers and our mothers have themselves had part, and almost all our families are bleeding still. Now, Jeppo, tell us what thou knowest.

GENNARO. (Throws himself into an arm-chair, and composes himself to sleep.)

Wake me, I pray you, when Jeppo's done.

JEPPO.

Well,'t was thus. In fourteen hundred eighty . . .

GUBETTA (in a corner of the stage).

Ninety-seven.

JEPPO.

E’en so. In fourteen ninety-seven. Upon a certain night betwixt a Wednesday and a Thursday . . .

GUBETTA.

No, no! betwixt a Tuesday and a Wednesday.

JEPPO.

As you will. Upon that night a Tiber boatman, sleeping aboard his craft, moored to the bank, the better to keep watch upon his freight, saw something terrible. 'T was just below the church of Santo Hieronimo. The time was some five hours after midnight. The boatman saw two men afoot come from the street which lies to the left of the church, peering on this side and on that, as if in dread; after them appeared two others, and then three—seven in all. One only of the seven was on horseback. The darkness was intense. 'Mongst all the houses looking on the Tiber, only a single window showed a light. The seven men drew near the river bank. He who was mounted turned his horse’s croup toward the Tiber, and then the boatman could distinctly see a pair of legs hanging upon one side, and on the other side a head and arms—in short a lifeless body of a man. While

their companions stood on guard at the street corners, two of those on foot took down the body, swung it twice or thrice with vigor to and fro, then cast it far away into the river. Scarce had the body touched the water when the horseman asked some question of the others, to which they both made answer: “Yes, my lord.” With that, the horseman turned toward the Tiber, and spied a something black floating upon the water. He asked them what it was. “My lord,” they answered him, “’t is my lord’s cloak who's dead." And one among the number pelted the cloak with stones until it sank from sight. This done they all decamped in company, and took the street which leads to San Giacomo. This did the boatman see.

MAFFIO.

A grewsome sight, indeed. Was he a man of mark, whom these men thus did cast into the stream 1’ That horse makes my flesh creep: the murderer in the saddle, and his victim riding on behind.

GUBETTA.

Upon that horse there were two brothers.

JEPPO.

You have said it, Signor di Belverana. The corpse was Giovanni Borgia; the horseman Caesar Borgia.

MAFFIO.

A veritable family of demons are these Borgias! But tell us, Jeppo, why did the brother slay his brother thus?

JEPPO.

I will not tell you. The motive for the murder was so execrable that it should be a deadly sin merely to speak of it.

GUBETTA.

I will tell you why. Caesar, Cardinal of Valentia, slew Giovanni, Duke of Gandia, because both brothers were enamored of the same woman.

MAFFIO.

And this woman was . . .?

GUBETTA (still in the background).

Their sister.

JEPPO.

Enough, Signor di Belverana. Do not, I pray you, utter before us the name of that most monstrous woman. There's not one of our families she has not wounded to the very quick.

MAFFIO.

And was there not a child involved in the affair?

JEPPO.

Yes, a child whose father only do I care to name: 't was Giovanni Borgia.

MAFFIO.

That child should be a man ere now.

OLOFERNO.

He disappeared.

JEPPO.

Did Caesar succeed in abducting him from his mother? Did the mother succeed in removing him from Caesar’s ken? That none can say.

DON APOSTOLO.

If 't was the mother who concealed her son, she took the wisest course. Since Caesar Borgia, Cardinal of Valentia, became Duke of Valentinois, he has put to death, as you all know, without counting his brother Giovanni, his two nephews, sons of Guifry Borgia, Prince of Squillace, and of his cousin, Cardinal Francesco Borgia. The man has a downright mania for killing all his kindred.

JEPPO.

Per Bacco! he intends to be the only Borgia, and so inherit all the pope’s estate.

ASCANIO.

Did not this sister, Jeppo, whom you will not name, make at this time a pilgrimage in secret to the monastery of Saint

Sixtus, and seek seclusion there, for reasons known to no one but herself?

JEPPO.

I think she did. Her purpose was to bring about a separation from her second husband, Giovanni Sforza.

MAFFIO.

What is the boatman’s name who saw all this?

JEPPO.

I know it not.

GUBETTA.

His name is Giorgio Schiavone, and his trade to carry wood up Tiber to Ripetta.

MAFFIO (aside to Ascanio).

This Spaniard seems to know much more about our business than we Romans do.

ASCANIO (aside).

I have the same distrust that thou hast of this Signor di Belverana. But let us go no deeper into this. There may be danger lurking underneath.

JEPPO.

Ah! my friends, my friends! what times are these we live in! Tell me, do you know one single human being who is sure of living more than one to-morrow in this poor Italy of ours, so racked and rent by wars and plagues and Borgias?

DON APOSTOLO.

Methinks, my lords, that all of us here present are named as members of the embassy, forthwith to be dispatched by the Serene Republic to Ferrara, with her felicitations to the duke upon the conquest of Rimini from the Malatesta. When do we set out upon our mission?

OLOFERNO.

Two days hence, if all goes well. The two ambassadors, you know, have been selected— Senator Tiopolo and General Grimani.

DON APOSTOLO.

Will Captain Gennaro be one of us?

MAFFIO.

Doubt it not! Gennaro and I never part.

ASCANIO.

Gentlemen, there is a momentous fact to which I desire to call your attention: they are drinking all the good Spanish wine without US.

MAFFIO.

Let us go in.—Ho! Gennaro!

(To Jeppo)

Why, verily he fell asleep during your story, Jeppo

JEPPO.

Let him sleep.

(Exit all, except Gubetta.)

SCENE II

GUBETTA, then DONNA LUCREZIA. GENNARO, asleep.

GUBETTA (alone).

Indeed I do know more of their affairs than they: they told each other so in undertones. I know much more than they, but Donna Lucrezia knows much more than I, Signor di Valentinois knows much more than Donna Lucrezia, the devil knows much more than Signor di Valentinois, and Pope Alexander Sixth knows vastly more than the devil.

(Looking at Gennaro.)

How these young people sleep!

(Donna Lucrezia enters, masked. She perceives Gennaro asleep, and stands gazing at him in a sort of ecstasy, mingled with respect.)

DONNA LUCREZIA (aside).

He sleeps.—Doubtless this féte has wearied him.—How beautiful he is!