

## Murder in Pentameter

*(With apologies to Robert Browning. For literary purposes, and to avoid libel, Newnham has a 'Mistress' rather than a 'Principal' in this tale.)*

Here's our first Mistress painted on the wall  
looking as if she were alive. And there,  
there in her hand – d'you see it? – there, quite small,  
her death. Ah, now you look! Now all of you  
surge forwards, lifting high your mobile phones  
to take a snap. You know the story then –  
how Newnham's esteemed Mistress took a sip  
at the Midwinter Feast from our great cup  
inlaid with rubies, how she choked and paled,  
how her hands spasmed tight as poison spread  
throughout her veins. The great historian  
of late Renaissance economic trends  
was dead! Her book ('A noblewoman's wealth  
in the Veneto pre-1519')  
would never be. And it seemed all too clear  
that someone on High Table did the deed;  
that as the chalice passed from hand to hand  
someone had slipped a deadly poison in.

(You, who are new to Newnham, will not know  
the rivalries and intrigues of our Halls,  
how armed with facts, philosophies and pens  
each strives to reign supreme, to be the one  
whose book sells best, who holds a Chair, appears  
on Radio 4, is 'MBE' or 'Dame'.  
Please do not take offence if this aside  
does not apply to you. I seek to warn  
those newer Fellows whom it may concern.)

Each had a motive, none an alibi.  
Was it the chemist, learned in the ways  
of poisons? Or perhaps the vet,  
who daily dealt out fatal drops to ducks?  
Was it the Bursar, keeping budgets down?  
Did reading Caesar lead to Roman death?  
Had the Domestic Bursar had enough?  
It was impossible to tell. The case  
perplexed police, and baffled Scotland Yard,  
and to this day, none knows who did the deed –  
none but myself. And I – can I be sure?

As the Curator here, I chanced to look  
more closely at the portrait; saw where time  
dulling the paint, obscured the sitter's hand;  
began my restoration – and then stopped.  
There, on her hand, a ring, and such a ring

as did not suit an modest scholar's hand -  
a great and bevelled emerald set in gold  
such as some Pope, some late Venetian prince  
might once have worn. And there, I marked it well,  
a tiny catch half-hid beneath the jewel -  
and then I knew. The Mistress's research -  
what was her book? - 'A noblewoman's wealth  
in the Veneto, pre-1519. '

In some neglected archive, she had found  
among the letters, ledgers, sums, accounts,  
a ring - Lucrezia Borgia's ring - and giving way  
to greed, she made it hers. Not greed for gold  
but for a talisman, a touch across  
four centuries. (Oh, I have done the same  
and felt my hand held by a man long dead.)  
Focused on economics, she dismissed  
as "misanthropic claptrap" all the tales.  
"It's always been assumed that women get  
their power through trickery. Lucrezia drained  
marshlands, which led to higher rents, and hence  
her wealth. A poison ring?" she would have scoffed.  
And so for Newnham's Feast the Mistress wore  
Lucrezia's ring, and as she took the cup  
the catch came loose, and from its hidden store  
the poison dripped. She drank. She spoke no more.

If there's a moral here, I could not say  
what it might be. But not since then  
has Newnham had a 'Mistress' to preside:  
instead a 'Principal' has graced the board,  
the ruby-studded chalice was sold off,  
and we have had a doctor at each Feast.  
So have no fears while dining: feel free  
to eat and drink - but please dress cautiously.

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