LOVE IS BLIND

A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS



RIHAAN SODHANI

LOVE IS BLIND

BIRCH
BOOKS

First published by Birch Books 2025

Copyrights - Insert Actual Author Name

All rights reserved

ISBN: 9788168757-00

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Printed and Bound by Repro India Ltd.


birch.books

www.birchbooks.in

Contents

ACT 1 7

ACT 2 22

ACT 3 41

ACT 4 69

LOVE IS BLIND



A Comedy in Four Acts

Rihaan Sodhani

BIRCH
BOOKS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

—*—

Virgilio, The Prince

Inganno, The Prince's former tutor

Benedetta, A peasant woman

Celsus, The King

Inpius, The royal priest

Lucrezia, A countess

Impostor, A common woman

Servant

Duke

Priest

Guards

Noblewomen

Noblemen

Citizens

Musicians

Courtiers

ACT 1

Scene 1

A modestly decorated tavern.

Enter VIRGILIO, dressed humbly but wearing the royal signet ring, and INGANNO, dressed elaborately like a prince.

Inganno

Slouch more, Virgilio. You stand too proudly for a commoner.

Virgilio

And you are too theatrical to be Prince; you must act less. I have little faith in your scheme, Inganno.

Inganno

You must never doubt me, dear Prince! When you were a stripling, I taught you Latin and Philosophy. Yet, more than a tutor, I hope I am not too forward to call myself your friend.

Virgilio

Of course not.

Inganno

Then, like when you were a child, repeat what I have explained to you from your own memory.

Virgilio

My ageing father desires to see his bloodline thrive, and demands to see a woman within three days.

Inganno

Excellent, my pupil! Of course, we already have many candidates: hundreds of noblewomen would swat their fans, as if to kill a fly, at the thought of throwing themselves—and large sums of gold—at Prince Virgilio.

Virgilio

If they have not yet been stifled beneath a multitudinous sea of Dutch fabric, or suffocated in clouds of Arabian perfume. These are unacceptable choices for a wife. So we must find a woman stitched of finer thread, dressed in coarser thread, who will marry Virgilio, not the Prince.

Inganno

And thus our costumes.

Virgilio

But there was no need for you to dress as Prince, surely?

Inganno

You doubt me again! Someone must fulfil your duties whilst you are away!

Virgilio

I have no duties as Prince but to be born and wait for my father to die. Ah, marriage is folly! Wherefore must a beast be bound, chained, caged within the prison that he himself chose?

Inganno

Hurry now! But first, it is unwonted for a humble commoner to bear the royal signet ring. Please allow me to guard it as Prince.

Virgilio

Very well. Clasp it tightly; it alone proves that mighty royal line which my father seeks so strongly to preserve.

VIRGILIO gives the signet ring to INGANNO, who wears it.

Inganno

Do not worry, Virgilio. I will clasp it tightly indeed.

Exit INGANNO.

Enter a crowd of modestly dressed CITIZENS, including the IMPOSTOR.

Impostor

My dear friend, the King, just told me that yesterday! I wish I could take you to supper tomorrow; he'd love you all, I know!

The crowd laughs. VIRGILIO sighs.

Enter BENEDETTA, looking sad.

Virgilio

Who is that woman, shining brighter than all the rest?

He approaches her.

Benedetta

Good morning, stranger. Why come to this unhappy woman?

Virgilio

I am Inganno. Our paths have never crossed before, have they? May I sit?

BENEDETTA

I doubt that we have. A man does not approach a woman at a tavern because he recognises an old friend, I know.

VIRGILIO

I shall stand then, but let me suffer beside you.

What worries possess you that your melodic song is reduced to a whisper?

BENEDETTA

It is our kingdom's Poverty Tax. If we earn beneath twenty silver coins twelve are stolen; if we earn beneath twelve, this is increased to fourteen.

VIRGILIO

Of course, how else may the poor be driven to escape their plight?

BENEDETTA

Absurd! Sit so we may discuss further.

VIRGILIO

I now have earned a seat beside your throne;

Let me remain in rapture at your side,

Till dawn grows pale and yields itself to night.

BENEDETTA

Your poetry is preposterous. Follow me out of here before this crowd smothers us.

Exit BENEDETTA and VIRGILIO.

Enter INPIUS, whose fingers are adorned with rings. He passes them as they exit, watching BENEDETTA.

INPIUS

What a din of impropriety! No place for a girl like that.

CITIZEN 1

Indeed! Why are you here then, noble priest?

INPIUS looks at him, annoyed.

INPIUS

What beauty and charm that she possesses! Alas, they shall soon fade; the Lord, in his wisdom, made life on this earth of the most ephemeral kind. It would be a great pity, then, that such a maiden would have the flower of her youth robbed by men most peccable.

CITIZEN 1

I would joyously play the part of this man!

CITIZEN 2

I would kiss her cheek each morning, and she would peck mine: I, being most peccable—

INPIUS

Silence, idiots! When all her worldly charm has at last departed, this girl will mourn it as her most intimate friend, for the friend with whom she was intimate has departed as well. It is my duty to the Lord to protect these maidens.

CITIZEN 1

How?

INPIUS

The law of monogamy prevents a maiden from marrying these philanderers, if she is already married. Men cannot steal from her what has already been lost. Therefore, I marry each woman myself.

CITIZEN 2

I admit that I have a short glass of wit, and even it is half-empty. But, don't you break the law yourself by marrying these maidens?

INPIUS

Blasphemy! I am a priest; I cannot sin! My intentions with these women are selfless. Virtuous women are besides themselves to submit to me. A swarm of locusts will engulf anyone who doubts my virtue! It is my duty to save this poor girl.

Exit all.

Scene 2

An extravagantly decorated chamber. It mirrors the tavern in design.

Enter INGANNO, dressed elaborately like a prince. He is followed by a crowd of NOBLEWOMEN, including LUCREZIA, who carry fans.

INGANNO

I beg you all, my dears, to calm down—there is but one Prince, and how many of you...

He attempts to count them.

Well, many!

LUCREZIA

Oh, dear Virgilio, bestow upon me but a night of your life!

She raises her glass. NOBLEWOMAN 1 knocks it out of her hand.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

Lucrezia is merely a Countess, my dear Prince. I, as a Duchess, am higher-born.

LUCREZIA

You are the higher-married.

NOBLEWOMAN 2

Give me your hand dear Prince, and you will find that I am worth my weight in gold.

LUCREZIA

That will take more gold than can fill the royal treasury. You are a woman of unrivaled weight and consequence indeed.

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Oh, but it is your age that is unrivalled. My dear Countess, would you allow me to court our Prince first?

LUCREZIA

My dear Lady, I would not dream of stopping you.

NOBLEWOMAN 3 attempts to approach the Prince but is stopped by LUCREZIA.

INGANNO

Do not argue, my dears! Love is a bee that flutters from flower to flower. It doesn't seek the most beautiful or the fairest, only the nearest one. Love is fickle, but so are we: while its sweet nectar passes transiently through our hearts, we must embrace it! Why should we caress the withering springtime flower, once night has fled, whilst love races to its next target? I will find love, pure and poetical, for each woman here.

The NOBLEWOMEN fan themselves faster and sigh. One pretends to faint.

LUCREZIA

How beautiful!

INGANNO

My dear Countess, let us meet tonight at your home!

LUCREZIA

Alas, heaven does not favour us today! I have a

rendez-vous already arranged.

INGANNO

Of course, I understand. Whom will you meet?

LUCREZIA

Another lover, my dear.

INGANNO

(Shocked.) How about tomorrow?

LUCREZIA

Oh, it is a great pity! We cannot.

INGANNO

(Irritated.) Who is it this time?

LUCREZIA

My husband, of course. Let our love blossom in three nights, at your palace.

Exit all except INGANNO.

INGANNO

Virgilio has not yet returned. My scheme is unfolding perfectly, and the Prince was a fool to follow! It offends the educated eye to see such a fool inherit a throne he did not earn. Power belongs to those intelligent enough to wield it! And whose mind

shines brightest in the kingdom?

He pauses as if waiting for a response.

Of course, mine. I, who spent ten years studying Latin and philosophy and all human knowledge, for no purpose but to teach it to someone else; to watch that idiot inherit all I rightly deserve! Virgilio is too proud to return without a woman, and no one will fall for a man dressed as unpleasantly as he is. When the heavens—or, more likely, the fires of hell—toll for King Celsus, I can seize power! I am entirely confident that the Prince will never return; it would be more natural for the sun itself to fail to rise—

Enter VIRGILIO.

VIRGILIO

I have returned!

INGANNO

(Disappointed.) I see.

VIRGILIO

Allow me to praise your illustrious mind, Inganno! Your plan was successful.

INGANNO

(With veiled irritation.) I expected nothing else. But can you forsake that Virgilio who, just one day ago, saw marriage as a prison?

VIRGILIO

The hours between then and now have wizened me, you see. That youth Virgilio, a day ago, was a carefree bachelor. But wisdom has now blossomed: freedom and liberty are empty words! I seek the comfort of a wedding ring.

INGANNO

Where is the girl?

VIRGILIO

She was due to meet the tax collector, but she will find us here now.

INGANNO

Tell me about this delightful dame.

VIRGILIO

When her mouth opens, your ears are graced by music that compels you to dance along.

INGANNO

Anything else?

VIRGILIO

Her eyes are like an endless sea, tempestuous yet serene.

INGANNO

I beg for something more concrete.

VIRGILIO

Other than her hair?

INGANNO

If you would be willing to oblige.

VIRGILIO

Very well. Her name is Benedetta. She is a peasant from-

INGANNO

(Triumphant.) Ah! Why subject this poor rustic to the tedious life of luxury? Moreover, you cannot marry: King Celsus is reverent to our feudal caste system.

VIRGILIO

Here we shall test my intelligence: I shall dress her as a countess.

INGANNO

(Aside.) The Prince's intelligence has been unemployed since his birth. My plan will still succeed. The king will not hesitate to forsake Virgilio once I reveal the truth.

Enter BENEDETTA.

BENEDETTA

A nobleman!

INGANNO shows off the royal signet ring.

INGANNO

Not any, my dear, but Prince Virgilio himself.

BENEDETTA

I am honoured!

INGANNO

My bosom friend invites you, in fact, to dinner with my father, King Celsus himself, in three days.

BENEDETTA

(To VIRGILIO.) I wouldn't have guessed, from your clothing, that you mingled with the King.

INGANNO

He is my dearest friend. He dresses humbly as it is in his nature to be humble; he spends gold only on what is required to survive, the rest goes to the poor.

BENEDETTA

I will be at dinner.

VIRGILIO

We must, however, participate in a farce before the King. He is, you see, a great lover of humour. Prince Virgilio must dress as a commoner, whilst I pretend to be the Prince. For his benefit, you must play the role

of Countess.

BENEDETTA

But surely King Celsus will be able to see through our costumes?

INGANNO

No, for the King is blind in his right eye.

BENEDETTA

The upper crust of our society is odd indeed. But I will do it.

VIRGILIO

Let us hope that the next three days shall be thrice the part of heaven that this one has been!

Exit all.

ACT 2

Scene 1

The Prince's living room. A dress and jewels lie on a table at the centre of the room. To the right is the entrance to the living room. To the left is the door to the Prince's bedroom.

Enter INGANNO and VIRGILIO from the right, both dressed elaborately like a Prince.

VIRGILIO

I see one more Prince than is necessary.

INGANNO

On this, we are in agreement. Fear not, I am going to change.

(Aside.) Alas, attire, we must part now. You are made for me, like the moon is fashioned for night, and power is fashioned for liars.

VIRGILIO

First, where is my signet ring?

INGANNO

Oh! I have sent it to be polished.

VIRGILIO

Three days ago, it gleamed like a star, fallen from the firmament to the earth. It did not need polishing.

INGANNO

Of course, it will not need polishing once it is back from the polisher.

VIRGILIO

I have learnt not to question you. I will return soon with Benedetta. Let the masquerade continue!

Exit VIRGILIO to the right.

INGANNO

I am afraid that Virgilio's plan might succeed.

He approaches the table.

Benedetta's dress!

He disposes of the dress and jewels and laughs.

Let the masquerade continue, dear Prince!

Enter LUCREZIA, from the right. She embraces INGANNO from behind, startling him.

LUCREZIA

There you are, Prince Virgilio! Three long days have passed, my dear. Let us satisfy our burning desires tonight.

INGANNO

Alas, I must join the King for dinner.

LUCREZIA

Yet surely you can spare me some of your valuable time, my Prince.

She kisses INGANNO on the cheek.

INGANNO

(Aside.) Resistance is futile!

INGANNO

Of course, charming Countess: a moment with you is worth a thousand elsewhere.

Enter INPIUS.

INGANNO

(Worried.) Good evening, Inpius.

INPIUS

I am lost, my child. Our wise King wants me at dinner. Though I doubt you know the Prince's

chambers much better than I do, can you help me find the dining room?

INGANNO

Why, it is in these very chambers that I grew up. You must turn right here, then go past the statue of King Celsus, then turn right again, and again, and again—until you see the dining room. If you find the statue again, you have gone too far.

INPIUS

Thank you, I suppose. I could not help but notice this beautiful woman here, I trust that both of you are bound by the holy oath of marriage?

There is a moment of silence.

LUCREZIA

Well, I am.

INPIUS

Of course, my children. I will plague you no further then.

Exit INPIUS to the right.

INGANNO

Time, our greatest foe, races ahead!

Exit all to the left. Once offstage, LUCREZIA throws her dress and jewels onto the stage whilst laughing.

Enter VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA from the right.

VIRGILIO

I have arranged for your apparel and ornaments. You must don, along with the jewels, the identity of Countess. Do not be like the foolish actors of today, whom we see on stages like this one, who strut and fret their hour upon the stage, and then are heard no more. Costumes alone do not make a successful play—

BENEDETTA

Nor do long speeches.

VIRGILIO

Just remember that you are a Countess.

Exit VIRGILIO.

BENEDETTA approaches the table.

BENEDETTA

How curious.

She notices LUCREZIA's dress and jewels and picks them up.

Ah! Here they are.

Enter INPIUS, from the right.

INPIUS

Good evening, my dear. I need to find the royal dining room. There was a man here, but he could not help me.

BENEDETTA

I don't recognise you, I'm afraid.

INPIUS

Ah, but I do you. I am the King's Priest. The Lord leads me to his sons and daughters in need... And I sense that you are in need, my child. Do you fear, sometimes, like you are a man's most recent conquest? That your youth and beauty will fade whilst you love someone who does not truly care for you?

BENEDETTA

I beg your pardon, Father: I must prepare for dinner with the King.

INPIUS

Of course, I shall wait here. Is that dress woven of two kinds of fabric? That is sinful, I must warn.

BENEDETTA

I must beg you to leave so that I may change.

INPIUS

Fear not; I shall wait here whilst you do.

BENEDETTA

It is Sunday, isn't it? Is there a sermon for you to deliver?

INPIUS

Not today.

BENEDETTA

Perhaps a confession for the Lord to forgive?

INPIUS

I *confess* that I cannot, in good conscience, leave you unattended.

BENEDETTA

Your dedication is admirable, but I must demand that you leave now.

INPIUS

(Reluctant.) Very well. But do not tarry long—I shall await you at dinner.

Exit INPIUS, to the right.

BENEDETTA

What an odd man.

Exit BENEDETTA, carrying the dress, to the right.

INGANNO

(Within.) I heard voices; you cannot come out, my dear, clad scandalously, as you are. Wear this and we will find your dress outside.

Enter INGANNO and LUCREZIA from the left. LUCREZIA is dressed in men's clothing.

It was all I had.

Enter CELSUS from the right.

INGANNO kneels.

INGANNO

Puissant King Celsus!

CELSUS

Your King is here to seek Prince Virgilio.

INGANNO

(Nervous.) He is here!

CELSUS

Where?

INGANNO

Here, before you.

CELSUS

Is he hiding behind the blinds?

INGANNO

(To LUCREZIA.) He says that he is blind, that he did not see me.

CELSUS

Who is this?

INGANNO

It is the newest servant.

LUCREZIA

(Overly masculine.) Indeed, I am, man.

CELSUS

So this is a man?

INGANNO

Why, is he not?

CELSUS

He is: I see upon him marks of a beard.

LUCREZIA gasps.

Servant! Send word to Prince Virgilio that the King awaits him.

LUCREZIA

(Confused, she speaks to INGANNO.) Virgilio, the King seeks your presence!

CELSUS

Fool!

Enter INPIUS.

INPIUS

I have sought you for long, my King. Your palace is a labyrinth.

He looks at LUCREZIA.

Who is this?

INGANNO

It is the new servant.

INPIUS

I am charmed to meet you.

(Aside, he speaks uncomfortably.) What a handsome servant... capable, I mean! If only he were a woman... Of course, he is not. I must pray on this matter in private, and at length!

Let us depart now for dinner.

(To LUCREZIA.) And you are welcome to

join, fair one.

LUCREZIA

(Pleased.) I am flattered.

Exit CELSUS and INPIUS.

LUCREZIA looks for her dress and jewels but cannot find them.

LUCREZIA

My dress and jewels, gone!

INGANNO

Impossible!

LUCREZIA

What sort of Prince is this, who seduces a lady and steals her diamonds!

INGANNO

Consider the matter logically: why would a Prince—

LUCREZIA slaps him.

LUCREZIA

Wicked Prince, you have not known fury before today!

INGANNO

My dear Countess, allow me to explain—

LUCREZIA

These are dark times that have brought thieves to inherit the throne. Has the royal blood become so diluted? The King has bred with too many cousins and thus produced you. Besides rubies, you have stolen a woman's honour and dignity. Allow me, then, to return your kindness.

Exit INGANNO, slowly slipping out whilst LUCREZIA speaks.

I will find you, Prince Virgilio!

Exit all.

Scene 2

The royal dining room.

Enter INGANNO, dressed humbly, BENEDETTA, wearing Lucrezia's dress and jewels, VIRGILIO, dressed elaborately like a prince, INPIUS, and CELSUS.

INGANNO

(Aside.) I am Inganno, pretending to be Virgilio, pretending to be Inganno.

(He laughs.) To impersonate ourselves is the most

demanding role there is.

BENEDETTA

(To VIRGILIO.) We must sit to the King's right since he is blind in his right eye?

VIRGILIO

If that is what you recall Prince Virgilio saying.

BENEDETTA waves her hand around CELSUS's right eye. He is confused.

Remember to address me as Prince Virgilio and the Prince as Inganno.

Everybody sits.

Enter a SERVANT with platters, which he lays on the table, and a jug of wine.

CELSUS

Where, my son, is your signet ring?

VIRGILIO

It is with the polisher.

CELSUS

Why?

VIRGILIO

To be polished.

CELSUS

With whom exactly is it?

VIRGILIO

The polisher.

CELSUS

Yes, but which one?

VIRGILIO

The one who polishes.

CELSUS

(Sighing.) You were not a great teacher, Inganno.

INPIUS

The peasant is a most tempting dish.

BENEDETTA takes a large sip from her glass.

BENEDETTA

(To VIRGILIO.) Is he talking about me?

VIRGILIO

(To BENEDETTA.) Of course not!

(To INPIUS.) You refer to the pheasant?

INPIUS

(Chuckling.) Indeed, Prince Virgilio.

BENEDETTA empties her glass and signals to the SERVANT, who refills it.

Exit the SERVANT, drinking from the jug.

BENEDETTA

(Laughing.) I feel I could go on drinking forever! The King is blind to our side, you said?

She makes several faces at CELSUS.

CELSUS

What nonsense is this?

VIRGILIO

I apologise, father—

BENEDETTA

(Affected.) It was some meat stuck betwixt my teeth. I entreat thee humbly for forgiveness.

CELSUS

It is on my part to apologise, Countess.

INGANNO

Dear Countess, pray tell us about your lineage. Leave nothing out, I beg.

BENEDETTA empties her glass and throws it aside.

BENEDETTA

(Affected.) This is a long tale indeed, Inganno—I mean Prince Virgilio—I mean Inganno. It was in France that my father, the illustrious Marquis de Je ne sais quoi decided to marry a servant. He was, of course, married at the time to a high-born countess: the French do not enjoy, you see, the Law of Monogamy.

INGANNO

Absurd! They do—

BENEDETTA

(With a heavy French accent.) Silence! Have you been raised, as I have, in la France Profonde?

I am attributed, however, to the noble wife. When the French noblemen came to learn of this, the Marquis was forced to flee to this kingdom. It was not the second wife that was the problem, of course, but her lower station.

INGANNO

(Aside.) She spins tales faster than a politician!

LUCREZIA

(Within.) How many rooms must I search in this damned palace?

Enter LUCREZIA, still dressed in men's clothing.

LUCREZIA

There you are! You cannot escape me, thief!

She looks to and fro between VIRGILIO and INGANNO. Then, she looks at BENEDETTA.

My jewels!

CELSUS

Isn't this the new manservant? Guards!

LUCREZIA attacks BENEDETTA and attempts to take her jewels. She chases her around the room.

Enter some GUARDS. They join the chase, following LUCREZIA.

Exit BENEDETTA, LUCREZIA, and the GUARDS.

Enter BENEDETTA, looking tired.

BENEDETTA

Ah, I have forgotten to mention my sister—or was it brother—who accompanied us as we left France. She was the child of the second wife, the servant.

CELSUS

Let us retire for tonight! Thank you, Countess, for an unforgettable evening.

INGANNO

(Aside.) My plan may have failed tonight, but each defeat shall only delay my inevitable triumph.

Exit all except CELSUS and INPIUS.

CELSUS

The Countess is clearly a woman of breeding.

INPIUS

(Chuckling.) I agree with you entirely.

CELSUS

Virgilio is wanting in the intelligence a King must have; he needs a wise woman to conduct him. I pray you agree that their marriage should proceed immediately?

INPIUS

Of course. I ask for only one thing: let me officiate the holy ceremonies myself.

CELSUS

Your wish is granted. Let us hope for an unforgettable ceremony.

INPIUS

(Aside, he laughs.) This marriage will be unforgettable indeed!

Exit all.

Enter the SERVANT with the jug of wine, which he empties and tosses aside.

SERVANT

Curse these royal fools! Princes, priests, politicians dress in velvet robes and wear masks of infallibility, but they cannot hide the rot within. Lecherous, cowardly, rotten eggs! I can smell it in the air! The stench of political upheaval is everywhere!

Enter the GUARDS, who chase the SERVANT.

Exit all.

ACT 3

Scene 1

A street during a foggy night.

Enter INGANNO, dressed elaborately like a prince, a crowd of NOBLEWOMEN, and the DUKE, who hides.

INGANNO

(Aside.) It is rapture to be Prince once more.

My dears, your Prince has returned at last!

He shows off the signet ring. The NOBLEWOMEN are mesmerised by it.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

My Prince, these nights without you have been hell!

DUKE

(Aside.) That's my wife!

NOBLEWOMAN 1

I lay awake thinking of you, whilst my husband slept

beside me, after a short and unenthusiastic campaign.

The DUKE gasps, and the NOBLEWOMEN laugh.

NOBLEWOMAN 2

(Looking in the direction of the DUKE.) Is someone there?

DUKE

(Aside.) I must leave, but Prince Virgilio will pay for what he has done!

Exit DUKE.

INGANNO

(Gravely.) I love you all, but alas I cannot laugh and be merry beside you. You all know that I love my father, King Celsus. I love our kingdom too. It is a great tragedy, when a man finds in his heart things that cannot coexist; my heart is thus at war with itself right now. It has become clear that King Celsus will ruin our kingdom!

The NOBLEWOMEN gasp.

I love you all; if only he saw in you what I do! He intends to abolish the poverty tax and instead fill his treasury with gold looted from your hard hands!

The NOBLEWOMEN gasp again.

I do not blame him; King Celsus was made that

way. He did not choose to be a tyrant! He did not choose to be born to my grandfather. He did not choose, one morning, this precipitous decline in his wit! He was determined by nature, so our true quarrel is with God. But since God cannot explain himself, we must instead overthrow our King.

The NOBLEWOMEN nod and murmur in agreement.

We shall overthrow our King, not because I love Celsus less, but because I love our kingdom more. He is but one whilst we are...

He attempts to count them.

Well, many!

NOBLEWOMAN 3

We will follow you forever!

INGANNO

I must go now, my dears. I will give word to you when we are to rise!

NOBLEWOMAN 4

But do not forget once you are King, my dear Virgilio, that there must be a Queen!

Exit INGANNO.

Enter LUCREZIA, dressed elegantly. The NOBLEWOMEN chatter excitedly.

LUCREZIA

Ladies, what enlivens us tonight?

NOBLEWOMAN 1

Prince Virgilio, with our support, plans to topple King Celsus!

NOBLEWOMAN 2

And once the deed is done, one of us will be Queen!

LUCREZIA

The Prince lies to you all! He has already chosen a Queen: a common thief! They robbed and humiliated me two nights ago. Why should this man inherit the throne? Is wisdom carried in the blood like some hereditary disease? It is foolish to let a single family rule the kingdom forever.

The NOBLEWOMEN murmur in agreement.

The people must choose their own ruler.

NOBLEWOMAN 3

But how?

LUCREZIA

Through election.

NOBLEWOMAN 4

Who votes?

NOBLEWOMAN 1

Everyone, of course.

There is a brief silence.

NOBLEWOMAN 2

Even servants?

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Surely not?

LUCREZIA

No, of course not.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

Farmers?

NOBLEWOMAN 2

How can they? They can hardly read and write their own names, much less those of candidates.

LUCREZIA

Perhaps we could teach them to read.

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Then they would stop farming.

LUCREZIA

Then the peasants will not vote either.

NOBLEWOMAN 4

What about working men?

NOBLEWOMAN 1

The men cannot stop their work to vote, of course.

NOBLEWOMAN 2

And their poor housewives?

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Households cannot go unattended.

LUCREZIA

It is settled then: only those with the means, education, intelligence, and leisure to vote shall do so. We will have democracy!

NOBLEWOMAN 4

What shall we do now? The Prince plans to overthrow King Celsus with us.

LUCREZIA

For now, we shall follow him. Once he has led us to the King, we topple both of them.

NOBLEWOMEN

Enfranchisement! Democracy!

Exit all.

Enter VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA, both dressed humbly.

BENEDETTA

The night is cold and dark, and the moon gives little comfort. We should go inside.

VIRGILIO

I need no moonlight but to look on you,

And when I do, I feel my heart renew.

You herald spring and rout the winter's forces;

You melt the snow and bid the flowers bloom.

From this, my dawn, until my setting sun,

My heart shall beat for you and you alone.

BENEDETTA

(Laughing.) You could spare the moon and stars their trouble by coming to your point directly.

VIRGILIO

(Kneeling, he offers BENEDETTA a ring.) Will you marry me?

BENEDETTA

If you will enthral me no longer with poetry and figurative language, I will consider it.

VIRGILIO

Yes, then?

BENEDETTA

Yes.

VIRGILIO

And you mean nothing else?

BENEDETTA

No.

VIRGILIO

And once again, yes?

BENEDETTA

Yes!

VIRGILIO

Your love transforms me from a humble commoner to the Prince himself!

BENEDETTA

So quickly do men betray their vows! You said you wouldn't speak figuratively.

VIRGILIO

I speak literally, my dear! I am Prince Virgilio.

BENEDETTA

(Gasps.) I loved the commoner and I will love the Prince.

VIRGILIO

Will you marry the Prince?

BENEDETTA

Yes.

VIRGILIO

Then Sunday morning shall be the happiest hour of my life. I must leave now, but we must not be parted for long: I will find you at your home!

Exit VIRGILIO.

Enter INGANNO, dressed humbly. He notices BENEDETTA and attempts to leave, but she stops him.

INGANNO

I am sorry that you must see your Prince in this state. I can explain—

BENEDETTA

There is no need. Virgilio has explained this masquerade. We shall marry this Sunday.

INGANNO

(Seething.) How wonderful, to see love blossom before my eyes!

Enter the DUKE and a crowd of NOBLEMEN.

Look! At this hour, these men can mean no good.

BENEDETTA and INGANNO hide aside and watch.

DUKE

I have gathered you here to deliver ill tidings.

NOBLEMAN 1

What is it?

DUKE

Gentlemen, steel yourselves. Prince Virgilio has crossed our borders, breached our bulwarks, and planted his banner into the most sacred provinces of our estates.

NOBLEMAN 2

Speak plainly!

DUKE

The depraved Prince has seduced our wives!

The NOBLEMEN erupt in outrage.

NOBLEMEN

The scoundrel! The marauder! The plunderer!

NOBLEMAN 3

I knew it! She smiled at supper yesterday!

DUKE

There! The first cannon-shot!

NOBLEMAN 4

My wife hummed in the garden!

DUKE

Smoke upon the horizon!

NOBLEMAN 1

She complimented my coat!

DUKE

(*Gravely.)* Men, the city has fallen.

NOBLEMAN 2

I demand vengeance!

DUKE

We shall have it!

NOBLEMAN 3

Shall we confront our wives?

There is a brief silence.

NOBLEMAN 4

Let us not act rashly.

NOBLEMAN 1

My wife grows loud when startled.

DUKE

We are men of honour. Battles are not fought with words; they are fought with steel! We shall follow our wives, and once they meet Prince Virgilio, we'll exact our revenge on him.

NOBLEMEN

My blood is roused! My honour burns! The Prince will die!

NOBLEMAN 3

My knees ache slightly, but I am with you.

DUKE AND NOBLEMEN

We shall protect our honour! Death to Prince Virgilio!

Exit the DUKE and the NOBLEMEN.

BENEDETTA

What horror! Is this my beloved Virgilio?

INGANNO

My dear Benedetta, do not condemn the Prince on one report. A lie speaks loudly and is believed at once, while truth must beg to be heard. Come, I know where answers may be found.

(Aside.) I have seen a perfect witness walking these streets.

Exit all to the left.

Enter LUCREZIA from the right.

LUCREZIA

After Prince Virgilio's treachery, I had given up hope on men. But I have found a more virtuous lover. I shall meet him tonight, if I can find him.

Enter INGANNO and BENEDETTA from the right. LUCREZIA does not turn around to them.

INGANNO

(To BENEDETTA.) That is Countess Lucrezia.

LUCREZIA

There you are! I have endured the cold night to meet you again, my love!

INGANNO

My dear, am I forgiven?

INGANNO embraces LUCREZIA from behind. She slaps him.

LUCREZIA

Who dares touch a Countess?

INGANNO

Can you expect any better from a man? It is in my nature for hands to follow where thought wanders. The blame is on God's craftsmanship.

LUCREZIA

Indeed, these are dark times: gallantry is dead!

INGANNO

Why do you say so?

LUCREZIA

Ah, it is a woeful tale... The Prince himself, Virgilio...

She spits.

He arranged to meet me two nights ago. Once I was undressed, he robbed me and bestowed my jewels upon some other wench!

INGANNO

Thank you, fair Countess.

LUCREZIA

I have found a more honourable lover, whom I have arranged to meet tonight. Have you seen a man passing by this way?

BENEDETTA

Yes, there were many.

(Pointing offstage.) They went that way!

Exit LUCREZIA in that direction.

BENEDETTA

(Despondent.) God, you have condemned me. Virgilio dined with me and seduced this Countess on the same night! I am marrying him this week. What can I do?

INGANNO

You are wise, Benedetta. I trust that you already know what to do.

Exit INGANNO.

BENEDETTA

(Sorrowful.) What are men? They dress in kindness and tender words, concealing a restless appetite beneath. Virgilio, you are two men to me: the commoner who spoke of love, honour, and

faithfulness, and the Prince who made a fool of me. Can I love the commoner but hate the Prince?

(Pacing.) I should leave. I will find joy in my virtue. A woman who stays knowing what I know is a fool. That is the right thing. Yet, to my greatest irritation, my heart will not respond to reason; it hungers for his sweetness, even though he betrayed it. Can I blind my eyes and drink this bitter poison for a few drops more?

(Weeping, she looks up.) If God can hear me now, send me some light to clear the fog.

Some of the fog clears and moonlight shines through.

Enter INPIUS.

INPIUS

My child, the Lord has answered your prayer.

BENEDETTA

I have met you before, haven't I?

INPIUS

I have been observing you for some time. I sensed you needed my protection. I tried to warn you before... to shield you from the pain you feel today.

BENEDETTA

I don't know whom to trust.

INPIUS

(Kindly.) Yes, my child, you have trusted too easily. The world has been cruel to you, but your pain has had a purpose, for it has led you to this moment. I can shield you from the storm.

BENEDETTA

What about Virgilio?

INPIUS

God sometimes wounds the heart only to steer it from a worse embrace. Do not waste anger on the Prince; we do not hate the wolf that preys on sheep, for it is in the wolf's nature. Let me be the shepherd that guides his lamb to safety.

BENEDETTA

(Aside.) It is so tempting to be free from the choice...

INPIUS

(Aside.) She trembles at the threshold of salvation...

BENEDETTA

No, I cannot! Not yet. I must confront Virgilio myself.

INPIUS

As you wish, my child. The Lord's door is always open.

Exit INPIUS.

BENEDETTA

(Resolute.) When Virgilio returns to meet me, I shall tell him that there will be no wedding. Then I will leave, and I will be fine.

Scene 2

A room in BENEDETTA's house. A table stands centre, covered with bouquets. To the left is the entrance and to the right is another room.

Enter BENEDETTA from the left. She angrily picks up all the flowers and prepares to throw them offstage to the right. Hesitating, she returns them to the table and observes them for a moment. Finally, she picks up half of them and throws them offstage to the right. She begins to rehearse what she will say to the Prince.

BENEDETTA

Sir, you are false, vain, faithless—no, let him speak first.

A knock is heard.

Enter!

Enter VIRGILIO, dressed elaborately like a Prince, from the left. He carries a sheathed sword.

Sir—

VIRGILIO

Before your love, I was an unlit candle,

But now I burn with sudden, living flames,

Every heartbeat richer than the last one.

Before your love, my world was filled with noise,

But your voice has filled it now with music.

I cannot bear a moment more without you!

BENEDETTA

(Coldly.) Then you must learn to do so. We cannot marry.

VIRGILIO

Is it the language?

BENEDETTA

It is the deceit.

VIRGILIO

I swore, I grant, to speak in short sentences. Give me one last chance!

BENEDETTA

Who is it, now, to whom I speak? The man I loved or that libertine?

VIRGILIO

What?

BENEDETTA

Do not insult me further. I know of the Countess.

VIRGILIO

Which Countess?

BENEDETTA

How many have you seduced?

VIRGILIO

None! I meant that there are several Countesses in the kingdom.

BENEDETTA

And you seduced several of them.

VIRGILIO

(Flustered.) When?

BENEDETTA

You courted Countess Lucrezia the very night you presented me to the King!

There is a brief pause.

VIRGILIO

Perhaps I divided myself to be with you and the Countess simultaneously.

He pauses.

(Gravely.) There were two Princes that evening. Myself and Inganno. He did not change until right before dinner.

BENEDETTA

(Coldly.) That is convenient for you.

VIRGILIO

I admit that you have no reason to believe that one Prince courted the Countess and not the other, but you must concede that it is possible that I was not unfaithful.

BENEDETTA

Yes, I admit the possibility.

VIRGILIO

If you think me vain, call me vain! If foolish, call me foolish! But am I cruel enough to mock the woman I love by courting another in the same hour?

BENEDETTA

I would have answered no without wavering to the man I met in the tavern last week. But I have seen that things are seldom what they seem.

VIRGILIO

I assure you that I am a plain, simple man.

What I am, I wear upon my sleeve; there is nothing hidden beneath.

BENEDETTA

Is that so Prince?

VIRGILIO

On the other hand, what do we know about Inganno? He is a weasel, too crafty for his own good.

BENEDETTA

(Laughs.) He talks too smoothly.

VIRGILIO

(Joins BENEDETTA in laughing.) Tiresome to be around. Weighing the options, you must grant that the scale leans on his side. There is greater cause to believe that he is guilty than that I am. If I sought a high-born woman who wanted to marry the Prince, would I masquerade as a commoner to find you?

BENEDETTA

But it was Inganno who led me to the Countess!

VIRGILIO

No doubt he set us against each other to clear his own name.

BENEDETTA

He embraced her when he saw her! I see your

point, Virgilio.

VIRGILIO

(Angrily.) We waste time speaking: I must find him at once!

There is a knock on the door.

INGANNO

(Within.) It is Inganno!

VIRGILIO angrily draws his sword and rushes to the door. BENEDETTA pulls him back and gets him to sheath the sword.

BENEDETTA

Enter!

Enter INGANNO from the left.

INGANNO

I came to check on you, my dear Benedetta, but it seems I have arrived at a bad time. I shall return later.

He attempts to leave but is pulled in by BENEDETTA.

BENEDETTA

You have come at the perfect time, my dear Inganno.

VIRGILIO

Would you believe that some villain has been pretending to be Prince Virgilio and courting noblewomen?

INGANNO

(Nervous.) What villain would dare such a thing? It is impossible!

VIRGILIO

Yet it has occurred. We shall soon catch this impostor. Until then, wise tutor, we hope that you could help us determine what punishment best suits such a crime.

INGANNO

(Worried.) Severe rebuke ought to teach him his lesson.

BENEDETTA

How about flogging?

VIRGILIO

(Gestures around INGANNO's throat.) Perhaps hanging could work.

INGANNO tries to distance himself from VIRGILIO.

INGANNO

(Growing increasingly frightened.) This poor man

has erred once; must we be so harsh?

BENEDETTA

You defend this villain as if you are personally concerned.

INGANNO

A philosopher must consider all perspectives.

VIRGILIO

This man has dishonoured his Prince.

INGANNO

(Afraid.) No doubt for good reason.

VIRGILIO

(Angrily.) I'll kill you!

He draws his sword. INGANNO shrieks and scrambles to get away from him, hiding behind the table.

INGANNO

(Panicking.) I confess everything! Find it in your royal heart to spare your old tutor.

INGANNO flees to a wall. VIRGILIO follows and prepares to strike. INGANNO hastily gestures a cross.

Alas, I had so many virtues left unexplored!

VIRGILIO misses and his sword is stuck in the wall. As he pulls it out, INGANNO hides behind BENEDETTA.

VIRGILIO

Why should I spare you?

INGANNO

For the sake of our long friendship!

VIRGILIO

(Prepares to strike.) You were a second-rate tutor.

INGANNO

Wait! Were it not for me, you two would never have met!

BENEDETTA

He speaks some truth.

VIRGILIO

Very little.

BENEDETTA

The quality of mercy is not strained.

VIRGILIO

Then let us show mercy and forgive my old tutor. Rise, Inganno. You are pardoned.

INGANNO

(Relieved.) We all know, it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown—

VIRGILIO

Another word will test the limits of mercy.

INGANNO

(Seething.) Thank you, mighty Prince.

(Aside.) I will have my vengeance on their wedding day!

Exit INGANNO to the left.

BENEDETTA

I have wronged you.

VIRGILIO

Better to be wronged by you than adored by all the world besides. You judged me only by what was placed before your eyes, and any reasonable person should.

BENEDETTA

But the evidence was false.

VIRGILIO

Our wedding continues as planned then, I hope?

BENEDETTA

It does.

VIRGILIO

Then let us leave sorrow and ire to the past and celebrate, my love! We must prepare for the grand day to come.

Exit all.

ACT 4

Scene 1

A church antechamber. To the left is the entrance to the church. To the right are doors leading to the chapel.

Bells ring. Enter VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA, who is dressed elaborately like a Countess, from the left.

VIRGILIO

The day has arrived! My father does not know who you really are. If he learnt you were a humble peasant, the church bells would toll for your funeral.

Bells ring, startling them.

Yet once we are wed, no force can divide us.

BENEDETTA

Time is therefore of the essence.

VIRGILIO

Let heaven grant us speed!

Exit all to the right.

Bells ring. Enter INGANNO.

INGANNO

Prince Virgilio has humiliated me, but the last laugh shall be mine. The fool pardoned me and invited me to the ceremony: now he will see how far my gratitude extends. The mob of noblewomen has been given word that revolution begins today. Hell tolls for King Celsus!

Bells ring, startling him.

Though the ladies do not know it, their husbands have been following them since I met them five nights ago. Armed, the men will storm the church after their wives, seeking revenge upon the Prince, and overwhelm the King's guards. With Celsus and Virgilio toppled, I shall step forth as sovereign, endorsed by the aristocracy.

(Annoyed.) The women should have arrived by now.

There is a brief silence.

Now.

There is another silence.

Perhaps they are adjusting their hair. Should Prince and Peasant utter their vows, I can never divide them. Can I show them this mercy? No! Virgilio must not know happiness. I must therefore delay the wedding until the women arrive: let heaven slow us down!

Exit INGANNO to the right.

Bells ring. Enter INPIUS from the left.

INPIUS

Benedetta, that poor child. If she cannot choose wisely, heaven must choose for her; I must choose for her.

(Gravely.) I take no joy in this duty, but it must be done. Lord, you know the purity of my intentions.

Bells ring, startling him.

In music and celebration, ears grow careless. During the ceremony, my own name will be taken rather than the Prince's. I must act fast, lest my intentions be discovered by the less virtuous. Let heaven grant us speed!

Exit INPIUS to the right.

Scene 2

A chapel splendidly adorned for the wedding. There is an altar at the back. A few rows of seats stand to either side of the altar, but there is plenty of open space in the front.

Bells ring. Enter some MUSICIANS, who play softly in the background, the SERVANT, who places flowers and arranges the seats. Enter CELSUS, followed by some GUARDS. He sits at the front while guards stand

near the entrance. The MUSICIANS stop playing when CELSUS speaks.

CELSUS

At last, my bloodline will be secure. Let this one matter in the kingdom proceed without confusion.

Enter INPIUS, who takes his place at the altar and bows solemnly before CELSUS.

INPIUS

Your majesty, everything is ready.

Enter INGANNO along with a small number of COURTIERS. They sit, but most of the seats remain empty. Enter VIRGILIO. He bows to CELSUS.

VIRGILIO

Father.

CELSUS

I am glad you are marrying Countess Benedetta. I could not have chosen a nobler woman myself.

VIRGILIO

I am certain you could not.

Music swells and all rise. Enter BENEDETTA, wearing a wedding dress and veil. She meets VIRGILIO and they pause for a moment. Silently, they take their place at the altar before INPIUS.

INPIUS

Dearly beloved, we are assembled here in the sight of God to join a man and woman in the holy estate of matrimony. This is not an estate lightly entered: it is honest and noble. Let all deceit be absent from this sacred place. First, we will enjoy a moment of silence.

He is silent for a very short moment.

There.

(Emotional.) I was due, I grant, to perform a homily, but I find myself too overcome with emotion to speak—

INGANNO

Let us leave nothing out on this holy day.

BENEDETTA AND VIRGILIO

It really is not necessary.

INGANNO

I have known you since you were a child, my Prince, and desire only for your wedding to be perfect in every way. I insist on it.

INPIUS

(Sighs.) Very well.

(Hesitant.) As Saint Paul hath written: Love is patient, love is kind—

He cannot remember the Bible verse and looks around for help.

Enter another PRIEST carrying the Bible. He gives it to INPIUS.

Divine intervention!

(Flipping through the book, going back and forth.) Love does not envy, it does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking. Love keepeth no record of wrongs. It is not proud. Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love rejoices with the truth! There it is. I said as much inwardly.

(Closing the book triumphantly.) In the end, what matters is faith, hope, and lust.

There is a brief silence.

Love. But the greatest of these is love.

Everybody applauds.

(Aside.) Sainthood will be easy! They applaud before knowing the ending I have planned.

CELSUS

Magnificent! Marry them before I weep again.

INPIUS

We shall proceed to the ceremony! If any here know lawful cause why these two may not be joined,

let him speak now, or forever hold his peace.

There is a moment of silence.

INGANNO

(Aside.) No one?

INPIUS

Let us continue with the vows. Prince Virgilio, you may start.

VIRGILIO

I swore to speak no more in lofty verse,
But grant me now this vow, one final ode,
To you.
You who loved me dressed in humble cloth,
You whom I loved above the higher-born.
When you were cold, I loved you through the frost;
When you are warm, the frozen earth turns green.
All that I am, and all I hope to be,
Shall bend itself to make your happiness.

INPIUS

Benedetta.

BENEDETTA

I have not come here blindly. I have come knowing

what men are, knowing that love bears sweetness and poison alike. I have come after having seen the worst of what you might be, and even though it was not really you, I am willing to take the risk of marrying you anyway. I once asked whether I could love the commoner but hate the Prince, and I know now that the answer is no. I choose you wholly.

INPIUS

That was long.

He pulls two rings off his fingers and tosses them to VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA, who exchange the rings.

Let me now marry you!

INGANNO

I apologise for the interruption, Inpius, but can you clarify whether you intended to use the word "marry" transitively? Do you mean to join the couple, or wed the lady yourself?

INPIUS

(Chuckling nervously.) Let us not confound ourselves with grammar.

We shall proceed to the vows.

(To the MUSICIANS.) A moment of solemn music, if you please.

The MUSICIANS play louder.

(Leaning towards BENEDETTA.) Benedetta, are you prepared to love and honour Inpius—

The music swells, drowning him out.

In good times and bad?

The music stops.

BENEDETTA

Sorry, I could not hear.

INPIUS

Reply "I am."

BENEDETTA

I am.

INGANNO

Forgive me, Inpius, but I could not hear either. Would you repeat the question?

VIRGILIO

We heard it perfectly. Continue!

INPIUS

Have husband and bride come here to enter marriage freely and wholeheartedly? I have—that is what you are to say, Benedetta.

BENEDETTA

I have.

VIRGILIO

I—

INPIUS

Not yet, my Prince. Your part will come soon.

(To the MUSICIANS.) Some more music to honour the ceremony, please.

The music swells, drowning him out.

(Leaning towards BENEDETTA.) Do you, Benedetta, take Inpius... lawfully wedded husband?

BENEDETTA

(Loudly, over the music.) I'm sorry, did I hear "Inpius?"

INPIUS

(Loudly, over the music.) I cannot hear you! Reply "I do."

The music stops.

BENEDETTA

(Aside.) He is a priest. Surely I am mishearing.

I—

INGANNO

I must insist we begin again. I could not hear a word.

VIRGILIO

I could hear every word clearly. Continue!

INPIUS

Benedetta, reply "I do!"

BENEDETTA

I... I—

Enter the shouting NOBLEWOMEN and IMPOSTOR, led by LUCREZIA.

CELSUS

What is that row?

LUCREZIA

Democracy!

NOBLEWOMEN

Death to King Celsus!

IMPOSTOR

Death to democracy!

CELSUS

Stop them!

The GUARDS attempt to stop the NOBLEWOMEN.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

You dare touch a married woman?

The NOBLEWOMEN break free and approach CELSUS, the GUARDS following behind. VIRGILIO leaves the altar to defend CELSUS. INPIUS and BENEDETTA stay at the altar and watch. The COURTIERS and INGANNO move to the side and watch. The NOBLEWOMEN shout over one another.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

We seek a new system of government!

NOBLEWOMAN 2

We are here for revolution!

CELSUS

Silence! Ladies, speak plainly. Why are you here?

LUCREZIA

Very simple, King Celsus. We are governed poorly, and we are governed without our consent. We are here to end it.

INGANNO

And instate a new Ruler, perhaps?

LUCREZIA

No. We shall have a democracy.

INGANNO

(Aside.) Who gave them this idea?

CELSUS

(Furious.) So you would overthrow your King, who has spent his life in service to our kingdom? Ungrateful villains! Will you kill your mothers next? I have given this kingdom my strength, my tears, my blood, yet until my last hair is silver, I shall love it. What strange cruelty, O God, that my kingdom cannot return even a shadow of this kindness!

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Noble intentions are not sufficient to make a good ruler.

CELSUS

You contend that someone else would make a better one?

NOBLEWOMAN 4

The people shall decide that.

CELSUS

Who are the people? Will the unlettered servant make decisions for his kingdom?

LUCREZIA

The citizens are those who have the means, leisure, and wisdom to vote.

VIRGILIO

So yourselves?

LUCREZIA

I suppose.

CELSUS

A King's life is a difficult one, and I shall gladly retire from it. Only my love of the people compelled me to endure the crown's yoke. I welcome you to elect your own leader.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

Really?

CELSUS

Before I leave, allow me to explain what the leader will do. Each morning, you will hear petitions asking you to forgive, demanding you punish; the petitioner appeased will forget your kindness, and the one rebuffed will call you unjust. Who specifically will hear those?

NOBLEWOMAN 1

We will appoint judges.

CELSUS

Judges require salaries, and the royal treasury must be funded through taxation. No doubt you will raise the taxes, then. Beware: you will then be labelled a tyrant, and if the people are incensed enough, you will be deposed.

NOBLEWOMAN 2

Surely one can rule with less effort.

CELSUS

At noon, you must deal with the famine in the north. Our ingenious merchants will hoard the surplus and sell it to the poor at four times the price.

NOBLEWOMAN 3

Surely the people, governing themselves, would not exploit one another so.

CELSUS

What divine law states that it is in human nature to help one another? There is also the issue of war. By sunset, you are informed of unrest by the border. Will you vote on how many men to send to die?

NOBLEWOMAN 4

I had not considered wars.

CELSUS

I am glad that you are prepared to inherit such a weighty burden; I am weary from having borne it for so many years.

VIRGILIO

(Worried.) Is this truly the life I am to inherit? This is a strange crown, I am not sure I want it.

LUCREZIA

Perhaps change does not need to be so sudden, my King.

CELSUS

No, I have faith in you. I am ready to retire my crown.

NOBLEWOMEN

Do not leave, we beg you, O King!

LUCREZIA

We came here to be heard. We have been heard. That is enough.

The NOBLEWOMEN and LUCREZIA kneel before CELSUS. INGANNO seethes on the side.

CELSUS

(Pleased.) Very well, noble ladies. Since you demand it, I shall remain King. Then let us rejoice and enjoy the wedding celebration together.

The NOBLEWOMEN sit.

Enter the shouting NOBLEMEN, who carry swords, led by the DUKE.

DUKE

Our fears are verified! Our wives have led us to the Prince!

NOBLEMEN

Death to Prince Virgilio!

The GUARDS attempt to stop them but are overpowered. The NOBLEMEN approach CELSUS. The NOBLEMEN and NOBLEWOMEN shout over one another.

NOBLEMAN 1

The Prince has courted our wives!

NOBLEWOMAN 1

You dare accuse us of unfaithfulness?

NOBLEMAN 2

He has seduced them and now makes them lie for him!

They become silent but continue their argument through hand gestures.

INPIUS

(To BENEDETTA.) Come, my child.

INPIUS leads BENEDETTA to the front. LUCREZIA silently follows them and watches.

We must conclude the vows before this madness worsens.

BENEDETTA

Do not hurry so much that you forget the groom!

INPIUS

(Smiling, he gestures to himself.) He is here.

BENEDETTA

You are a man of the cloth! You cannot marry.

INPIUS

No one will know that I married you. I shall tell the Prince that you fled the wedding, love failing at the altar.

BENEDETTA gasps.

My intentions are noble: I will protect you from the sin of men! It is your duty as an obedient Christian to submit to me—enthusiastically.

BENEDETTA

It seems being righteous without virtue is what makes a religious leader! I will not marry you.

She attempts to leave, but INPIUS grips her arm, stopping her.

INPIUS

(Laughing.) If you are ready, dear bride, we must continue now. Do you take me, Inpius, as your husband?

BENEDETTA

(Looking for a way out.) I am left with no choice! I—

LUCREZIA

Stop!

INPIUS

Curses! A third time I am halted.

LUCREZIA

When we met at the King's palace a week ago, you had me believe that you were virtuous, but it seems that you are unfaithful like all other men. You will not discard me easily, Inpius!

INPIUS

My dear—

LUCREZIA

You will not marry this wench. You will marry me.

INPIUS

That is impossible! I am a man of the cloth—

BENEDETTA

If you were willing to marry me, that cannot be true.

INPIUS

My dear, I am sworn to celibacy.

LUCREZIA

That has not stopped you before. We shall wed immediately! Let us find a priest.

INPIUS

Marriage destroys love!

Exit LUCREZIA, who drags a protesting INPIUS along with her.

VIRGILIO comes forward and meets BENEDETTA at the front. They hold hands for a moment.

CELSUS

Peace! One voice at a time. Men, what is your grievance?

DUKE

Prince Virgilio has attempted to court our wives.

NOBLEWOMAN 1

My dear husband, I admit that we were swayed by him, but I swear that we have never been unfaithful.

The other NOBLEWOMEN nod and mutter in agreement.

INGANNO

What do you mean when you say that you were swayed by him, ladies?

NOBLEWOMAN 1

I mean that it was him who led us to revolt against King Celsus.

VIRGILIO

(To BENEDETTA.) That villain! Inganno still deceives us.

CELSUS

For this betrayal, son, you must be punished. Your wise King concludes that there is a single fount from which these controversies flow: Prince Virgilio!

The NOBLEMEN, NOBLEWOMEN, and GUARDS approach VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA, led by CELSUS and INGANNO.

BENEDETTA

What shall we do?

VIRGILIO

(Aside.) I think I see a solution.

Stop! You confound yourselves! It is true that Prince Virgilio is the source of our kingdom's recent chaos; your choler is sensible, but I am the wrong mark! You see, we have been performing an elaborate ruse today: I am dressed as the Prince, while the true Prince pretends to be my old tutor.

(Pointing at INGANNO.) The real Prince Virgilio has been hiding in plain sight!

INGANNO

Absurd! The Prince continues to lie.

VIRGILIO

I can prove it. As all of you know, the royal signet ring alone proves the mighty royal lineage. Virgilio, I am sure that, by now, it has returned from the polisher.

INGANNO

(Panicking.) I do not have it! He deceives you.

VIRGILIO

Then you are surely willing to let the crowd frisk you and prove this?

INGANNO

I shall welcome it from the fair ladies.

VIRGILIO

The men will do it.

INGANNO

(Taking out the signet ring.) No!

VIRGILIO

There, you can all see it, clear as day.

(Gesturing to BENEDETTA.) Allow me to add, for the benefit of King Celsus, that this woman is no French Countess, but rather a humble peasant!

CELSUS

(Furious.) First, you incite revolution against me, then you deceive me! Worse still, you bring an ignoble, nay an agrestic commoner in my presence. I fear her baseness is already rubbing off on me. You are not my son, not heir to my kingdom! Take this woman away, and never return to my sight!

Exit VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA.

INGANNO

(Aside, he laughs.) The fool has handed his downfall to me on a royal silver platter! I am now the Prince. Power, my beloved, you are mine at last!

NOBLEMEN AND NOBLEWOMEN

Death to Prince Virgilio!

Exit INGANNO, pursued by the NOBLEMEN and NOBLEWOMEN.

Enter LUCREZIA, dragging along a dishevelled, defeated INPIUS and followed by the PRIEST. LUCREZIA and INPIUS wear an extra ring each.

LUCREZIA

Now that we are wed, my dear Inpius, we shall never be separated!

CELSUS

I shall miss having you by my side, Inpius, yet I am glad that my old friend has found love. At least someone was married today. Of course, a priest who weds cannot remain a priest; from this moment, you are relieved of your office.

(Laughs.) I trust you will find marriage no lighter a burden.

Exit all.

Enter the SERVANT, drinking from a jug of wine.

SERVANT

And thus the wheel of fortune has turned once, twice, and back again. Yet what has changed? The same old fool sits on the throne. The nobles cry about

honour, justice, and faith, and the rest pay their taxes.

(Sarcastic and without emotion.) I heard talk of revolution: exciting.

Alas, it was led by those who would not work to achieve it.

(Looking at his hands.) No, when that day comes, it will be achieved by these hands.

Until that blessed day, there remains a more reliable comfort.

He drinks.

Tell me, Lord, is this elixir permitted here?

(Looking up, he nods.) You are too generous.

Emptying the jug, he hugs it.

This I can trust to be faithful and true. My drink is my true love... Yes, love, the tyrant that started this. It shines like a lamp before a blind man.

(Looking around nervously.) Hush! I think I hear the taxman approaching.

Exit SERVANT.

Enter VIRGILIO and BENEDETTA, both dressed humbly.

VIRGILIO

Love made me many things: a Prince, a commoner, and a Prince again. Now it shall make me something nobler still: your husband.

BENEDETTA

We will never possess what you once had.

VIRGILIO

Nor do we seek to. Leave chasing thrones and golden crowns to Inganno.

BENEDETTA

I suppose that it is the nature of the low to dream of rising and of the high to push them back down.

VIRGILIO

Having lived as both Prince and commoner, I see that the great difference between the high and low lies in clothes and taxes (and it is the low who pays them).

BENEDETTA

The Poverty Tax shall burden us wherever we go. For the bankrupt, it is raised to twenty silver coins.

VIRGILIO

Let it reach a hundred; they cannot tax what we have found.

BENEDETTA

Now let us be wed!

VIRGILIO

Love, then, still prevails.

They embrace and kiss.

Exit all.

TO IMPERSONATE OURSELVES IS THE MOST DEMANDING ROLE THERE IS.

The idealistic Prince Virgilio has the perfect plan: swap places with Inganno, his overly-ambitious former tutor, and find genuine love.

Falling for the peasant Benedetta, he resolves to marry her, but the two must first don layers upon layers of disguise to fool the class-obsessed King.

As the wedding day approaches, the masquerade spirals out of control: Inganno adapts to the role of Prince far too well, and the young lovers must ward off a vengeful Countess, jealous husbands, and a hypocritical Priest with less-than-honourable intentions.

What's more, rumour has it that revolution's afoot! Fear not: all will be resolved by the wedding day... or will the kingdom mistake performance for reality?

Inspired by Italian opera and Shakespearean comedy, Love is Blind is a fast-paced, self-aware farce that celebrates classical stage comedy and breathes new life into its most beloved conventions.

MRP: ₹ 273
ISBN: 978-81-687574-0-0
9 788168 757400