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Article abstract

This article carries out a close reading of Niccolò Machiavelli's play *Mandragola* (The mandrake root) from the perspective of sex and gender studies. In so doing, it takes into consideration what the play says or suggests about sexual desire, sexual practices, and conjugal life. This somewhat less conventional examination reveals that, under cover of entertainment and humour, Machiavelli was raising important questions about contemporary marriage conventions and sexual practices that ranged from the difference in age between the spouses to the difference in their sexual interests, from a couple's desire for progeny to the partners' (un)willingness to pay the marriage debt, from the matter of a man's "honour" to the question of a woman's "worth."

Sex and Marriage in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*: A Close(t) Reading

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This article carries out a close reading of Niccolò Machiavelli's play Mandragola (The mandrake root) from the perspective of sex and gender studies. In so doing, it takes into consideration what the play says or suggests about sexual desire, sexual practices, and conjugal life. This somewhat less conventional examination reveals that, under cover of entertainment and humour, Machiavelli was raising important questions about contemporary marriage conventions and sexual practices that ranged from the difference in age between the spouses to the difference in their sexual interests, from a couple's desire for progeny to the partners' (un)willingness to pay the marriage debt, from the matter of a man's "honour" to the question of a woman's "worth."

Cet article propose une lecture approfondie de la pièce de théâtre Mandragola (La Mandragore) de Nicolas Machiavel du point de vue du sexe et des études de genre. On y considère ce que cette pièce exprime ou suggère à propos du désir sexuel, des pratiques sexuelles et de la vie conjugale. Cette approche quelque peu non conventionnelle fait apparaître que Machiavel, sous les apparences du divertissement et de l'humour, y soulève d'importantes questions quant aux conventions de mariage et aux pratiques sexuelles de son époque, depuis la différence d'âge entre les conjoints jusqu'à leurs différences d'intérêt sexuel, en passant par le désir de procréer et le consentement à payer la dette de mariage, ainsi que par le sujet de « l'honneur » de l'homme et les interrogations sur la « valeur » de la femme.

Machiavelli's play *Mandragola* (The mandrake root) is a story of sexual desire, duplicity, and self-interest. It is a disturbing narrative on account of the dubious morality it advances—seduction, adultery, and murder are all presented as both viable and acceptable venues for a young man's pursuit of his personal sexual gratification as well as for a married couple's attempts to have a child. At the end of the play, the culprits all enjoy the happy results of their immoral and even criminal actions and there is no indication that any of this will ever come back to haunt them. To use a phrase often (incorrectly) attributed to Machiavelli, the end has justified the means.¹ Actions that would

1. Machiavelli did, however, say that a prince should do what is necessary in order to maintain his power because the masses see only the results (appearances) and not the process (reality): "Let a prince therefore act to conquer and to maintain the state; his methods will always be judged honourable, and

normally lead to severe prosecution in a court of law or to public disgrace in the social arena have been justified by the goals each character had and achieved: the young man Callimaco will have the illicit sex he craved, the married couple Nicia and Lucrezia will have the son they wanted, the elderly Sostrata will have the grandson she so hoped for, Friar Timoteo will have the alms he sought to collect, and the ex-marriage broker Ligurio will have the dinner he hungered for.

In order to better understand the context and the “message” this disturbing play brings to the stage, one needs, first of all, to keep in mind the marriage practices of the moneyed classes in sixteenth-century Italy. Marriage in the moneyed classes of that time was not, normally, a love match but a “business” contract between two families who sought, through the union of their children, to advance their own specific economic, political, or dynastic agendas. As a result, it was the norm, among the wealthy professional and merchant classes, for men to marry late and women early. Such a pattern of marriage was the result of two important facts: one was that young men needed to establish themselves in business before being able to assume the obligations of supporting a wife and family; the other was that women, on the other hand, needed to marry early in order not to risk losing their reputations as virgins and, consequently, their commodity value on the marriage market.² As a result, the average age for first marriage for a middle-class Florentine male was about thirty to thirty-five years while for a Florentine woman it was about eighteen years.³ Machiavelli himself, for example, married at age thirty-two; at the

will be praised by all; for ordinary people are always deceived by appearances and by the outcome of a thing and in the world there is nothing but ordinary people.” Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 18, p. 60. Machiavelli’s cynical assessment of the means by which favourable results are obtained has been much criticized over the centuries, but has also, at times, been read as satire rather than sound advice.

2. There are many studies that touch on this topic, but see the brief summaries provided in John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 226, and Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 137–43.

3. Most data on ages of marriage in Florence come from fifteenth-century sources and especially from studies of the *Catasto* (universal tax census) of 1427. Scholars such as Julius Kirshner point out that in Florence “in 1427, women at the time of their first marriage were about eighteen years old; men around thirty years old”; *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 7. As the century progressed, it seems that the age of first marriage increased. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber reports that in 1480 the age of first marriage for Florentine men

time of his marriage, his bride, Marietta Corsini, was “in her late teens.”⁴ This meant that, normally, there was a generational difference between husband and wife, and this difference led to a number of social problems, not the least of which revolved around sexual attraction. Generally speaking, most people are sexually attracted to persons more or less their own age. If there is a significant age difference between two people, it is likely that sexual attraction between them will diminish in direct relation to that age difference, at least in one of the two partners. Age is, therefore, an important factor in how two people respond to each other sexually.

In *Mandragola*, too, age seems to be an important factor. Already in the opening scene Machiavelli seems keen to let us know the age of the principal male character, Callimaco. In that scene, Callimaco, who has recently returned to Florence from a long stay in Paris, says that he was sent to Paris at age ten and that he remained there for twenty years (1.1).⁵ This means that Callimaco is now thirty years old. Why point out his age and why so early in the play? It seems clear that Machiavelli wanted his audience to know right away that Callimaco was approaching the age of first marriage for a Florentine man of that time and then to compare his age with that of his sexual rival Nicia and of his heart-throb Lucrezia.

Such a comparison seems inevitable when, just a few lines later in that very first scene, we are told that Nicia and Lucrezia have been married for six years and have had no children. Two important pieces of information can be gleaned from this second comment. First, if we assume that Nicia and Lucrezia married at the average age of first marriage for sixteenth-century Florentine males and females, this would suggest that Nicia is somewhere in his late thirties (30+6

was, on average, 31.4, and for women 20.8; *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 29n22. There has not been a similar detailed examination of sixteenth-century sources, but generally it would seem that age of first marriage for women remained the same (late teens), while for men it continued to rise slightly.

4. Miles J. Unger dates the marriage to “sometime in August 1501,” in *Machiavelli: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 108. Innocenzio Giampieri dates it to the early months of 1502; “Niccolò Machiavelli e Marietta Corsini,” in Pietro Contrucci et al., *Monumenti del Giardino Puccini* (Pistoia: Tipografia Cino, 1845), 280. The difference in dates does not, really, alter the basic fact that the thirty-something Machiavelli married a teen-aged girl nearly half his age.

5. All references to the Italian original will be taken from Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 4, *Scritti letterari*, ed. Luigi Blasucci (Turin: UTET, 1980) and, when possible, incorporated into the text. All translations from Italian and Latin into English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

or 32+6) and Lucrezia twenty-four years old (18+6). To be fair, the play does suggest that Nicia is much older, even senile, so one might assume that Nicia married somewhat later than average, perhaps when he was thirty-five or even forty, which would then make him either forty-one years old (35+6) or forty-six (40+6) at this moment.⁶ In the standard model of sixteenth-century learned comedy, Nicia would thus be the *senex* or “old man” to Callimaco’s *adulescens* or “young man.” In contemporary Italy, where a man’s life span was usually somewhere in the fifties or sixties (Machiavelli, for example, died at fifty-eight years of age),⁷ Nicia might, indeed, be considered well advanced in age. At the same time, however, Callimaco does say that “if [Nicia] is not young, he’s not completely old, as might appear.”⁸ In other words, Nicia may be physically much older than Callimaco, but not so old as to be discounted as a sexual rival.

A second piece of information that can be gleaned from Callimaco’s comments about Nicia and Lucrezia is the fact that, after six years of marriage, they still have no children. The standard assumption at the time would have been either that Lucrezia was infertile, as Nicia would like everyone to believe (2.2), or that Nicia was impotent, as Callimaco, in the guise of a learned Parisian doctor, suggests (2.2) but, in his own mind, does not believe (see the comment above from 1.1 suggesting that Nicia is not to be discounted as a sexual rival). A third explanation for the fact that the couple is childless might well be that they are simply not having sex—and there are several bits of information to support this third suggestion.

One reason for the couple’s possible sexual inactivity may well be Lucrezia’s lack of desire for her significantly older husband. Machiavelli hints that there might be some disinterest on Lucrezia’s part in paying the conjugal debt when he has her husband Nicia complain about her bedtime habits. When Callimaco, disguised as a doctor, suggests that the problem with Lucrezia’s fertility may be the fact that she is not “well covered” at night in bed, Nicia completely misses

6. There is no indication in the play that this might be Nicia’s second marriage, so we must assume that it is his first marriage and deduce that he married later than average (perhaps for reasons that will become evident further down in this article).

7. As a comparison, Machiavelli’s friends and correspondents Francesco Guicciardini and Francesco Vettori died at ages fifty-seven and sixty-five respectively.

8. “se non è giovane, non è del tutto vecchio, come pare” (1.1, 119).

Callimaco's non-complimentary sexual innuendo⁹ and reveals, instead, that when they go to bed at night "She does keep a big quilt on top of her, but before coming to bed she spends four hours on her knees stringing Our Fathers, and she can really put up with the cold."¹⁰ In other words, Nicia says that Lucrezia can withstand cold for a long time, but then, once she gets into bed, she sleeps under "a big quilt"—a behavioural contradiction that speaks volumes about Lucrezia. Nicia then adds that Lucrezia is a very religious woman who prays a lot before going to bed. What we infer from these two statements is that in the evening Lucrezia delays her entry into bed by praying to excess. Perhaps she does this in the hope that by the time she crawls between the sheets her old husband will have fallen asleep. If he has not, she is quick to put up a physical barrier (the big quilt) between herself and her husband.

When we consider Lucrezia's bedtime behaviour in light of other comments Nicia makes about his wife's character, the picture of a happy conjugal life quickly disappears, and this in spite of their alleged mutual desire to have children. According to Nicia, Lucrezia is fundamentally uncooperative; when he asks her to produce a urine sample, she stubbornly refuses and he has to struggle long to convince her (2.5). When the mandrake plan is conceived and Ligurio says that now all they need to do is to get Lucrezia to listen to her confessor's advice, Nicia voices his doubts saying: "I suspect that, if nothing else, if I ask her to go speak with the confessor she will refuse."¹¹ Just moments before, in exasperation, Nicia had told Ligurio that "Whenever I want her to do anything, it's a big story!"¹² In short, Lucrezia is clearly not interested in paying the conjugal debt nor in listening to her husband, and this may well be 50 percent of the marital problems.

The other 50 percent may reside with Nicia, and not only on account of the generational difference that separates him from his wife.

When we listen carefully to Nicia's words, we discover the possibility that he may have alternate sexual interests. His language, for one, abounds in anal and sodomitical references, something that is simply not the case with any of

9. In Italian, the verb *coprire* (to cover) can be used in the sense of *montare* (to mount or to tup) to refer to a male animal "mounting" or impregnating a female animal.

10. "Ella tien pure adosso un buon coltrone; ma la sta quattro ore ginocchioni a infilzar paternostri, innanzi che la se ne venghi al letto, ed è una bestia a patire freddo" (2.6, 132).

11. "Io dubito, non che altro, che per mio detto la non voglia ire a parlare al confessore" (2.6, 134).

12. "come io le vo' far fare nulla, egli è una storia!" (2.5, 131).

the other characters in the play. On their own, these references may indicate only that Nicia is, simply put, a vulgar man. However, his vulgarity leads to a rather curious scene that, suddenly, raises a lot of questions about his sexual preferences.

The morning after the fateful night in which the young scoundrel (*garzonaccio*) they picked up on a street corner has been led to have sex with Lucrezia, Nicia, speaking with Ligurio, describes in detail how he took the young man into his house and got him ready for the encounter. He starts the narrative by exclaiming: "Oh, I have some beautiful things to tell you" and then continues with:

My wife was in bed in the dark. Sostrata was waiting for me by the fireplace. I arrived with this young scoundrel, and so that nothing would go amiss I led him into a pantry off the living room where there was a water lamp that gave off a faint light so that he could not see my face. [...] I had him undress; he was hesitant; I turned on him like a dog so that he quickly took his clothes off and stood there naked. He had an ugly face: a monstrous nose, a crooked mouth ... but you never saw more beautiful flesh! White, soft, just like dough, and don't ask me about the rest.¹³

One cannot help but be struck by Nicia's obvious delight at the beauty of the young man's body and the attractiveness of the young man's "flesh" (as Nicia puts it). One rightly wonders what "the rest" might have been. When Ligurio toys with Nicia first by expressing mock propriety and then by egging him on with the comment: "It's not good to talk about it. Was it necessary to see him completely naked?"¹⁴ Nicia responds with even more revealing details:

13. "Oh! io v'ho da dire le belle cose! Mogliama era nel letto al buio. Sostrata m'aspettava al fuoco. I' giunsi su con questo garzonaccio, e perché e' non andassi nulla in capperuccia, io lo menai in una dispensa che io ho in sulla sala, dove era un certo lume annacquato, che gittava un poco d'albore, in modo ch'è non mi poteva vedere in viso. [...] Io lo feci spogliare: e' nicchiava; io me li volsi come un cane, di modo che li parve mill'anni d'avere fuori e' panni, e rimase ignudo. Egli è brutto di viso: egli aveva uno nasaccio, una bocca torta ... Ma tu non vedesti mai le più belle carni: bianco, morbido, pastoso! E dell'altre cose non ne domandat" (5.2, 160–61).

14. "E' non è bene ragionarne. Che bisognava vederlo tutto?" (5.2, 161).

Are you kidding me? After I had put my hands in the dough, I wanted to touch it all the way to the bottom: then I wanted to see if he was healthy: if he had had the sores, what would have happened to me? Easy for you to talk! [...] When I saw that he was healthy, I pulled him along behind me and led him in the dark to the bedroom, I put him in bed, and before leaving I made sure to touch with my own hand how things were going, 'cause I'm not the type of man who'll buy something sight-unseen. [...] Once I had touched and felt everything, I left the bedroom and locked the door and then went to sit with my mother-in-law by the fireplace and spent the night chatting with her.¹⁵

Without a doubt, this is one of the most amazing narratives in Italian Renaissance comedy. It tells of a cuckolded husband who not only leads his young rival to his wife's bedroom, but first takes him into a dimly lit closet, then forces him to undresses completely, admires his beautiful body, touches him "to the very bottom," clearly relishes in that touch, examines the young man's penis and genital area for sores or any signs of syphilis, and then, having put the rival in bed with his wife, physically checks, with his own hand, to make sure that the young man has achieved erection and is doing what he should be doing. It is a tale beyond belief. Machiavelli obviously constructed it to underline Nicia's foolishness, but perhaps also to point the finger to the unspoken cause of Nicia's real marital problem—his unrestrained delight at the sight and touch of a naked young man and consequent same-sex (in early modern terms, sodomitical) desires.

There is another important set of sodomitical references in the play, and they are to be found in the conversation between Friar Timoteo and an unnamed widow in 3.3, a scene that, one should remember, takes place at the church door as the two characters come out of the building. In this brief but crucial moment for the presentation of Friar Timoteo's character and his *modus operandi*, the friar consoles a widow who had come to church to pray for the soul of her deceased husband. When speaking of her late husband, the widow

15. "Tu vuoi el giambo! Poi che avevo messo mano in pasta, io ne volsi toccare el fondo. Poi volsi vedere s'egli era sano: s'egli avessi auto le bolle, dove mi trovavo io? Tu ci metti parole! [...] Come io ebbi veduto che gli era sano, io me lo tirai drieto, ed al buio lo menai in camera, messilo al letto; e innanzi mi partissi, volli toccare con mano come la cosa andava, ch  io non sono uso ad essermi dato ad intendere lucciole per lanterne. [...] Tocco e sentito che io ebbi ogni cosa, mi uscii di camera, e serrai l'uscio, e me n'andai alla suocera, che era al fuoco, e tutta notte abbiamo atteso a ragionare" (5.2, 161).

describes him as an *omaccio*, a brute of a man, but then immediately goes on to say “pure le carne tirono” (3.3), which might be rendered in English as “and yet my body still longs for him.”¹⁶ In other words, the sexual desire that drew her to her husband is still, for her, a force to be reckoned with; as the widow says, “I cannot help but feel it again when I remember it.”¹⁷ The clearly very active and satisfying sex life she and her husband enjoyed (unlike the sex life between Nicia and Lucrezia) leads the widow to worry about her deceased husband’s salvation, which in turn prompts her to ask the friar whether her husband might be among the saved and penitent in Purgatory. When the friar responds with an absolute affirmative (“Sanza dubio” / “Without a doubt”), the widow responds with her very serious doubts about this, all on account of her husband’s sexual practices—she says: “I’m not sure about that. You know very well what he made me do some time. Oh, how I complained about it with you! I drew away from it as much as I could, but he was so insistent. Oh, dear Lord!”¹⁸

Timoteo reassures her that God’s mercy is great, but not without a slight sexual innuendo in his own words when he says: “Don’t worry, God’s mercy is great; if a man does not lack the will [*voglia*], he will never lack the time to repent.”¹⁹ The word *voglia* has multiple meanings—not only does it mean “the will” (as Timoteo’s overt meaning would have it), but it also means a sexual desire or lust.²⁰ So, Friar Timoteo’s subtle message to the widow is that a sexually active man will always find the time to repent. In what may at first appear to be a complete non sequitur, the widow immediately changes topic and asks Friar

16. I take this translation from Nerida Newbiggin who renders the widow’s entire speech as “And even though he was a brute of a man, my flesh still longs for him. I can’t help tingling when I remember him” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, trans. Nerida Newbiggin, 2009.) Online at http://www-personal.usyd.edu.au/~nnew4107/Texts/Sixteenth-century_Florence_files/Mandragola_Translation.pdf (accessed 1 November 2016). In their translation of the play, Laura Giannetti and Guido Ruggiero render it as “Even though he was a beast, still, the flesh calls, and when I remember him I can’t help feeling something,” in *Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance*, trans. and ed. Laura Giannetti and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 91.

17. “io non posso fare non mi risenta, quando io me ne ricordo” (3.3, 137).

18. “Voi sapete pure quel che mi faceva qualche volta. Oh, quanto me ne dolsi io con esso voi! Io me ne discostavo quanto io potevo; ma egli era sì importuno! Uh, nostro Signore!” (3.3, 137).

19. “Non dubitate, la clemenza di Dio è grande; se non manca a l’uomo la voglia, non gli manca mai el tempo a pentirsi” (3.3, 137).

20. *Garzanti Linguistica*, online, accessed 1 November 2016, http://www.garzantilinguistica.it/en_ad_vocem.

Timoteo whether the Turk will invade Italy this year. "If you don't pray, he will," the friar replies. At this point the reason for the woman's sudden change in topics becomes evident: she exclaims, "Good Lord! May God keep us from their devilish practices! I am quite afraid of their impaling."²¹ Having made a clear connection between her husband's sexual practices and the Turks' "devilish" practice of impaling people, the widow quickly excuses herself and runs back into the church.

So, what went on, just then and there, on the church steps, and why did Machiavelli include in his play this rather strange scene that does not move the plot forward? Clearly, the scene serves to introduce Friar Timoteo's character, but it also serves to point out the presence of sodomitical practices among sexually active heterosexual couples in contemporary Florence, and this, in turn, opens the way to the allusions that will be made later in the play to Nicia's own sexual tendencies. This scene also serves to counterbalance Nicia's and Lucrezia's unhappy marriage. It points to a sexually satisfying conjugal relationship, one that enjoys sexual practices that were (and still are) considered aberrant by the Church, but which were, nonetheless, quietly ignored by at least some of the clergy (represented here by Friar Timoteo), the state, and even the culture of the time.²² Michel Plaisance, for one, points out that "The theme of sodomy—sometimes homosexual, but generally heterosexual—is very prominent in [Florentine] Carnival songs. In *Canzona de' visi addietro* ("Song of the Backward Faces"), for example, sodomy appears to be normal behaviour."²³

In suggesting that Friar Timoteo quietly ignores the sodomitical practices of his parishioners, Machiavelli might well be echoing his own views on the matter and those of many other fellow Florentines. Such an easy-going attitude

21. "Naffe! Dio ci aiuti, con queste diavolerie! io ho una gran paura di quello impalare" (3.3, 137).

22. On the practice and toleration of heterosexual sodomy or anal intercourse in Renaissance Florence, see, among others, Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 156, and John K. Brackett, *Criminal Justice and Crime in Late Renaissance Florence, 1537–1609* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 131–32. More generally, and for some references to occasional prosecution for heterosexual sodomy, see David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 277.

23. Michel Plaisance, *Florence in the Time of the Medici: Public Celebrations, Politics, and Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, trans. Nicole Carew-Reid, *Essays and Studies* 14 (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 20.

may also well apply to same-sex sodomy; Guido Ruggiero, for example, points to the easy-going acceptance of same-sex desire and sodomitical practices by Machiavelli and his circle of friends when he refers to Donato del Corno, “a friend who was frequently identified in Machiavelli’s correspondence by his sexuality—his enduring attraction to boys as sexual partners and his distaste for women.” Ruggiero then elaborates, saying that del Corno’s “sexual preference for male youths was clearly not treated by the group of friends as a mere practice or a passing stage on the way to adult sexuality; it was a marking aspect of his personality that was central in how his friends understood him, portrayed him, and enjoyed him.”²⁴

Although Machiavelli’s own sexual self-identity and self-presentation were clearly and actively heterosexual, that is not to say he may not have engaged in sodomitical practices himself. In his biography of Machiavelli, Niccolò Capponi says that “according to an anonymous denunciation made to the Otto di Guardia e Balìa (the Florentine police and criminal justice commission) at the time when Machiavelli was secretary to the office of the ‘Ten of War’—he enjoyed anal sex with ‘la Riccia,’ a famous Florentine courtesan with whom the Florentine secretary had a long and intimate ten-year relationship.”²⁵ The charge of sodomitical practices with his favourite courtesan voiced in this anonymous denunciation cannot be taken as reliable information on Machiavelli’s sexual practices and, in fact, seems not to have been pursued by the authorities in charge of Florentine morality, but it does point (as does his correspondence) to Machiavelli’s active sexuality (both real or imagined) and to his delight in sexual yarns at the expense of common acquaintances.

Instead of any anonymous and unproven allegations of Machiavelli’s sodomitical practices with his favourite prostitute, what is more interesting and revealing for our discussion is Francesco Vettori’s comment to Machiavelli in response to the latter’s concerns about the close relationship his son Ludovico had developed with another young man. In his letter of 17 April 1523, Vettori tried to alleviate Machiavelli’s concerns by pointing out that

24. Guido Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 125–26.

25. Niccolò Capponi, *An Unlikely Prince: The Life and Times of Machiavelli* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 64. The denunciation, dated 27 May 1510, reads: “Notifichasi a voi, signori Otto, chome Nicholò di messer Bernardo Machiavelli fotte la Lucretia vochata la Riccia nel culo.” See Sieni, *La sporca storia di Firenze* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2002), 71.

as we draw towards old age, we become very difficult to please and, as they say, scrupulous, nor do we remember what we did as young men. [Your son] Ludovico has a boy with him with whom he plays, jests, goes for walks, growl in his ear, goes to bed with. So what? Perhaps even in these things there's nothing bad.²⁶

Francesco Vettori is clearly advising Machiavelli to close an eye to his son's adolescent bonding and homosexual activity, as most Florentines did at the time. We know from Michael Rocke's ground-breaking study of male same-sex relationships that homosexual activity was everywhere in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence and was generally seen as a natural "phase" in a young man's development into adulthood; as Rocke's evidence reveals, most Florentine youths engaged in at least some same-sex sexuality until they married, and then stopped doing so once they married.²⁷ Vettori's comment that he and Machiavelli "do not remember what [they] did as adolescents" seems to imply that they did the same as what Ludovico is doing now and were none the worse for it.

Some scholars have, in fact, entertained the idea that in his youth Machiavelli may have engaged sexually with both men and women. Ridolfi, who very early in his biography of Machiavelli claims that the only vice Machiavelli had was "lust for women" (*libidine di femmine*), quickly follows this statement with a very long and detailed note in which he (un)intentionally argues both sides of the question:

No-one, *as far as I know*, has ever suspected Machiavelli of having given in to the vice of the times and the place, the "Florentine vice." *Some doubts on this matter* may arise from his *canzonetta* "If you had bow and wings, / cheerful young man," by certain of his words in a letter to Francesco Vettori. [...] One must therefore conclude, *without excluding*

26. "Sed, cum in senium vergimus, nimis morosi et, ut sic loquar, scrupulosi simus, nec recordamur quid adolescentes egerimus. Habet Ludovicus filius secum puerum, cum illo ludit, iocatur, deambulat, in aurem gannit, una cubant. Quid tum? Fortasse etiam sub his rebus nihil mali subest." Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 3, *Lettere*, 536. See also Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114 for his understanding of Vettori's comment to Machiavelli.

27. Rocke, 127–29 and *passim*.

with certainty the possibility of some single curiosity and experience, that Machiavelli was, nearly alone among his friends [...] completely free of such a vice.²⁸ (Emphasis added).

Ridolfi's comments lead one to think that he suspected the contrary of what he was claiming, but did not have the nerve to say it openly (he was, after all, writing in the 1950s).

More recently, and in a much more liberal intellectual climate, Guido Ruggiero tantalizingly pursued the idea that, in his youth, Machiavelli might have engaged sexually with both men and women, but then dropped it as an "admittedly highly problematic reading" of Vettori's comment.²⁹ Not so Haig Patapan, who not only pointed out Machiavelli's easy going acceptance of his friends' same-sex activities, but went on to say that even though Machiavelli was clearly "a lover of women," his advice to Vettori

to act on love and regret later and his observation that "whoever is considered wise by day will not be considered crazy by night" so that "instead of being called a sodomite or a lecher, people will say he is well rounded, easy going, and a boon companion" (Machiavelli to Vettori, 5 January 1514, L227, 273) suggest that he would not have denied himself the opportunity.³⁰

Machiavelli's same-sex experiences may not all have been for pleasure. In an interview published in the newspaper *Corriere della sera*, William Connell suggested that, as a youth of twelve to fourteen years of age, Machiavelli may have been sexually abused by his teacher-priest, Ser Paolo Sassi da Ronciglione, an experience that, Connell goes on to say, may be a factor in explaining his

28. "Nessuno, ch'io sappia ha mai sospettato il M. di aver ceduto al vizio del tempo e del luogo, il 'vizio fiorentino'. Qualche dubbio in proposito potrebbe essere suscitato dalla sua canzonetta *Se avessi l'arco e l'ale / giovanetto giulio*, da certe parole di una lettera a Francesco Vettori [...] Bisogna dunque concludere, senza escludere certamente la possibilità di qualche singola curiosità ed esperienza, che il M. fosse, quasi solo fra i suoi amici [...], affatto netto di tale vizio." Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli*. 2nd ed. rev. (Rome: Angelo Bolardetti, 1954), 389–90n32.

29. Ruggiero, 129.

30. Haig Patapan, *Machiavelli in Love: The Modern Politics of Love and Fear* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), 42n79.

strong anticlericalism.³¹ The suggestion was strongly challenged by Francesco Bausi who, having claimed that nothing whatsoever leads us to doubt Ser Paolo Sassi's upright moral standing, does nonetheless admit that Machiavelli probably did have a homosexual relationship, but does not expand on this suggestion.³² Connell defended himself against Bausi's attack in a brief follow-up note in the same journal saying that his was just a hypothesis based on his close reading of Vettori's letter to Machiavelli of 16 January 1515.³³ Very recently, new documentation discovered by Robert Black points out very clearly that Ser Paolo Sassi did, in fact, abuse his students sexually, so much so that he was "summarily dismissed from his post as grammar master in the Florentine cathedral school at the end of January 1495 for violating a pupil or pupils in the cathedral choir, access to which he was henceforth forbidden."³⁴ Black's discovery proves that Connell was absolutely correct about Sassi's predatory nature and, therefore, that he stood on solid ground when advancing the hypothesis that Machiavelli may have been sexually abused by his teacher.

Machiavelli was not the only Florentine youth engaging, willingly or unwillingly, in sex with fellow males. Adolescent same-sex activity was something of a phase that many, if not most, Florentine males went through in their growth to adulthood. As Rocke points out, such activity became problematic only when adult men did not abandon this adolescent phase of homosexual activity, but continued to be sexually active with younger males well into their mature years (that is, into their thirties, forties, and fifties). Old man Nicia thus seems to fall into this category, as did Machiavelli's friends Donato

31. Alessandra Farkas, "Machiavelli molestato da piccolo da un prete" [interview with William J. Connell], *Corriere della sera* (11 November 2005), online, http://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Spettacoli/2005/11_Novembre/07/machiavelli.shtml?refresh_ce-cp, and also on William Connell's web page, accessed 1 November 2016, <https://www.academia.edu>.

32. Francesco Bausi, "Machiavelli molestato? (in difesa di ser Paolo Sassi)," *Interpres* 24 (2005): 266–71.

33. William J. Connell, "Le molestie del Machiavelli," *Interpres* 28 (2009): 266–67. For the letter itself, see Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 3, *Lettere*, ed. Franco Gaeta (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1984), 486–88.

34. Robert Black, "Machiavelli and the Grammarians: Benedetto Riccardini and Paolo Sassi da Ronciglione," *Archivio storico italiano* 173.3 (2015): 460–61. See also his summary of the Connell/Bausi controversy in his "The School of San Lorenzo, Niccolò Machiavelli, Paolo Sassi, and Benedetto Riccardini," in *Essays in Renaissance Thought and Letters in Honor of John Monfasani*, ed. Alison Frazier and Patrick Nold (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 107–33, 112–13.

del Corno, Giuliano Brancacci, Giovanni Machiavelli, and others.³⁵ With this in mind, Nicia's description of what he did with the "young scoundrel" he picked up on the street the previous night seems to have the hallmarks of a same-sex encounter between an older male "John" and a young male prostitute.³⁶

In the description of Nicia's delight at the sight of the young man's "flesh" and the implication that he may be more interested in young men than in his wife, it is not clear whether Machiavelli is critiquing same-sex interests. What is perhaps clear is that he may be critiquing heteronormative expectations that everyone should marry. In that same letter in which he gave Machiavelli advice on how to deal with young Ludovico, who was cavorting perhaps even sexually with a male friend, Vettori followed up his rhetorical question "So what? Perhaps even in these things there's nothing bad" with a revealing comment that clearly indicated that marriage was not the natural or preferred choice either for himself or for Machiavelli:

But sometimes we accuse Nature with being a stepmother, when we should, instead, accuse our parents. You, if had you known yourself well, you would never have taken a wife. If my father had known my character and habits, he would never have tied me to a wife because Nature made me for games and joking, not for chasing after profit, even less for family matters. But my wife and daughters have compelled me to change, which cannot happen to anyone happily.³⁷

The same may well apply to Nicia. By presenting Nicia as a "gay" man obliged to take a wife and sire children because of his society's heteronormative expectations, Machiavelli may be pointing out the difficulties that arise from such marriages—starting with the subterfuges an adult male has to engage in when trying to prove both his manhood and his heterosexuality and ending with the

35. Patapan, 42n78; Ruggiero, 126; Rocke, 151.

36. On these "Encounters," see the subsection by that title in Rocke, 151–61.

37. "sed nos aliquando naturam ipsam tamquam novercam incusamus, cum potius parentes aut nos ipsos incusare deberemus. Tu, si te ipsum bene novisses, numquam uxorem duxisses; pater meus, si ingenium, si mores meos scisset, me numquam uxori alligasset, quippe quem ad ludos, ad iocos natura genuerat, lucris non inhiantem, rei familiari minime intentum. Sed uxor, filie ingenium me mutare coegerunt, quod nemini feliciter succedere potest." Machiavelli, *Opere*, vol. 3, *Lettere*, 536.

unhappiness of a *malmaritata*, that is, of a badly married wife, who has to live her life as an unwanted and undesired partner.

Machiavelli's critique of marriage in these terms is quite a novelty on the Italian stage at several levels.³⁸ First of all, none of the Graeco-Roman comedies that served as a model for the erudite theatre of sixteenth-century Italy ended with the establishment of a long-term adulterous relationship between a nubile young man and a married woman; and neither did any of the contemporary religious or secular theatre performed in Italy in the years before Machiavelli's *Mandragola*. Ariosto's *La Cassaria*, of 1508, for example, and his *I Suppositi* of 1509, ended with the marriage of the young nubile lover and his young nubile beloved, while Bernardo Dovizi's *La Calandria*, of 1513, ended with a marriage between the young man and an appropriate young woman who was suddenly brought forth out of nowhere as a suitable bride for him. In ending his comedy with the establishment of a permanent adulterous relationship, Machiavelli was being radically innovative, breaking taboos that had stood for close to two millennia on the classical and modern stage. He would soon be followed in this by Ludovico Ariosto who, in his *La Lena* of 1528, brought to the stage a long-established adulterous arrangement that continued, unchanged, even after the comedy was over. Later in the century, the Florentine notary and dramatist Giovan Maria Cecchi would again conclude one of his comedies with an adultery, a double one this time: his *L'Assiuolo* (The horned owl), of 1549, ends with the two young men in the play, both first-year students at the University of Pisa, seducing two young married women in town and setting up two adulterous relationships that will last them the length of their university careers. Briefly put, Machiavelli's "adulterous" solution to a mismatched and unhappy marriage broke new ground on the Italian stage and served as a model

38. Though a novelty on the stage, similar critiques of marriage were not unusual in the Italian *novella* tradition. A number of stories in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* tell of enterprising men and women who set up (at times fairly permanent or at least, accepted) adulterous relationships or engage in threesomes to the pleasure of all involved; see, for example, stories 3.6 and 6.7 (adultery) or 5.10 (a bisexual threesome). For Machiavelli's debts to Boccaccio see, among others, Gay Bardin, "Machiavelli Reads Boccaccio: *Mandragola* between *Decameron* and *Corbaccio*," *Italian Quarterly* 38 (2001): 5–26; Daria Perocco, "Boccaccio (comico) nel teatro (comico) di Machiavelli," *Quaderns d'Italia* 14 (2009): 23–36; and Salvatore Di Maria, *The Poetics of Imitation in the Italian Theatre of the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), ch. 2 on "Machiavelli's *Mandragola*."

for subsequent plays depicting young *malmaritate*, their hapless husbands, and their willing lovers.³⁹

A second innovation to note is that no comedy till now, whether ancient or modern, had brought to the stage a married man who was more interested in younger men than in his wife. In so doing, Machiavelli was, once again, clearly breaking new ground for Renaissance theatre.

Third, in his critique of contemporary marriage patterns that saw mature men marry teenaged women, Machiavelli broke yet another important taboo—the canonical impediment of *crimen*, or crime, that is, the regulation that prohibits a man from marrying the widow with whom he had committed adultery while her husband was alive.⁴⁰ This impediment is broken (in intention if not yet in fact) by Callimaco the morning after his night with Lucrezia. As Callimaco tells Ligurio,

after I revealed myself to her and let her understand the love I bore for her, and how easily on account of her husband's foolishness we could live happily and without infamy, and after promising that, whenever God disposed of him, I would take her as my wife [...] she drew a few sighs and said: [...] I take you as my lord, master, and guide; you my father, you my defender, and you, I want, will be all my wealth.⁴¹

39. On Machiavelli's influence on Italian sixteenth-century comedy, see, among others, Giorgio Padoan, "Il tramonto di Machiavelli," *Lettere italiane* 33 (1981): 457–81; Francesco Bausi, "Machiavelli e la commedia fiorentina di primo Cinquecento," in *Il teatro di Machiavelli*, ed. Gennaro Barbarisi and Anna Maria (Milan: Monduzzi, 2005), 1–20; and M. C. Figorilli, "La presenza del teatro di Machiavelli in alcune commedie fiorentine degli anni Trenta e Cinquanta del Cinquecento," in *Il teatro di Machiavelli*, ed. Gennaro Barbarisi and Anna Maria (Milan: Monduzzi, 2005), 501–26.

40. "The respect due to marriage has caused to be prohibited the union of persons who have attacked the sanctity of the marriage of one or other of the parties by killing his or her partner, or by committing adultery with a promise of marriage or an attempted marriage; that is the impediment of crime (*crimen*).” See "Canonical Impediments," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online, accessed 1 November 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07695a.htm>, *ad vocem*.

41. "Ma poi che io me le fu' dato a conoscere, e ch'io l'ebbi dato ad intendere lo amore che io le portavo, e quanto facilmente, per la semplicità del marito, noi potavano vivere felici senza infamia alcuna, promettendole che qualunque volta Dio facessi altro di lui, di prenderla per donna [...] doppio qualche sospiro disse: [...] io ti prendo per signore, padrone, guida: tu mio padre, tu mio difensore, e tu voglio che sia ogni mio bene [...]" (5.4, 163–64).

In other words, Callimaco promises marriage to Lucrezia once she becomes a widow, and she accepts, putting herself completely in his hands. This is *crimen*.

Callimaco's promise of marriage to Lucrezia and her response to his promise are also close to constituting a clandestine marriage, though technically this is not the case; the early modern oath of marriage, "I am yours," is not pronounced by either partner *per verba de praesentis* (in the present tense), as would have been required for a marriage to take place, but Lucrezia's words do seem to come awfully close to it: "I take you for my lord, master, guide: you my father, you my defender, and you, I want, to be my every good." If they are not married, they may well be engaged—Lucrezia's husband, Nicia, seems to suggest this when, in the final scene of the play, he invites Callimaco to "take the hand" ("Maestro, toccate la mano qui alla donna mia"; 5.6) of Lucrezia on their way to church, a clear linguistic allusion to the ritual of the *toccamano* or handshake that sealed an engagement in early modern Italy.⁴²

Though Lucrezia puts herself in Callimaco's hands, the same is not true for Callimaco. Just as he had been up to now, Callimaco continues to be duplicitous towards her, and he does so in a very Machiavellian way. He clearly takes advantage of Lucrezia's gullibility to serve his own needs and desires. While he only *promises* marriage to her, she, on the other hand, thinks a marriage of sorts *is taking place* and responds with a clear paraphrase of the "I am yours" marriage formula—three words that Erasmus of Rotterdam famously described as "a short song, all right, but it has a long finale."⁴³

The immorality evident throughout *Mandragola* carries with it a complementary disregard for human life. We have already seen how easily Nicia and Lucrezia are prepared to sacrifice a stranger's life for the sake of getting Lucrezia pregnant. A similar disregard for human life is evident in both Ligurio and Friar Timoteo when they discuss the possibility of procuring an abortion for a young woman left in the care of a nunnery (3.4). Ligurio asks Timoteo to help convince the mother abbess to give the girl an abortifacient, that is, a potion that will induce her to abort. In his attempt to convince the friar, Ligurio offers him some money, allegedly to be used as "alms" for the

42. On the complex undercurrent of this final scene, see Pasquale Stoppelli, "L'ultima scena della *Mandragola*," *Studi e testi italiani* 10 (2002): 25–39. See also Daria Perocco, "Il rito finale della *Mandragola*," *Lettere italiane* 25 (1973): 531–37.

43. Desiderius Erasmus, *Colloquies*, trans. and annotated by Craig R. Thompson, *Collected Works of Erasmus in English* 39 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 264.

poor, and then describes the foetus as “a piece of unborn flesh, without feeling, that could be lost in a thousand ways.”⁴⁴ With the bribe and the explanation nicely aired in front of him, Friar Timoteo readily agrees to assist in procuring the abortion and, following his own self-serving logic, says: “So be it, in God’s name. Let’s do as you wish and let’s do it for God’s and for charity’s sake. Tell me which monastery it is, give me the potion, and, if you think, this money so that some good can come out of it.”⁴⁵ Ligurio has played Friar Timoteo well, but Machiavelli even more so. In his characterization of the friar, Machiavelli has created a duplicitous character who exemplifies some of the major failing of the contemporary Church—at least as far as Machiavelli sees it. In exposing Friar Timoteo’s hypocrisy, his overwhelming concern with acquiring money, his focus on the externals of religion, his need to keep up appearances, in all these matters Machiavelli is critiquing the late-medieval/early Renaissance Church, ironically at the same time when Luther was raising these criticisms north of the Alps (that is, if we accept Roberto Ridolfi’s dating of the play to January–February 1518).⁴⁶

Machiavelli’s criticism of the Church as represented by Friar Timoteo includes a critique of the Church’s understanding of women’s role in society. Friar Timoteo’s view of women is quite negative; he claims that “all women are short on brains; as soon as one of them knows enough to say two words, everyone sings her praises because in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king.”⁴⁷ Two scenes later, he seeks to convince Lucrezia to go along with the mandrake potion plan on the grounds that “your purpose in life is to fill a seat in paradise, [and] to please your husband”⁴⁸—that is to say, in Friar Timoteo’s view, and by extension in the eyes of the Church, a woman’s purpose is to bear

44. “un pezzo di carne non nata, senza senso, che in mille modi si può sperdere” (3.4, 139).

45. “Sia col nome di Dio. Faccisi ciò che voi volete, e per Dio e per carità sia fatto ogni cosa. Ditemi el munistero, datemi la pozione, e, se vi pare, cotesti danari, da potere cominciare a fare qualche bene” (3.4, 140).

46. Ridolfi, 256. Ridolfi’s unilateral and unsubstantiated dating is highly problematic and has been strongly challenged by, among others, Sergio Bertelli who, tearing down every argument advanced by Ridolfi, lays open the dating to any time between 1504 and 1519; see Sergio Bertelli, “When Did Machiavelli Write *Mandragola*?” *Renaissance Quarterly* 24.3 (1971): 317–26.

47. “tutte le donne hanno poco cervello; e come n’è una che sappi dire dua parole, e’ se ne predica, perché in terra di ciechi chi v’ha un occhio è signore” (3.9, 143).

48. “el fine vostro si è riempire una sedia in paradiso, contentare el marito vostro” (3.11, 145).

children and make her husband happy. This may well have been the attitude of most males in Florence at the time, and Machiavelli may well have shared it—his low opinion of women is evidenced in many of his writings.⁴⁹ Yet, in this play and without being a feminist *ante litteram*, Machiavelli does seem to critique Friar Timoteo and, by extension, the Church for placing women in an inferior, even servile position vis-à-vis men.

Friar Timoteo is not, however, the only character in the play to adhere to this gendered hierarchy. Even the women abide by it. We have already seen how Lucrezia is quick to change “lords” and submit herself, completely, to the new man in her life—after their night of love-making she tells Callimaco that *he* will now be her “lord, master, and guide,” that she wants *him* to be her “defender” and that she is prepared to consider *him* to be “all her wealth” (5.4). In other words, having become aware of the deceptions played upon her by every other male around her, Lucrezia still cannot imagine the possibility of freeing herself from male control or domination in order to go it alone. Deceived and abused by the males around her, she continues to seek a male to “lord” it over her. That male will now be Callimaco, whom she sees as her superior in various categories—not only as *signore* (lord), *padrone* (master/owner), and *guida* (guide), but also as *padre* (father) and *difensore* (defender) (5.4).

Lucrezia's mother is not any more liberated than her daughter, even though in her youth she had been “good company” (*buona compagna*), meaning that she may have been a courtesan, and even though she is now so wealthy that Callimaco does not know how to handle her because she cannot be bought with money (1.1). Sostrata is clearly a woman who knows how to look after herself in a man's world and make herself wealthy enough to survive on her own; and yet, in spite of her entrepreneurship and wealth, even she cannot imagine a woman without a man. When trying to convince Lucrezia to accept the mandrake potion plan, she asks her daughter “Can't you see that a woman who has no children has no home? Once her husband dies she is left like an animal, abandoned by everyone.”⁵⁰ Strange words coming from a woman who seems to have made it on her own without the help of any husband.

49. For a brief but informative discussion of Machiavelli's attitude to women, see Unger, 110–12.

50. “Non vedi tu che una donna che non ha figliuoli non ha casa? Muorsi el marito, resta com'una bestia, abbandonata da ognuno” (3.11, 145).

Admittedly, the words spoken by both Lucrezia and Sostrata are composed by a male dramatist and placed into the mouth of a female persona created by his male imagination, yet they may not be uncharacteristic of women's thoughts on the matter—one finds that even flesh-and-bone, intelligent, learned women in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries voiced such hierarchically gendered concepts of themselves and women in general. One of the reasons for this is that women were, after all, the product of their times, their culture, and their education, all of which were “male” in both outlook and understanding. In putting such hierarchically gendered ideas on Lucrezia's or Sostrata's lips, Machiavelli was not necessarily criticizing contemporary society, but merely reflecting contemporary reality.

The deception fostered upon Lucrezia by the men around her may find an explanation in a verse from the prologue to the play. When introducing the cast of characters, the prologue describes Callimaco and Lucrezia as follows: “A young man, Callimaco Guadagni / just arrived from Paris, / lives there, by that door on the left. / [...] / A careful young woman / was greatly loved by him / and for this she was deceived, / as you will hear.”⁵¹ In other words, according to the prologue, love was the reason for the deception played upon Lucrezia. What does this say about Machiavelli's view of love? In *Mandragola*, love is either a disease that should be immediately treated as soon as it is caught—otherwise, if it is allowed to take hold, there is no cure for it (as Siro points out to Callimaco in 1.1)—or it is a complex series of emotions that develop over time and through a number of senses (as Callimaco, in turn, points out to Siro in that same scene). The debate is on, but it is a brief debate, for Siro's point is quickly cast aside and Callimaco's understanding of love as a process of emotional and sensual development takes centre stage. This is a nuanced understanding of love that starts in a somewhat unconventional manner for that time. Normally, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, love is sparked by direct visual contact with the object of desire—love enters the heart through the eyes. As the thirteenth-century Sicilian poet Jacopo da Lentini explained in his ground-breaking sonnet, “Love is a desire that comes from the heart / from an abundance of great pleasure; / and first the eyes generate love / and [then]

51. “Un giovane, Callimaco Guadagno, / venuto or da Parigi, / abita là, in quella sinistra porta. / [...] / Una giovane accorta / fu da lui molto amata, / e per questo ingannata / fu, come intenderete” (Prologo 114).

the heart gives it nourishment.”⁵² In Callimaco's case, however, this is not at all the process he underwent when he fell in love with Lucrezia.

Callimaco explains to Siro that he had been enjoying the good life in Paris—dividing his time between his studies, his pleasures, and his business, living quietly and happily, helping everyone and not offending anyone, respected by all, merchant or gentleman alike, local or foreign, rich or poor. His “good life” came to an end when Fortune “thinking [he] was having too good a time” (I.1) had him meet Camillo Calfucci, a Florentine merchant passing through Paris, who told him about a relative of his, the beautiful and virtuous Florentine woman Lucrezia Calfucci. With his curiosity sparked by the words of praise lavished upon this woman by one of her kin, Callimaco decided to go to Florence to see such a wonder. Once in Florence, the mere sight of Lucrezia sparked not his love for her, but his lust for her—as Callimaco says, “when I arrived I found Madonna Lucrezia's reputation to be much less than the reality, which is very rarely the case, and I caught fire with such a *desire to be with her* that I can't rest” (my emphasis).⁵³ From here on, Callimaco's references to his “love” for Lucrezia are, quite simply, references to his “desire to be with her,” that is, to his physical lust for her—he just wants to enjoy her sexually, and that is all. There is no higher motive, just plain and simple male lust for a beautiful woman. Because of this, Callimaco focuses on, and is satisfied with, the opportunity to have a one-night stand, as it were, with Lucrezia. He has no intention whatsoever of starting a long-term relationship with her. It will be Ligurio, the mastermind behind the mandrake root deception, who, much later in the play (4.2), will tell Callimaco not to waste all their scheming and hard work on a one-night stand, but to see to it that this single encounter becomes a stable, long-term arrangement. Callimaco is caught by surprise at this suggestion—all along he had been thinking of a conquest, and not of a relationship.

Ligurio's advice to Callimaco on how to turn this one-night stand into a permanent arrangement is also not based on any concept of “love” as we

52. Jacopo da Lentini, “Amore è un[o] desio che ven da' core / per abbondanza di gran piacimento; / e li occhi in prima genera[n] l'amore / e lo core li dà nutricamento,” in *Antologia della poesia italiana*, ed. Cesare Segre and Carlo Ossola (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 49.

53. “dove arrivato, ho trovato la fama di Madonna Lucrezia essere minore assai che la verità, il che occorre rarissime volte, e sommi acceso in tanto desiderio d'esser seco, che io non truovo loco” (I.1, 118–19).

might understand it—it is based, instead, on cold Machiavellian calculation. As Ligurio explains to Callimaco,

In order to win her over tonight, before you leave let her know, reveal this deception to her, show her the love you bear for her, tell her how much you love her and how, without shame, she can be your friend or, with great shame, your enemy. It's impossible she will not agree with you or that she will want this night to be the only night.⁵⁴

The basic point in Ligurio's advice is that, in order to get Lucrezia to agree to extend their one-night stand into a long-term relationship, Callimaco should, quite simply, blackmail her with the threat of publicly exposing her adultery and thereby ruining her reputation. Clearly, there is very little "love" present, even in Ligurio's understanding of human relationships. Even at the end of the play, when all has been resolved and Lucrezia has agreed to become Callimaco's long-term mistress, there is still no understanding of a "love" relationship between them that might extend beyond sexual attraction and erotic satisfaction (mixed, in Lucrezia's case, with a healthy dose of revenge).

In Lucrezia's case, acceptance of the new relationship is not the result of a sudden awareness of feelings of love for her new sexual partner, but the result of a new understanding of an old power structure—she has replaced one master with another, an ineffectual and incompetent male with a determined and successful one, a beta-dog with an alpha-dog. The next morning Nicia might well comment that Lucrezia suddenly "seems cocky" ("pare un gallo"; 5.5), but the truth of the matter is that she has traded a hapless husband she could control for a determined lover who has played her well—in short, she has gone from bad to worse.

In the wake of the successful seduction, Callimaco's desire for Lucrezia remains a matter of lust and not love. Even though he promises marriage to her once she is widowed of Nicia, there is nothing in his words that might suggest a new understanding of love or a valid conjugal commitment to her. His promise of marriage to her remains an empty word because the *crimen* it

54. "Che tu te la guadagni in questa notte, e che, inanzi che tu ti parta, te le dia a conoscere, scuoprare lo inganno, mostrile l'amore le porti, dicale el bene le vuoi; e come senza sua infamia la può esser tua amica, e con sua grande infamia tua nimica. È impossibile che la non convenghi teco e che la voglia che questa notte sia sola" (4.2, 151).

entails will be sufficient grounds to block such a marriage should he ever wish to extricate himself from the promise he made to her. At the end of the play, Callimaco declares "I find myself to be the happiest and most content man in the world; and if death or time do not take this happiness away from me, I will be more blessed than the blessed, more saint than the saints."⁵⁵ That's not at all surprising: Callimaco has returned to "the good life" a young man can enjoy here on earth with no thought about consequences or punishments either in this or the other life. In fact, his only worry now is that time or death might take it all away. What he has learned from this adventure is that nothing is permanent, whether that be Lucrezia's chastity or his own "good life."

So, what is Machiavelli saying in this play about sex and marriage? Perhaps Callimaco's servant, Siro, had the right take on marriage when he recalled the Italian proverb "God makes them and they pair themselves off" (*Dio fa gli uomini, e' si appaiono!*), but then quickly remarked that this is not quite correct because "often one sees a well qualified man draw (*sortire*) a beast of a woman and, vice versa, a prudent woman have a crazy man."⁵⁶ That is, marriage is often a mismatch. In Siro's view, marriage is a game of chance in which the luck of the draw (*sortire*) means that one never knows what one will get. This may well have been inevitable in a marriage market based on commercial, political, or dynastic considerations. Although far from advancing the idea of free, personal choice in finding a compatible marriage partner, Machiavelli was, at least in this play, pointing out that the current system of arranged marriages between spouses a generation apart was not really working well at the level of personal happiness or sexual satisfaction for either partner. Under cover of entertainment and humour, Machiavelli was thus raising important questions about contemporary marriage patterns that saw older men marry much younger women, unhappy couples withhold the marriage debt, heteronormative expectations induce "gay" men to marry, societal pressures oblige women to bear children, the wish for an heir lead people to engage in criminal action, and gendered attitudes to sexuality determine what constituted a man's "honour" or a woman's "worth."

55. "io mi truovo el più felice e contento uomo che fussi mai nel mondo; e se questa felicità non mi mancassi o per morte o per tempo, io sarei più beato ch'è beati, più santo che e' santi" (5.4, 164).

56. "spesso si vede uno uomo ben qualificato sortire una bestia, e per avverso, una prudente donna avere un pazzo" (1.3, 123).