

Fortune is a Friend to the Young: The Triumph of Life and Love in a Fallen World

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Infernal comedy has been described as “a state in which grace is utterly absent and where selfishness and malice prevail.”² Recognizing that the community found in such comedies “has accepted its fallen condition and cynically attributes its corruption to ‘the way of the world,’”³ this infernal realm is “[o]ften interpreted as nihilistic,” but it is generally “the most severely moral of all the guises of comedy.”⁴ Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* is one such infernal comedy that has been mistakenly interpreted in a nihilistic, “Machiavellian,” manner.⁵ But to understand *Mandragola* as

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² Louise Cowan, “Introduction: The Comic Terrain,” in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 11.

³ Cowan, “Introduction,” 11.

⁴ Cowan, “Introduction,” 13.

⁵ Harvey C. Mansfield, “The Cuckold in Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*,” in *The Comedy and Tragedy of Machiavelli: Essays on the Literary Works*, Edited by Vickie Sullivan (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); William P. Baumgarth, “Deception and Enlightenment: The Politics of Machiavelli’s *The Mandragola*,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 44, no. 1 (2015).

Machiavellian is to miss the striving inherent in this comedy, like all comedy, towards a better world. "Comedy endures and perseveres in a fallen world, . . . making its way by mutual helpfulness toward a community of love within the larger order of society."⁶ It seeks to "bring life back to a degraded and disintegrating city."⁷ In comedy, "[b]lessedness and celebration are the proper state of humanity, a condition to be achieved only by audacity, [by] a certain goodhearted rascality and cheerful resourcefulness that ensure survival."⁸

Machiavelli illustrates the movement from disorder, from the infernal, towards the hope of happiness through an inversion of allusions. Rather than the Archangel Raphael helping the pious Tobias to marry Sara in purity, Ligurio helps Callimaco to seduce Lucrezia to satisfy his lust. Rather than the daughters of Lot having intercourse with their father based on a mistake, *Frate* Timeoteo uses sophistry to persuade Lucrezia to have intercourse with a stranger. And in contrast to the Roman Lucretia, whose honor is undoubted by her husband and confirmed by her suicide, Lucrezia's husband commands her to suffer dishonor, and the risk that her actions may cause the death of another. Machiavelli's allusions serve to illustrate the fallenness of the world in the play, and also serve to show that there is still hope. Callimaco is not a virtuous Tobias, but he is also not a violent Sextus. Callimaco's night of union with Lucrezia, rather than serving as a mere slaking of his lust, is the moment at which he moves out of the region of the infernal and can finally "win the lovely lady."⁹ The play ends, not with Messer Nicia acquiring his desired heir, or with Callimaco conquering Lucrezia, but with Messer Nicia giving her hand to Callimaco in a church (5.6.54) in what appears most like a marriage founded on Callimaco's genuine commitment to stay true to his beloved and serve as her "defender." (5.4.52).

⁶ Cowan, "Introduction," 10.

⁷ Louise Cowan, "Aristophanes' Comic Apocalypse," in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 62.

⁸ Cowan, "Aristophanes," 69.

⁹ Cowan, "Introduction," 12.

A PARASITE, THE DARLING OF MALICE

While Ligurio was a marriage broker, there is apparently no marriage to broker in *Mandragola's* Florence and Ligurio has been relegated to "begging suppers and dinners." (1.1.14). Callimaco, who presumably would have been the appropriate marriage prospect for Lucrezia, has been in France since he was ten, staying there from his twentieth to his thirtieth years because of "the wars in Italy which ruined this country." (1.1.12). In the meantime, Lucrezia has been married off to Messer Nicia, who is substantially older than her, and apparently impotent (1.1.14). Moreover, it is apparent that Messer Nicia's decision to marry Lucrezia was not a result of any love or devotion to her, as he comments that if he had "believed I wasn't going to have any children, I'd sooner have taken a country girl for a wife" (2.5.23). Perhaps Ligurio was the broker of Messer Nicia's and Lucrezia's marriage, as he is "very familiar" with Messer Nicia, but Nicia nevertheless does not "bring him in to eat with him;" he only lends him money, another sign that Ligurio is no longer able to practice his trade (1.1.14-15).¹⁰ While Messer Nicia keeps Ligurio at arm's length for some unknown reason, Callimaco and his servant, Siro, are quite clear that they do not consider Ligurio a naturally trustworthy individual. Callimaco comments that "the likes of you live by cheating men" (1.3.18) and Siro questions the likelihood that Ligurio will be faithful (1.1.15). Callimaco, however, has entrusted the matter of facilitating the seduction of Lucrezia to Ligurio, counting on Ligurio's desire for reward as sufficient guarantee of good faith (*Ibid.*). Moreover, Callimaco threatens to get revenge on Ligurio if he is unfaithful (1.3.18). Ligurio proclaims his faithfulness on grounds that go well beyond hope of reward: "Don't doubt my faith, because even if the profit I sense and hope for were not here, your blood is in accord with mine, and I desire for you to satisfy this desire of yours almost as much as you do yourself" (*Ibid.*). Ligurio, the marriage broker who instead brokers adultery, serves as a distorted analogue to the Archangel Raphael in the story of Tobias and Sarah.

¹⁰ Nicia is also sufficiently acquainted with Lucrezia's mother that he is confident that she will assist in convincing Lucrezia to go through with the *mandragola* plan. (2.6.26).

It is *Frate* Timoteo who first draws attention to the story of Raphael's assistance in the Book of Tobit, promising Lucrezia to say a prayer to the archangel "so that he'll accompany you." (3.11.36). The comparison with the story of Raphael, Tobias, and Sarah, is particularly helpful in drawing out the fallen nature of the world that Lucrezia lives in. "In the infernal state the pretty girl, who is one of the chief identifying marks of comedy, is either absent or, if she does enter the boundaries of this dark region, victimized. Lust, avarice, hypocrisy, and treachery are the vices most prevalent in this doleful city."¹¹ Ligurio serves in the place of Raphael, not being sent by God, but hired by Callimaco. (1.1.14-15). The demon Asmodeus murders Sarah's husbands because he is in love with her,¹² while Messer Nicia marries Lucrezia to get an heir. (2.5.23).

Lucrezia, in turn, has been praying. But whereas Sarah prays to be released from reproach, we do not know what Lucrezia is praying for. Messer Nicia complains that "she stays on her knees for four hours, stringing together Our Fathers." (2.6.24). As one critic points out, "Remembering that this is a comedy, this information is quite amusing. Here is a man who is frustrated that his wife is not pregnant, yet she stays on her knees praying late into the cold night —perhaps until her husband is asleep."¹³ In addition, Lucrezia's string of prayers would have each ended with *sed libera nos a malo*, deliver us from evil, but it seems more likely that the evil she wanted to be delivered from was her husband. Messer Nicia, then, becomes a somewhat ridiculous demon compared with Asmodeus.

At Raphael's direction, Tobias and Sarah pray before laying down for the night, saying in part,

You made Adam and gave him Eve his wife
as a helper and support. From them the race
of mankind has sprung.

¹¹ Cowan, "Introduction," 11.

¹² Tob. 6:13.

¹³ Susan Behuniak-Long, "The Significance of Lucrezia in Machiavelli's *La Mandragola*," *The Review of Politics* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 268.

You said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; Let us make a helper for him like himself.'

And now, O Lord, I am not taking this sister of mine because of lust, but with sincerity. Grant that I may find mercy and may grow old together with her.¹⁴

Tobias' prayer emphasizes the goodness of marriage, the importance of avoiding lust, and the value of growing old together. Ligurio, however, has been engaged to assist Callimaco to violate the sanctity of a marriage, in fulfillment of Callimaco's lust, and with no prior intention of more than a one-night affair. (1.1.14-15). It is, however, noteworthy, that it is Ligurio, the fallen archangel, who suggests a continuation of the illicit relationship. Ligurio suggests that Callimaco should "do what you can to return there." (4.2.42). But even in suggesting a more permanent relationship, Ligurio couples his advice that Callimaco "show her the love you bear her, tell her of the good you wish her" with the implicit threat that "without scandal she can be your friend, and with great scandal, your enemy." (*Ibid.*).

Ligurio never reveals why he desires for Callimaco "to satisfy this desire of yours almost as much as you do yourself." (1.3.18). Nor does he reveal why he recommends that Callimaco continue his relationship with Lucrezia. Interestingly, and in marked contrast to the ill-living *frate*, Ligurio no mention of any payment or profit at the end of the play.¹⁵ Like Raphael, Ligurio seems to have been adequately paid by facilitating the match. He has rescued Lucrezia, but from her husband.

AN ILL-LIVING FRATE

Comedy, in Aristophanes' plays, consists of two worlds, including "one [that] is debased and dangerously declining.... at war, taught by sophists,

¹⁴ Tob. 8:6-7.

¹⁵ See John Bernard, "Writing and the Paradox of the Self: Machiavelli's Literary Vocation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 83, where he notes that when Ligurio "learns that his protégé has heeded his advice and effected a permanent change in the play's social configuration, he says nothing more about a material reward."

vitiated by pretense, racked by vanity and the love of money, rent by constant recourse to courts of law.”¹⁶ The character *Frate Timoteo* beautifully illustrates this Aristophanic world in Florence. Timoteo is a friar of special devotion, chastising his brother friars for their failure to encourage devotion, and presumably therefore donations, among the faithful. (5.1.49; 3.4.30). And his efforts on behalf of Messer Nicia and Lucrezia did not go without notice, as Nicomaco, the lecherous old man who is fooled in Machiavelli’s *Clizia*, claims that through *Frate Timoteo*’s prayers a miracle occurred, that is, Lucrezia became pregnant. (C 2.3.21). Nicomaco’s less credulous wife suggests that it is no miracle for a monk to make a woman pregnant; it would only be a miracle if it had been a nun (*Ibid.*).

While it appears that Timoteo does not lack for sexual desire, commenting that Callimaco and Lucrezia will not sleep during their night together, “because I know if I were he and you were she, we wouldn’t sleep” (4.10.48), he appears to be more consistently driven by avarice. The audience’s first experience of him is a brief interchange between a woman who has donated money for him to say mass on behalf of her deceased husband, which leads to a brief monologue about having to put up with the annoyances of women in order to make a profit, as “there’s no honey without flies.” (3.4.30). But Timoteo’s desire for wealth is not limited to taking the money of annoying though apparently pious women, as Ligurio proceeds to lead the *frate* to agree, in exchange for money for Timoteo to “distribute” (3.4.31), to convince a young girl to take a potion that would cause her to miscarry and, thereby cover up the presumed sexual sin of the girl and the negligence (or complicity) of the nuns caring for her by an abortion of the resulting child. (3.4.31-32). Having led Timoteo to offer his assistance, it is relatively simple for Ligurio to coax the *frate* to agree to facilitate Callimaco’s plan to spend the night with Lucrezia, lest the promised “alms” not be given. (3.6.32-33). Timoteo knows he was duped, but he also knows he will be able to profit from the situation, as Messer Nicia will have dishonored his wife by coercing her to adultery and will (erroneously) believe that he has caused the death of

¹⁶ Cowan, “Aristophanes,” 69.

a stranger, and Callimaco will likewise want to avoid widespread knowledge of the adultery.¹⁷

Frate Timoteo's avarice-driven sophistry is on full display during his meeting with Lucrezia and her mother. Having agreed to dupe Lucrezia moments before she arrives,¹⁸ Timoteo tells Lucrezia that he has been at his "books more than two hours studying this case," and has found "many things both in particular and in general, that work for us." (3.11.35). Timoteo first argues:

1. Where there is a certain good and an uncertain evil, one should never leave that good for fear of that evil.
2. Here it is certain good, that you will become pregnant, will acquire a soul for our Lord.
3. The uncertain evil is that the one who will lie with you after you take the potion may die; but those who don't die are also found.
4. But because the thing is doubtful, it is therefore well that Messer Nicia not run that risk. (3.11.35-36).

There are a variety of problems with Timoteo's argument. For instance, he uses the phrase "certain good" in an ambiguous fashion. Acquiring a soul for God, and perhaps becoming pregnant, might be goods, but it is difficult to understand what he means by saying that they are "certain good." Acquiring a soul for God would seem to be undoubtedly a good. And becoming pregnant, in accordance with sexual morality, would seem

¹⁷ "It's true that I've been duped; nevertheless, this trick is to my profit. Messer Nicia and Callimaco are rich, and, *in different ways*, I'll get a lot from each of them; it's convenient for the thing to be kept secret, because telling it matters as much to them as to me." (3.9.34) (emphasis added).

¹⁸ At the end of his discussion with Ligurio and Messer Nicia, Timoteo tells them to wait inside the church until after the women come and go, and that he will wait for them. (3.8.34). The *frate* then has a brief monologue, at the end of which he mentions that Lucrezia and her mother have arrived. (3.9.34).

to be undoubtedly a good. But presumably he is not claiming that a pregnancy that directly results from adultery is undoubtedly good. The meaning of “certain,” in turn, remains unclear. Does “certain” mean the same as “undoubtedly,” or is he claiming that it is certain, guaranteed, that the good of pregnancy and acquiring a soul for God will occur?

Similar problems occur by considering the “uncertain evil.” The *frate* claims that “those who don’t die are also found,” but there is nothing in the story that Callimaco told Messer Nicia that would support this claim. Rather, Callimaco is quite clear that “the man who first has to do with her after she has taken this potion dies within eight days, and all the world can’t save him.” (2.6.25).

Finally, the last portion of Timoteo’s argument concludes with a claim that fundamentally undermines his initial premise. If it is a certain good that Lucrezia would become pregnant, and only an uncertain evil that Messer Nicia would die from sleeping with her that first night, then it is no longer clear why Messer Nicia should not sleep with her. The *frate*’s first claim, after all, was that “one should never leave that [certain] good for fear of that [uncertain] evil.” (3.11.35).

Lucrezia does not appear to catch the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the *frate*’s sophistic argument, and he quickly moves to a second line of attack. His first argument explained why she would do not wrong in participating in something that might result in the death of a stranger. Timoteo next argues that Lucrezia will not have sinned by the adulterous union:

1. As to the act, that it might be a sin, that is a fable, because the will is what sins, not the body;¹⁹

¹⁹ *Frate* Timoteo would appear to be alluding to the words of the Christ: “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” Matt. 15:17-19.

2. And what causes it to be a sin is displeasing your husband – but you please him;
3. Taking pleasure in it – but you have no pleasure from it.
4. Besides this, the end has to be looked to in all things;
5. Your end is to fill a seat in paradise, to make your husband happy.
6. The Bible says that the daughters of Lot, believing themselves alone in the world, lay with their father; and because their intention was good, they didn't sin. (3.11.36).

Timoteo's description of the story of Lot and his daughters is a direct response to the second argument that Lucrezia had made to her mother. Lucrezia had first argued that it "seems to me the most strange: to have to submit my body to this disgrace, to be the cause that a man might die for disgracing me." (3.10.35). Timoteo's argument about certain and uncertain goods responded to Lucrezia's concern about causing the death of the stranger. Lucrezia's second argument is that, "if I were the only woman remaining in the world and if human nature had to rise again from me, I couldn't believe that such a course would be allowed to me." (*Ibid.*). That is, Lucrezia argues that even if the survival of humanity *did* depend on her, the adultery would not be allowed. Timoteo, on the other hand, argues that Lot's daughters did not sin merely because they (mistakenly) believed that the survival of humanity depended on them. But even if Timoteo's interpretation of the story of Lot is reasonable, it would not seem relevant to Lucrezia since they all know that humanity does not depend on her committing adultery. Presumably recognizing the weak point in this new argument, the *frate* has already taken the argument one step further. The question of Lot's daughters is whether they sinned by engaging in an illicit sexual act, but Timoteo implies that Lucrezia would sin by *not* engaging in the illicit sexual act.

The world of Timoteo “has allowed its codes to degenerate to the falsest of conventions.”²⁰ A *frate*, who should be supporting Lucrezia’s desire to act in accordance with what is right, instead uses his position of authority, his education in Scripture, and his education in logic to lead her astray. Twice Lucrezia asks him what he is telling her to do, “What are you persuading me to? . . . What are you leading me to, Padre?” (3.11.36). But he never gives her a straight answer. Rather, he tells her that obeying her husband in this case “is as much a matter of conscience as eating meat on Wednesday, which is a sin that goes away with holy water.” (*Ibid.*). And he tells her that he is leading her “to something for which you’ll always have a reason to pray to God for me.” (*Ibid.*). Instead of helping her, he blasphemously instructs her to leave so as to “prepare yourself for this mystery.” (*Ibid.*). Whereas the parasitic position of Ligurio highlights the degraded condition of marriage, the ill-living *frate* speaks to a more general decline, to a “degraded and disintegrating city.”²¹

A NOT-VERY-ASTUTE DOTTORE

The Roman historian Livy tells of the fall of the Roman monarchy due to the lasciviousness of Sextus Tarquinius, youngest son of King Tarquin. At a feast, the men began to praise their wives “extravagantly.”²² Collatinus claimed that “there was no need to talk,” as they could see for themselves that his wife, Lucretia, was the best. When the drunken revelers proceed to Collatinus’ home, they find Lucretia working with her maids by lamplight and Collatinus is declared the victor. Sextus, however, “was seized by the evil desire to debauch her, spurred on as he was by her beauty and redoubtable chastity.” Several days later, Sextus returns to Collatinus’ home, uninvited, and threatens to kill Lucretia if she does not succumb to his desire. After he threatens to kill her and leave her body in such a fashion that it would appear she had committed adultery with a slave, she relents.²³ But afterwards, she sends for her husband and his

²⁰ Cowan, “Introduction,” 12.

²¹ Cowan, “Aristophanes,” 62.

²² Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, 1.57.

²³ Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, 1.57.

friends, tells them what occurred and, while acknowledging that “only my body was defiled; my soul is not guilty,” she kills herself lest some “unchaste woman hereafter continue to live because of the precedent of Lucretia.”²⁴

The connection between the names of the heroines and certain similarities in their stories have long attracted the attention of commentators on *Mandragola*.²⁵ The play, however, provides relatively insight into Lucrezia’s thoughts and motivations. As one critic noted, “[m]ost of what we know of [her] is not from first-hand information but from what others say of her throughout the play.”²⁶ However, the absence of textual information has not resulted in a dearth of opinions, ranging from interpretations of Lucrezia as a virtuous woman who is fundamentally changed by the experience of seduction²⁷, a corrupt woman from the start glad for the opportunity²⁸, the instigator of the plot,²⁹ or, more dramatically, an allegory for the people of Florence.³⁰

Perhaps the apparent allusion to the story of Lucretia is more significant, however, in the inversion of the role of Collatinus and Messer Nicia. There is no reason to doubt that Collatinus loves Lucretia and wages war on his family (Collatinus also being of the house of Tarquin) in defense of her violated honor. Messer Nicia, on the other hand, presumably married Lucrezia because of her beauty, though it is his nephew who comments on it (1.1.13), but certainly because he anticipated

²⁴ Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, 1.57. In Livy’s account, the death of Lucretia leads Brutus and Collatinus lead a revolution against the Roman monarchy and the Roman Republic is established. (Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, 1.57). Machiavelli discusses these incidents in the *Discourses*. (D 3.2, 3.5.1).

²⁵ Baumgarth, “Deception,” 61.

²⁶ Behuniak-Long, “Significance,” 267-68.

²⁷ Joseph A. Barber, “The Irony of Lucrezia: Machiavelli’s *Donna di virtu*,” *Studies in Philology* 82, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 457.

²⁸ See generally Behuniak-Long, “Significance.”

²⁹ Heather Hadar Wright, “Lucrezia in *Mandragola*: Machiavelli’s New Prince,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 153-54.

³⁰ See Carnes Lord, “On Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*,” *The Journal of Politics* 41, no. 3 (Aug. 1979): 812, in which he claims that Lucrezia is, allegorically, the people of Florence while, for instance, Nicia is “the ineffectual Piero Soderini.”

that she would provide him with an heir. (2.5.23). Also, while the Romans accepted the proof of Lucretia's virtue because of her frugality and diligence, it is not clear what motivates Lucrezia's apparent frugality. Callimaco notes that while "she has a very rich husband," she does not appear to have any social life:

she has no relatives or neighbors
with whom she comes together at
some evening gathering or party, or
at any of the other amusements by
which young women are usually
delighted. Of the tradespeople, none
of them comes to her at home, and
she has no maid or servant who's
not afraid of her, so there's no room
there for bribery. (1.1.14).

We learn later that the house has one maid, and one servant. (4.8.45). Callimaco claims that Messer Nicia "lets himself be governed by her" (1.1.14), but her lack of social activities appears more in keeping with a husband that provides her little money.

Messer Nicia is, in Callimaco's words, "the simplest and most stupid man in Florence." (1.1.14).³¹ Through the practice of his art (2.1.21),

³¹ In the prologue, Nicia is referred to as "a not-very-astute *dottore*" (Pr.10) and, in the song after the second act, we are told that "[t]his Dottore of yours, longing to have children, would believe that an ass flies." (2.6.27). Various critics, however, have proposed that Messer Nicia is actually a mastermind who contrives the entire action of the play in order to procure an heir. See Mansfield, "Cuckold," 28-29; Baumgarth, "Deception," 61. Such a conjecture appears forced, for at least the following reasons. First, it would mean that Messer Nicia fools *every* other major character in the play, including Callimaco, Lucrezia, Ligurio, and Timoteo, as their actions and comments would not make sense if they believed Messer Nicia knew what was actually happening. Second, Messer Nicia's monologues (3.7.33; 4.8.45) do not make sense if he is a mastermind. They are the statements of someone who does not know what is going on and, in the second monologue, someone who looks like a fool but is completely unaware of it. Messer Nicia, speaking to himself, this that his disguise makes him "seem bigger, younger, more nimble" (4.8.46), but Ligurio, who can see Nicia, is laughing because Nicia has "on a little cloak that doesn't cover his backside." (4.7.45). Mansfield and Baumgarth are correct to point out that Machiavelli likely meant a connection between Messer Nicia (M.N.) and Niccolò Machiavelli (N.M.), as Machiavelli

which is apparently something like law or money-lending,³² he has accumulated considerable wealth and was able to negotiate for the hand in marriage of a young and beautiful, but apparently not well-connected, woman. (1.3.17). He is worried that he will be sold “empty bladders” (2.1.20) and is suspicious of the advice of the medical doctors because they recommend different bath destinations (1.2.16). He wants to be considered a man of the world, and widely traveled, but he has barely traveled outside of the city of Florence (*Ibid.*). Aside from his desire for an heir, his chief concern seems to be the loss of his money. For instance, after Ligurio plays on Nicia’s vanity to convince him to take his wife to the baths, he becomes frustrated and mentions the difficulty of moving his household to a new location (*Ibid.*). Similarly, when Ligurio and Messer Nicia are in the process of “corrupting” Frate Timoteo, Ligurio mentions a large donation and Nicia nearly wrecks the negotiations in surprise and then continues to complain about the anticipated loss of money. (3.4.31; 3.7.33). But aside from hoarding money, Messer Nicia seems to have little insight.

The foolish *dotto*re, however, seems to possess less wisdom than he claims. Before meeting Callimaco, Nicia claims to be able to determine the quality of Callimaco’s learning: “about his knowledge I’ll tell you myself, after I talk with him, whether he’s a man of learning, because he won’t sell me empty bladders!” (2.1.20). Messer Nicia greets Callimaco in Latin, and is responded to in the same language, which impresses him. But it seems more telling that Nicia never uses more than a common phrase in Latin (e.g., *ad rem nostram*), and appears not to understand Callimaco’s medical description:

Callimaco:	That’s true; but in order to satisfy your desire, it’s
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likely intended a connection between himself and Nicomaco in his play *Clizia*. But they miss the point of the connection. In both cases, Machiavelli is inviting the audience to laugh at him. See Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, Translated by Antony Shugar (Princeton University Press, 2010), 140.

³² The narrator of the Prologue informs the audience that the *dotto*re “learned in Buethius a great deal of law.” (9). Messer Nicia, in turn, describes his life as involving “loafing around all day on the Proconsul’s bench” (2.3.23), and Callimaco mentions that Messer Nicia loans money to Ligurio. (1.1.15).

- necessary to know the cause of your wife's sterility, because there could be many causes. *Nam causae sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in strumentis seminariis, aut in virga, aut in causa extrinseca.*
- Nicia: (This fellow is the most worthy man one could find!)
- Callimaco: Other than this, this sterility could be caused by your impotence, and if this were so, there wouldn't be any remedy for it.
- Nicia: Me impotent? Oh! You make me laugh! I don't believe there's a tougher or more robust man than I am in Florence. (2.2.21-22).

The most obvious joke on Messer Nicia is that, of course, it is likely that the problem is his impotence. The joke goes further, however, in that Nicia's response demonstrates that he did not understand Callimaco's Latin. Callimaco had already noted that the cause could be in the semen or in the seminal organs (*aut in semine ... aut in strumentis seminariis*), but it is only when Callimaco makes the same claim in Italian ("by your impotence") that Nicia notices. The *dottore* is impressed by the "subtlety" of Callimaco's Latin (2.6.24), but there is no reason to think that he actually knows the language.

Lucrezia also has experience of her husband's failings, observing to her mother that she has "always feared that Messer Nicia's longing to have children would make us commit some error." (3.10.34). And "after what you know happened to me by going to the Servi," Lucrezia has "been on guard and suspicious" of his suggestions (*Ibid.*). This rare moment of Lucrezia speaking for herself highlights the difficulty of understanding

her relationship with her husband. Messer Nicia tells Ligurio that on the advice of one her neighbors, “she vowed to hear the first mass at the Servi for forty mornings.” (3.2.28). Halfway through, though, “one of those big *frati* began to hang around her so she didn’t want to return there any more.” (*Ibid.*). While Nicia does not explain what the big *frate* did, it seems likely that he was offering to “help” provide an heir in much the same way that friars, as opposed to nuns, are equipped to help with such concerns. (C 2.3.21).³³

Messer Nicia is neither a Collatinus defending his wife’s honor, a Lot made drunk by his daughters, nor a demonic Asmodeus tormenting Sarah and killing her husbands. But Messer Nicia is a kind of monster, and he “symbolizes all that is wrong with the earthly city.”³⁴ Marriage in Nicia’s Florence is such that “old husbands tyrannize young wives, [and] maidens are linked by opportunism to unsuitable mates.”³⁵ “The wicked are in control of the city, [and must be] outwitted by someone even more tricky than they.”³⁶ In the degenerate city of Florence, Messer Nicia could never be the hero, but as the play is a comedy, he is also not a true demon. “Only in comedy can the beast be seen for what he is, his hollowness revealed by the cathartic principle of laughter.”³⁷ Like the hen-pecked devil in Machiavelli’s *Belfagor*, and like so many such out-witted devils of folklore, Messer Nicia must be outwitted by the comic hero, “willing to climb, drag, or hoist himself into [a better world] by the strength of his hope and his yearning.”³⁸

³³ It is also worth remembering that Lucrezia never says that she wants children, much less children with Messer Nicia. It is Nicia and Callimaco who claim that Lucrezia desires children (1.1.14, 2.5.23-24). “Lucrezia nowhere in the play gives the impression that this constitutes for her a major problem.” Barber, “Irony,” 457. Instead, as already noted, she apparently spends hours on her knees in prayer before laying down with Messer Nicia, much to his consternation (2.6.24).

³⁴ Cowan, “Aristophanes,” 84.

³⁵ Cowan, “Introduction,” 12.

³⁶ Cowan, “Introduction,” 12.

³⁷ Cowan, “Aristophanes,” 84.

³⁸ Cowan, “Aristophanes,” 83.

A MISERABLE LOVER

The Florence at the beginning of *Mandragola* is an entirely fallen world. It “begins in established disorder, . . . where people have lived by law, by reason, or by custom, neglecting wholeness, pleasure, and love.”³⁹ Messer Nicia and Lucrezia are in a love-less marriage, one that apparently gives no pleasure to either, the friars are not only hypocrites who promote religious devotion for profit, but have become too lazy to even maintain the appearance of faith (5.1.49), and Callimaco has spent his youth avoiding his homeland, the women of Italy, and the opportunity for valor in war. (1.1.12-13).⁴⁰ Callimaco has been so disconnected from the life of Florence that he feels unqualified to even participate in a debate over respective beauty of the women of France or Italy. (1.1.13). Hearing of the beauty of Lucrezia, however, Callimaco is aroused from his stupor and, “leaving off every other deliberation, not thinking any more of the wars or peace of Italy,” he sets out for Florence (*Ibid.*).

One of the central problems with interpreting *Mandragola* is explaining the change in Callimaco’s attitude and intentions in Act 5, Scene 4. Callimaco’s initial intention was to merely slake his lust. (1.1.13). Ligurio first awakens Callimaco to the idea that he might have the opportunity to be with Lucrezia more than once as they make final preparations for the night’s escapades. (4.2.42). But there is no indication that Callimaco will be permanently connected to Lucrezia, and Ligurio suggests that one method of persuasion can be the threaten her (*Ibid.*).

The following morning, however, when Callimaco speaks with Ligurio, something has changed. Callimaco mentions that he began his time with Lucrezia “with a troubled mind,” and despite the pleasure of their intercourse, “it didn’t seem good to me.” (5.4.52). The young lover then reveals to Lucrezia what has happened, the trick that has been played on her and her husband, and his love for her. Moreover, he promises, “whenever God did otherwise with [Messer Nicia], to take her for my

³⁹ Cowan, “Introduction,” 15.

⁴⁰ His name stands in contrast to his previous conduct. His first name, ‘Callimaco,’ appears to consist of “the Greek words *kalos* (noble, handsome) and *mache* (battle),” while his last name, ‘Guadagni,’ “is an Italian word for ‘gains,’ earnings,’ ‘profits,’ ‘advantages.’” Mera J. Flaumenhaft, notes in *Mandragola* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1996), 57.

wife." (*Ibid.*). As a result of "these true reasons," and, Callimaco thinks, because Lucrezia enjoyed being with him more than with her husband, she decides that "Heaven wills [her] to accept" Callimaco's proposal (*Ibid.*). There has been no previous discussion of Callimaco marrying Lucrezia, and nothing in Callimaco's and Ligurio's stated plans that would seem to necessitate it. It would be one thing if Callimaco was simply relating what he *told* Lucrezia, but Callimaco proclaims his intention to marry Lucrezia as a *true* reason. Somehow, "caught up in the delight of lovemaking,"⁴¹ Callimaco intuits a higher good, a better world. "[L]ying behind and sustaining"⁴² the "debased and dangerously declining" world he has lived in is "a realm of peace instead of war, with the lowly raised high and the self-important brought low. It posits parsimony, fertility and potency rather than barrenness and impotence."⁴³ Its supreme law is love, and while life "is far more important than established morality.... In the end, ... the comic seeks to reestablish morality and to reanimate the life of moral and spiritual forms."⁴⁴ The play ends back in a church, Messer Nicia has Callimaco take the hand of Lucrezia, as if taking her hand in marriage. (5.6.54). Love, and not merely lust, has triumphed. And while it has yet to reach its culmination in a live-giving marriage, it has taken a step towards a "community of love."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cowan, "Aristophanes," 76.

⁴² Cowan, "Aristophanes," 67.

⁴³ Cowan, "Aristophanes," 69.

⁴⁴ Cowan, "Introduction," 15-6.

⁴⁵ Cowan, "Introduction," 10.

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