
“Give your love full rein”: *Mandragola*, (Homo)Sexuality and Princely Virtue¹

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Summary

This article provides an alternative, sexual reinterpretation of Machiavelli's *Mandragola* from an alternative sexual perspective focusing on sodomy (in its sixteenth-century meaning), and especially male-male sexuality. In this reading, Messer Nicia is, put in today's terms, a homosexual and, at the same time, surprisingly enough, the key, princely character in the play. Driven by a desire to establish a new, less oppressive familial order, Nicia is able to renew his corrupted family by means of a conspiracy aimed at liberating Lucrezia's sexuality from the restraints of the dominant morality. *Mandragola* constitutes an intrinsic part of Machiavelli's political project, showing how the explosion of sexual desire beyond the confines of dominant heteronormative morality can serve as a productive way of expressing plebeian desire not to be oppressed and commanded by the great, which proves beneficial to all.

Keywords: (the) Great, Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, Sexuality, Plebs, Prince

*There's never anything so desperate that there
isn't some way of being able to hope for it.²*

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² *Mandragola*, 1.1. In this article *Mandragola* is cited by act and scene, while the prologue and songs are cited by page number. Mera J. Flaumenhaft's translation (1981) was used unless otherwise indicated. For the original Italian text, I used David Sices's and James B. Atkinson's bilin-

Introduction

Mandragola, often considered to be one of the best comedies of the Renaissance, is without doubt Machiavelli's best-known and most original play. Most scholars agree that it was written around 1518, during Machiavelli's forced retirement from political office, and therefore at the end of that period that includes his most famous and explicitly political treatises, *The Prince* (1513) and *Discourses* (ca. 1517). By approaching the play from the perspective of marginal sexualities, this article offers an alternative, sexual re-reading of *Mandragola*. According to this reading, *Mandragola* constitutes an intrinsic part of Machiavelli's political project, showing how the explosion of sexual desire beyond the dictates of civic morality can serve as a productive way of venting and expressing the desire not to be oppressed and commanded by the great, to the benefit of all.

The plot can be briefly summarized in the following way. One day Cammillo Calfucci decides to visit France. There he meets Callimaco Guadagni, a Florentine who has lived in Paris for twenty years. As they talk about whether the women are more beautiful in France or in Italy, Calfucci brings up the most beautiful and gracious Italian woman, his uncle's wife Madonna Lucrezia. Callimaco decides to go to Florence to see for himself and becomes obsessed with the desire to sleep with her. But there is a problem: Lucrezia is married to Messer Nicia. What is more, she is a paragon of (moral) virtue, an extremely chaste woman.

With the help of Ligurio, an acquaintance of Nicia described as a "parasite", a trick involving a series of deceptions is carefully devised to eventually enable Callimaco to satisfy his desire and lie with Lucrezia, all with Nicia's blessing. Since Nicia and Lucrezia do not have children and are desperate for offspring, Ligurio persuades foolish Nicia that Callimaco is a doctor who can help Lucrezia get pregnant. Callimaco prescribes an allegedly magic potion made from mandrake root (*mandragola*), a plant believed to be able to miraculously heal sterility in women, but that produces a side effect as well, causing the first man who lies with the woman who has taken it to die within a week. The solution is to catch an innocent young fellow and force him to sleep with Lucrezia, thereby drawing the alleged poison off onto him. This rascal will, of course, be a disguised Callimaco himself.

Chaste and reluctant Lucrezia is eventually persuaded to cooperate in the scheme. When she finally does lie with Callimaco, he reveals the whole trick to her, declares his love, and offers to marry her once Nicia is no longer around. Surprisingly, Lucrezia decides to enjoy an adulterous relation with Callimaco, permanent-

gual edition of Machiavelli's comedies (2007, pp. 153-275). *The Prince* and *Discourses* are referred to by the machi letter P or D, followed by the book number (where applicable), then the chapter number, and finally the page number.

ly cuckolding her husband. Nicia remains unaware of the trick, but gets his baby boy. He is so grateful that he even rashly invites Ligurio and "doctor" Callimaco, who has just seduced and impregnated his wife, to move in with them.

On the exoteric level, Machiavelli's play seems to be a classical Renaissance cruel joke, a *beffa* or *burla*, on foolish Nicia. The central erotic conspiracy combines adultery and sexual reproduction in such a way that adultery serves reproductive purposes, renovating the Calfucci household by generating offspring. The laughter of the audience at the (willingly?) cuckolded Nicia initially seems intended to reaffirm the procreative purposes of marriage. The transgressions of the established norms that make the audience laugh thus seem intended to remind spectators of the importance of the very norms being infringed.³

However, Machiavelli embarks onto a subversive path when he resolves to end the play with a long-term adulterous relationship.⁴ That surprising ending in turn gives the adulterous conspiracy central to the play a decisively subversive dimension. Is Machiavelli trying to tell his audience(s) something between the lines and perhaps conspire against rather than reaffirm dominant social norms?⁵ After all, comedy is a safe and therefore particularly suitable form for expressing unorthodox opinions, which can be put in the mouths of fictional characters (see Zuckert, 2017, p. 280).

This article claims, in a Straussian spirit, that beyond a manifest, comic surface of the play designed for the general public, there lies a subtle, subversive level of the text addressed to more specific audiences.⁶ The "secret" part of the text itself consists of a humorous veneer concealing a serious message. Read on this level, the play's true message turns on a private joke between Machiavelli and his inner circle

³ On this point see, e.g., Hulliung, 1978, p. 42.

⁴ While Konrad Eisenbichler claims that *Mandragola* is the *first* Italian play where an adulterous relationship continues after the play is over (Eisenbichler, 2017, pp. 27-28), Bibbiena's *Calandra*, of 1512, potentially features such an adulterous extension as well.

⁵ An early sign of Machiavelli's hidden intentions is found in the Prologue, 10, where the author explicitly states that he wishes to trick his audience in the same way Lucrezia was tricked.

⁶ See Strauss (1988). However, *pace* Strauss, who distinguishes between the general audience and the few superior, particularly capable, philosophically gifted and adequately trained readers able to decipher the true, esoteric meaning of a text, this article, in accordance with Claude Lefort's hermeneutical approach, claims that there is no such a thing as the objective, true meaning of the text. Instead, multiple audiences are invited to actively participate in the space of thought opened by the text and to further expand and revive the text by lending it their own thoughts. In this way, the interrogation of an old piece may become an interrogation of the possibilities of change in the here and now. On the main features of Lefort's theory of interpretation which methodologically undergirds this article, see especially Ribarević (2023).

of friends and potentially kindred-spirited future readers: a joke on Nicia's alternative, homoerotic interests that in fact propel the whole plot forward.

The joke, however, serves as a means to a serious end; Machiavelli's kindred spirits are gradually led to grasp a deep political message, one very much in line with his political teaching in *The Prince* and *Discourses*. Re-understood from the perspective of Nicia as the principal character of *Mandragola* sexually attracted to men, the focus shifts from Callimaco's conquest of Lucrezia to Nicia's renewal project, the one driven by his princely desire for the establishment of a new, less oppressive order for his unhappy family.⁷ That renewal is made possible through a clever deception that unleashes Lucrezia's sexuality, to the benefit of all members of the household. As context for such an alternative, sexual re-reading of *Mandragola*, it is important first to have a better sense of the illicit, lively male-male sexual world that existed in the Florence of Machiavelli's time.

Sodomy in Florence and Machiavelli's Close Circle of Friends

Between the beginning of the fifteenth century and the late Renaissance, under the watchful eye of the Church, sexuality and gender gradually became an especially concentrated focus of disciplinary power, both in Florence and in Italy in general.⁸ Following the Great Plague (1348) and the Ciompi revolt (1378), public morality became an issue of growing concern. Such concern was especially evident in the field of sexuality, as reflected in a novel regulation of prostitution, tighter control of the sexual purity of convents, and especially surveillance of sodomy. During the Renaissance, sodomy designated a range of unproductive sexual practices or acts, primarily but not exclusively related to male-male sexual relations, that were considered contrary to nature and God's commandments (Rocke, 1996, pp. 11-12). In response to the threat represented by this "abominable vice", in 1432 the Florentine government introduced a radical, innovative measure creating a special new criminal magistracy, the Office of the Night (*Ufficiali di Notte*). Its exclusive aim was to systematically police, punish, and repress sodomy, thereby disciplining, monitoring, and controlling such "unnatural" behavior (*ibid.*, pp. 45-84).

⁷ Surprisingly, in the vast secondary literature on *Mandragola*, only a small minority of scholars identify Nicia as the play's key character and Machiavelli's hero *par excellence*. See Palmer and Pontuso (1996); Mansfield (2000); Baumgarth (2015). While these readings suggest the need to shift attention from Callimaco's lust for Lucrezia to Nicia's desire for offspring, these authors overlook Nicia's other, deeper, and truly princely desires. More specifically, the authors do not consider Nicia's longing to recalibrate the Calfucci household's intimate relations in novel, unexpected, and less oppressive ways.

⁸ On Florence, see Rocke (1996).

Using judicial records, Michael Rocke has demonstrated that male-male sexual activity was a widespread part of everyday life in Florence and an integral aspect of male sexual experience for the majority of Florentine bachelors, often concurrently with sexual relations with women (*ibid.*, pp. 4-7). In the context of Renaissance Florence's decisively male culture, in which civic life was primarily the realm of men, male sexual ties represented an additional dimension of the sociability, comradeship, and brotherhood that helped knit society together (*ibid.*, pp. 121-122, 148-191).

In Renaissance Florence, male sexual activity was not fixed throughout life. However, it was expected eventually to develop into the "correct", fixed sexual identity characteristic of a fully formed adult.⁹ At puberty, males entered into the transitional period of adolescence (*gioventù*). For upper class men, that period extended until their early thirties, by which time they were expected to become economically independent of their fathers and to take a wife, usually one in her teens. Men's long period of maturation that preceded marriage was often characterized by diverse sexual activity.

For male same-sex activity to be treated relatively mildly, it had to adhere to rigid conventions. A strict, hierarchical differentiation of sexual roles based on the difference in age between partners was expected. A male couple was presumed to consist of a younger partner and a relatively older one. Younger partners, usually of eighteen years of age or less, were associated with the passive, submissive, "womanly" role reflecting the immaturity of youth and their corresponding subordinate social status. In contrast, older partners were expected to take on the active, dominant, "manly" role, one associated with mature behavior and manliness. The change from the passive to the active role that occurred between the ages of eighteen and twenty was closely related to a symbolic entry into the male adult world. Being a sexually passive adult male was regarded as particularly shameful since the receptive role was linked to immaturity, and submission, whereas the active, penetrative role was associated with maturity, domination, manhood, virility, and virtue.¹⁰

Marriage served as the basis for familial, economic, and political strategies and was considered the key event in the life of a man, one that marked the passage from "adolescence" to a state of adulthood and manhood characterized by a fully and properly developed, fixed sexual identity. Marriage and starting a family were considered particularly effective as instruments for sexually disciplining society. As such, they were at the heart of the discourse of civic morality and fundamental to

⁹ In this section I draw primarily on Rocke, 1996, pp. 87-111 and Ruggiero, 2007, pp. 24-27.

¹⁰ See especially Rocke (1998); see also Rocke, 1996, pp. 106-111, and the primary sources quoted there.

constituting a well-ordered (moral) society (Ruggiero, 1993, especially pp. 26-27). However, even after marriage, the lure of the extramarital and illicit sexual world was often irresistible.

Here it is useful to read through the available epistolary correspondence exchanged between Machiavelli and his comrades. That correspondence is replete with stories and jokes about their sexual adventures, which gave rise to an important bond helping to maintain their male friendship.¹¹ These letters enable readers to see “gloomy” Machiavelli in an unexpected light, as a sexual being and both an admirer and practitioner of clandestine forms of sex not necessarily limited to courtesans. Italian philologist Mario Martelli, who also edited Machiavelli’s complete works (Martelli, 1971), provides a fascinating, meticulous reading of various letters exchanged between Machiavelli and Francesco Vettori, Florence’s ambassador to Rome. The exchange uses ambiguities, word play, and coded language to refer to their (non-exclusive) sexual interest in male youths (Martelli, 1998, pp. 226-256; cf. also Ruggiero, 2007, p. 245, n. 6).¹² In a similar spirit, Roger D. Masters defends a thesis concerning Machiavelli’s “bisexuality” (Pitkin, 1999, p. 340).¹³ Unfortunately, the majority of Machiavelli’s correspondence on sexual exploits and pleasures was not transcribed by the executor of his legacy, his grandson Giuliano de’ Ricci, who deemed it irrelevant and perhaps dangerous (Ruggiero, 2007, p. 129).

Whatever Machiavelli’s own sexual tastes may have been, men like Donato Del Corno, Giovanni Machiavelli, and Filippo Casavecchia formed part of Machiavelli’s group of closest friends (Eisenbichler, 2017, p. 26). Within this circle, they were all explicitly identified on the basis of their alternative sexual preferences for men (*ibid.*; Ruggiero, 2007, pp. 125-129; Patapan, 2006, p. 42, n. 78). Yet, even while their sexual exploits were vividly recounted and approved within their group of immediate comrades, they had to comply with rigid conventions of manliness in order to keep up appearances of respectable sexual behavior in the eyes of the wider community (Ruggiero, 2007, pp. 128, 130). In the 19 December 1513 letter to Machiavelli, Vettori recounts how his friends, Guliano Brancacci and Filippo Casavecchia, who were visiting him in Rome, concerned for his public reputation, (initially) reprimanded him for inviting a courtesan and a notorious “sodomite” to his home (see Gilbert, 1988, pp. 144-148). Machiavelli, for his part, is pretty straightforward in approving of Vettori’s sexual misbehavior: “Ambassador [Fran-

¹¹ See Ruggiero’s fascinating analysis in *Machiavelli in Love* to which this text owes its inspiration (Ruggiero, 2007, especially pp. 108-141; see also Patapan, 2006, pp. 15-43).

¹² See, e.g., Vettori’s letter to Machiavelli, 16 January 1515 (Atkinson and Sices, 1996, pp. 310-311); Machiavelli’s letter to Vettori, 31 January 1515 (*ibid.*, pp. 311-313).

¹³ Pitkin considers Masters’ thesis “plausible” and “persuasive”.

cesco Vettori], you will get sick, and it does not seem to me that you have any recreation; here there are no boys, here there are no women; what sort of a bitchin' house is this?"¹⁴ In a similar vein, in another letter to Vettori dated just a few weeks later, on 25 February 1514, Machiavelli describes a miraculous change of Guliano Brancacci's sexual interest in favor of boys, while maintaining his public reputation by fraudulently taking on the identity of his friend Casavecchia and advises Vettori to "give your love full reign [...], pleasure you seize today may not be there for you to seize tomorrow [...]" and then quotes Boccaccio: "It is better to act and to regret it than not to act and to regret it" (see Atkinson and Sices, 1996, pp. 280-282).¹⁵

Having provided a glimpse into the clandestine, sexual world of Machiavelli's Florence, the following section traces textual clues suggestive of Nicia's sexual interest in men. Nicia's alternative sexuality could easily have attracted the attention of Machiavelli's circle of friends, especially those who themselves enjoyed the underground, sexual world of Florence and sex with adult males.¹⁶

Messer Nicia's Sexual Attraction to Men

Approached from the perspective of illicit sex, one can hardly miss *Mandragola's* description of a pleasurable experience of a male-female "sodomy" in the scene between *frate* Timoteo and the anonymous widow (3.3).¹⁷ In a conversation with the priest, the widow, apparently concerned for the soul of her prematurely deceased husband, alludes to the fact that many times she enjoyed anal sex with her "big nasty" (*ommaccio*), i.e. beast-like husband. Moreover, her flesh still calls for "it" and she "can't help feeling something" as soon as she remembers him.¹⁸ To be sure, the widow might in fact be concerned for her own soul, especially if she is still "feeling it", therefore practicing it, or at least desiring it. The widow's closing reference in that scene to the Turks and their "deviltries" in the form of the "impaling" that they do, further confirms her obsession with unproductive sexual pleasure.

This scene charged with allusions to male-female anal sex, alerts readers to the question of "sodomy", pointing them in the right direction when it comes to

¹⁴ Machiavelli's letter to Vettori, 5 January 1514 (Gilbert, 1988, pp. 148-150).

¹⁵ For a masterful analysis of this letter, see especially Ruggiero, 2007, pp. 98-104, 138-139.

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, Wayne A. Rebhorn notes that *Mandragola* was referred to among Machiavelli's close friends as "Messer Nicia" (Rebhorn, 1988, p. 67).

¹⁷ The interpretation of this scene in terms of "heterosexual sodomy" is offered by Eisenbichler, 2017, pp. 19-22, and it is closely followed in the continuation of the section.

¹⁸ Cf. Giannetti's and Ruggiero's translation (2003, p. 91).

approaching another famous scene (5.2) in *Mandragola*.¹⁹ In this later scene, Nicia is asked to recount what happened after he brought the disguised Callimaco to the house to sleep with Lucrezia. Nicia is delighted to recount “beautiful things”²⁰ (*belle cose*) about the “young fellow” (*garzonaccio*), that is, the poorly disguised Callimaco. The co-conspirators learn that after Nicia got the young man into the house, he “turned on him like a dog” and stripped him naked. Nicia is thoroughly impressed by the body of the young rascal and describes it as the finest “white, soft, smooth” flesh. He especially marvels at the size of Callimaco’s member, saying to his co-conspirators: “And about the other things – don’t ask about them.”²¹ Under the pretext of checking *garzonaccio*’s health, Nicia “put [his] hands into the dough” so as “to get to the bottom of it” (*tocare al fondo*). He then laid the young man in the bed with Lucrezia and “touched with [his] hands” to see that everything was in order. “Having touched and felt everything”, he finally (and reluctantly?) left the bedroom and locked the door behind him.²² Martelli maintains that the verb “*tocare*”, used no less than three times in a row here, was one of the coded expressions of the time for referring to male-male sexual relations (Martelli, 1998, pp. 238-241; see also Viroli, 2000, p. 164; Ruggiero, 2007, p. 248, n. 41).

¹⁹ For this idea see Eisenbichler, 2017, p. 21. Furthermore, in the interaction between Nicia and the “young scoundrel” (Callimaco), Eisenbichler recognizes crucial clues regarding Nicia’s “homosexuality” (see *ibid.*, pp. 18-19; see also Martinez, 1983, p. 35).

In a dialogue with Eisenbichler’s inspiring reading, this article offers a step further in the same direction by providing a consistently “homosexual” re-reading of *Mandragola* as a whole. Additionally, and crucially, the article provides a link between Eisenbichler’s study that emphasizes Nicia’s “homosexuality” and those interpretations that perceive Nicia as the master trickster and princely-like figure. By approaching Nicia both as a “homosexual” and a prince, i.e. as a “homosexual prince”, this paper seeks to highlight the relation between *Mandragola* and Machiavelli’s overall political project.

²⁰ My translation.

²¹ Note here, just for the moment, that Ligurio feels uncomfortable with the scene and tries to warn Nicia not to discuss these matters (*E’ non è bene ragionare*) (5.2). Is Machiavelli trying to tell us something between the lines here about Ligurio? What is the nature of Ligurio’s relation with Nicia? Such questions necessarily arise when reading *Mandragola* from the perspective of alternative sexuality. Observe, however, that Machiavelli neither offers explicit answers to ever-multiplying questions that surge forth while reading the text, nor does he provide some definite, irrefutable evidence in support of a particular solution. At best, he points towards a certain direction and it is up to the readers to follow Machiavelli’s subtle hints and fill in the gaps by courageously thinking for themselves.

²² Earlier in the play, in a soliloquy (4.8), Nicia already anticipates the whole scene. Note here also that, just minutes before Nicia’s eagerly anticipated first encounter with Callimaco, Nicia’s word play alludes to Callimaco losing his pants (2.1), which are, indeed, soon to be unzipped by Nicia’s own hands (5.2).

In order to discover traces of male-male sexuality in *Mandragola*, one is invited to pay attention to double meanings, metaphors, word play, and codes of the homosexual slang in use during the Renaissance.²³ For sure, Nicia is the character in *Mandragola* who most uses rhetoric and imagery alluding to sexuality (see Martinez, 1983, pp. 34-35; Eisenbichler, 2017, pp. 17-18). His choice of language sometimes alludes to anality (Rebhorn, 1988, pp. 62-64). For example, he characterizes Florentines as "shitsticks" (*cacastecchi*) for not valuing *virtù* (2.3). Furthermore, on two separate occasions, in 2.6 and 3.4, Nicia uses the term *cacasangua* ("bloody shit").

In this same scene, in which he talks confidently with Callimaco's servant Siro, Nicia admits that he has no status in society and alludes to the fact that evil tongues are speaking ill of him, giving him a bad reputation detrimental to his legal career (2.3). At the beginning of *Mandragola* Machiavelli presents himself similarly: as a man whose *virtù* is not being recognized and who is "not of a great fame" in the city of Florence (Prologue, 10; cf. Preface to *The Prince*). Moreover, Machiavelli explicitly anticipates that the audience will blame, sneer, and speak badly of him if they hear and see the play, and, again like Nicia, complains that the present age does not appreciate *virtù* (Prologue, 11; cf. D, I. Preface). Such unexpected parallels between *Nicia* and *Niccolò* Machiavelli himself as the play's author, are striking. Note too that both men long for change in the current *status quo*.

Nicia feels that others consider him only good enough to be "loafing around all day" (*donzellarci*) (2.3). Rebhorn remarks that "*donzello*" stands for an immature adolescent, while "*donzellarci*" is derived from the word "*donzella*", meaning young girl (Rebhorn, 1988, p. 58). Literally *donzellarci* translates "giggling like young girls".²⁴ According to Rebhorn, Machiavelli's choice of the verb *donzellarci* thereby directs the audience to Nicia's lack of manliness (*ibid.*). Such a view of Nicia as unmanly would be a logical consequence of the same-sex habits this article argues the play is meant to suggest Nicia has. From the perspective predominant in Machiavelli's time, as argued in the first section of this paper, such habits would testify to immaturity. At the end of the same scene, Nicia warns Siro that their conversation needs to stay off the record, since otherwise he could get some special "tax" (fine), or "some other pain in the ass slapped on [him] that would make [him] sweat".²⁵

In his soliloquy immediately following this scene, Siro seems to be able to detect the "effectual" nature of Nicia's problem (2.4). Siro cannot stop laughing

²³ On the coded sexual language of this period, see Hartog (2022).

²⁴ Giannetti's and Ruggiero's translation (2003, p. 84).

²⁵ Here, I primarily relied on Sices's and Atkinson's translation (2007, p. 191).

at “*questo ucellaccio*”, literally “big, nasty bird”, an expression meaning dupe or madman, but with an additional sexual meaning as well. “Ucellaccio” is a pejorative form of the word “uccello”, meaning bird, that was also used as euphemism for the male member in the lingo of Renaissance Florence.²⁶ Notice that Siro uses the word “uccellaccio” just after Nicia says he could get “some pain in the ass slapped on him”. In that context, it could be interpreted as a derogatory term alluding to Nicia’s alternative sexual interests and, moreover, his passive sexual role. Furthermore, it is also worth noticing that Ligurio makes fun of Nicia on another occasion, in a similar context and with a similar purpose. When Nicia disguises himself in order to catch the “garzonaccio” who will sleep with Lucrezia, Ligurio cannot help but to laugh: “Who wouldn’t laugh? He’s got on a little cloak that doesn’t cover his backside”, a funny hat made of fur, and “a little sword sticking out down below”.²⁷ However, while too short clothes and showy tights reveal his bottom, provoking laughter, Nicia himself feels “bigger” and “younger” (4.8).²⁸

Nicia is “very rich” (1.1), but does not enjoy social status because he is unable to live up to society’s expectations and conform to the dominant values of his native Florence. He is a misfit, an oddball. In the prologue, Machiavelli tells the audience about “a monster who does not know if he is still alive”, possibly referring to Nicia himself (Prologue, 11).²⁹ From a contemporary perspective, the perhaps exaggerated, vulgar, bawdy, inventive, but essentially humorous style of language of this learned man, a doctor of law, could be characterized as a type of “camp” that Nicia uses as a survival strategy in a society that despises him.

Based on such clues and signs littered throughout *Mandragola*, this article asserts that Messer Nicia in fact represents one of the small percentage of mature older men who extended the “sinful” practices of youth into adulthood, sometimes marrying, but still making male same-sex activity a permanent and significant part of their way of being in the world (Eisenbichler, 2017, p. 25). “Gray-bearded” men who were sexually attracted to other men dramatically transgressed the prevailing norms of manliness, most gravely in the case of adopting a receptive sexual role. Failure to forego such behavior in adulthood was considered a failure to adhere to the expectations imposed by prevailing social norms and values. Such men jeopardized the collective understanding of masculine identity properly expressed

²⁶ Analogically, the verb form “uccellare”, literary “hunting for birds”, was used in a sexually coded way to refer to hunting for an entirely different kind of “birds” (Grieco, 2010, especially pp. 99-109; see also Ruggiero, 2010, especially pp. 1-3).

²⁷ Original translation slightly altered.

²⁸ Notice also sexual innuendo associated with “a little sword” noticeable between Nicia’s legs.

²⁹ The other one fit to be a “monster” is Callimaco, since he is dying of desire to be with Lucrezia. The third candidate is Machiavelli himself, who is similar to Nicia.

through virile, phallic behavior and most clearly manifest through fathering children (Rocke, 1998, pp. 169-170; 1996, pp. 101-104). Such people, whom Nicia stands for in *Mandragola*, were exposed to the harshest of punishments, ranging from humiliation in public shaming spectacles, to exile and even being burned alive (Rocke, 1996, pp. 76-79, 104-106).

Once aware of Nicia's alternative sexual interests, this article invites the reader to reconsider the whole play in that light. At the beginning, we are told that Nicia founded his family by marrying beautiful Lucrezia six years before. However, their marriage is far from happy and harmonious. Frustration at not having children is just the most visible aspect of the couple's troubles; in fact, they do not make love at all. Lucrezia prefers kneeling on the floor praying for four hours, before sleeping, to going to bed with Nicia (Eisenbichler, 2017, p. 17; see 2.6). After all these years, is Lucrezia aware of her husband's sexual interests? She might well be. Observe in this context that Machiavelli repeatedly suggests that Lucrezia is "wise" (Prologue, 10; 1.3, 3.9) and even potentially "fit to rule the kingdom" (1.3). Indeed, Lucrezia has established an authoritative control of the entire household, including Nicia "who lets himself be governed by her [Lucrezia]" (1.1).³⁰ However, Lucrezia is unable to effectively take control over her own (love) life. When it comes to the things of love, she figures as an exemplar of morality and goodness. Lucrezia's biggest concern is maintaining and defending chastity, both as a sign of loyalty towards her husband and the very core of her inner identity.³¹ She is "extremely honest" and remains earnestly faithful to Nicia, "totally against the games of love" (1.1).³² Lucrezia, therefore, finds herself trapped on a wheel of fortune that she is unable to confront and change. That is to say, she is unaware that her sexual self-understanding in terms of moral virtue might be a role externally ascribed to her, the one that normatively reproduces the dominant system of values, actually reinforcing domination over her.

Fortunately, Nicia is able to astutely confront this apparent deadlock by devising a strategy for surreptitiously modifying it, thereby shifting the reality paralyzing and corrupting his family. The patriarch is aware that the possibility of renewing the unhappy Calfucci household depends on changing Lucrezia and teaching her how "to be able not to be good" (P, 15: 61). Changing one's nature is difficult, if not impossible (see, e.g., P, 25: 100 and D, III. 9: 240). However, remember that Lucrezia

³⁰ All maids and servants in the household are afraid of Lucrezia (1.1), while Nicia says to do everything his wife's way (2.5).

³¹ Cf. 3.10. Virginity before marriage and chastity after the marriage were considered essential components of a woman's virtue in Renaissance Florence, especially for the upper classes (see, e.g., Ruggiero, 2007, p. 196).

³² I rely here on Giannetti's and Ruggiero's translation (2003, p. 76).

is potentially “fit to rule the kingdom” (1.3). Perhaps she might be able to change her nature after all if only Nicia were able to act as a virtuous prince?

Nicia’s Princely Virtue

At the beginning of the play, Ligurio says that God must have sent Callimaco to satisfy Nicia’s craving (2.1). At the exoteric level, Nicia’s desire is presented as a longing for a male heir, a desire driving the whole plot. However, behind Nicia’s desire to continue his family, there is another, much more subversive project: the foundation of “new orders and modes” for the Calfucci household. That revitalizing change is brought about through a daring intervention to shake the family’s sexual dynamic loose from its current deadlock. By liberating Lucrezia’s sexuality, Nicia effects a change that proves beneficial to all.

Could it be that Nicia, who figures as the butt of the joke, is in fact Machiavelli’s new prince in *Mandragola*, the one who intervenes in the current corrupted conjuncture and introduces “new orders and modes” (P, 6)? Certainly, Nicia seems to figure as an extremely unlikely choice for playing such a princely role. On the exoteric level, throughout the play, Machiavelli presents him as a simpleton (1.1, 3.2, 4.1, 5.3), a man of “little prudence” and even “less spirit” (1.3). It seems that Nicia, blinded by his desire for an heir, remains completely unaware throughout the play of the trick being played on him. But is Nicia really a fool, or is he perhaps only playing at being one so as to provide his family with a new, happier beginning, while preserving his physical integrity endangered by his sexual practices? After all, *Mandragola* is explicitly set in 1504 (1.1), when harsh laws regulating sodomy passed under the charismatic preacher Savonarola as a part of his broader project of “moral reform” were still in effect (Rocke, 1996, p. 229). “Savonarolan” laws proscribed brutal and, in the Florentine context, unprecedented penalties that remained intact until 1514, exposing people like Nicia to harsh capital punishments (see *ibid.*, pp. 204-209).³³ In this context, note Nicia’s correction of Ligurio regarding the “Carrucola” of Pisa in 1.2. When Nicia is asked about ever having seen “Carrucola”, he is quick to (half-rightly) correct Ligurio about the name: “Verrucola” (in reality, La Verrucca) (1.2). This is the place where Machiavelli’s citizens’ militia won a decisive battle, leading to the celebrated, long-awaited recapture of Pisa.³⁴ Furthermore, while in Italian the verb derived from “carrucola” means to make fun of someone

³³ While in the post-Savonarolan Florence, the Office of the Night was abolished (1502), the jurisdiction to persecute sodomy was passed onto the Eight of Watch and the Guardians of the Law (Rocke, 1996, pp. 223-224). Under their jurisdiction, sodomy continued to persist as a “serious crime” (*ibid.*, p. 226).

³⁴ On this point, another suggestion of proximity between Nicia and Machiavelli himself, see Ruggiero, 2007, p. 145.

(as Ligurio seems to be doing with Nicia), "carrucola" also, as Ruggerio suggests, referred to the pulley used with a rope for painfully hoisting and lowering subjects of judicial torture (Ruggiero, 2007, p. 250, n. 72). Is Ligurio, then, covertly hinting here at the fact that Nicia's sexual interests might cost him excruciating treatment of that sort? Notice again in this context Ligurio's severe reproaching of Nicia for publicly discussing delicate sexual matters in 5.2.

Nicia, "the simplest and most stupid man in Florence" (1.1), might be, therefore, actually only playing a fool, as to protect his bare life, waiting for the opportune occasion to act. Such possibility brings to mind actions of Lucius Junius Brutus who freed Rome from tyranny by simulating stupidity, holding back until the right occasion for crushing the kings finally came (D, III. 2). Machiavelli, tellingly, considers Brutus *the* most prudent and *the* wisest "prince" of all (*ibid.*). Interestingly enough, according to Livy's narration in the first book of *History*, Brutus' conspiracy was triggered by notorious rape of chaste *Lucrezia* by the king's son, Sextus Tarquinius. Following the rape, Lucrezia revealed the truth to her inner circle and then decided to sacrifice her own life to defend her honor, which spurred Brutus into action. While, as Catherine H. Zuckert notes, the secondary literature on *Mandragola* consensually recognizes Machiavelli's debt to Livy's *History* discussing similarities and differences between the two stories (Zuckert, 2017, p. 285), for the purpose of this article focusing on Nicia's princely role, it is important to detect parallels between Machiavelli's fictional character and Brutus.³⁵ Could it be that Nicia, much like Machiavelli's favorite captain Brutus, only presents himself as a madman by readily making himself into a cuckold and Lucrezia into a "whore" (2.6), while on the esoteric level, simultaneously, actually taking the path of princes and lords (*ibid.*), he endeavors to intervene in the current corrupted condition in order to liberate and revitalize his family, just as Brutus did when he founded the Roman Republic?³⁶ Notice that the ability to deceive others about one's real character is decisive for the success of the "new prince" who acts in unfavorable (corrupted) conjuncture (D, III. 2).

Having pointed out the possibility that Nicia is in fact only feigning stupidity while actually striving to found the new familial order, the article now turns to the analysis of Nicia's conspiracy in *Mandragola*. Nicia's subversive project depends on using his able "brother" (*frate*) Ligurio (2.1). At the beginning of the play, Li-

³⁵ For the link between Brutus and Nicia, see especially Mansfield, 2000, p. 28; Baumgarth, 2015, p. 60.

³⁶ In the text of the play itself Nicia is never explicitly revealed as a master trickster. To discover Nicia as a princely figure, in addition to accepting the (Straussian) differentiation between esoteric and exoteric teachings, it is equally important to accept the challenge to read the play in the light of Machiavelli's other, more narrowly political texts.

gurio is presented as “a parasite, the darling of malice” (Prologue, 10), a wretched man (2.4) who lives by cheating others (1.3). One is bewildered to learn about the brotherhood between Messer Nicia, an educated, wealthy man, and the lower-class rascal Ligurio. Machiavelli, however, provides a few clues about Nicia’s attraction to Ligurio. Through Callimaco, Machiavelli tells the audience that Ligurio is a “pleasant man” (*piacevole uomo*) and that Nicia therefore developed with him “*una stretta dimestichezza*”, “a very great intimacy”, though Ligurio in fact only “plays with him” (*l’uccella*) (1.1).³⁷

Once sensibilized to the question of sodomy in the play, readers can readily read between the lines that the “friendship” between Nicia and Ligurio may well have a sexual dimension. While of course careful not to invite Ligurio to his house, Nicia seems to enjoy his company and indulges him by lending him money and petting him by gifts in the form of “lunches and dinners” (1.1).³⁸ But Ligurio is more than a “thrush” ready for anything in exchange for a few meals. While he might be a self-interested, insincere lover, he at the same time happens to be an extremely capable, shrewd man able to help Nicia.

Lucrezia’s desire for a child, which Nicia shares (e.g., 1.1), provides an opportunity to act that Nicia must seize if his household is to be renewed. The reader must be careful not to confuse Nicia’s project with a desire for mere physical reproduction. Nicia’s craving extends to a considerably more subversive terrain, as best reflected by the inauguration of a substantially extended new Calfucci household in the final scene (5.6).

When approached from the perspective of Nicia as a princely figure, Machiavelli’s comedy can be retold in the following manner. Having found out about extraordinarily handsome, young Callimaco,³⁹ Nicia recognizes and seizes the occasion. He sends his nephew Cammillo Calfucci to Paris with a mission: to hook Callimaco on returning to Florence by telling him how Lucrezia is the most beautiful woman in all Italy and France.⁴⁰ Nicia’s project to jump start Lucrezia’s sexual-

³⁷ My translations. To play with someone preserves both the dimension of deception and the (homo)erotic dimension linked to the Italian verb “*uccellare*”. Ligurio lures Nicia with false promises and flattery.

³⁸ Between male sexual companions in Florence, such material exchanges, reflecting differences in partners’ respective social standing, were a usual practice (see Rocke, 1996, pp. 165-166).

³⁹ Notice that “Cali” means handsome or pretty. In the culture of the time, beauty was linked to youth. See Ruggiero, 2007, p. 148.

⁴⁰ For this idea, see Palmer and Pontuso, 1996, p. 130; Mansfield, 2000, p. 16. If we take seriously the claim that Nicia is the mastermind behind the whole plot and follow this path to its logical conclusion, we are led to suspect that he is actually in control of the whole conspiracy right from the start, i.e. even before Callimaco’s arrival to Florence. This implies that Cammillo

ity relies on the lure of this adorable young lad, and Nicia himself is not averse to having such a pretty mate around.

In Paris, Callimaco has devoted his time to studies, business, and *pleasures* (1.1). Though his reputation has remained unsullied, Machiavelli explicitly places him amidst the "*buon compagni*", the very same description he later uses to describe Lucrezia's mother Sostrata, who used to be a "good company" (*buona compagna*), that is, a lady of "easy virtue" (Prologue, 10; 1.1).⁴¹ Being thirty in the play (see 1.1), Callimaco has just begun to reach a marriable age and therefore still enjoys the pleasures of *gioventù*.⁴² This fact may well have captured the imagination of our princely "*uccellaccio*". Perhaps Callimaco would willingly serve as a "staff" for both spouses?⁴³

As soon as Callimaco arrives in Florence, he is mesmerized by Lucrezia, and the only thing he desires from that moment on is to sleep with her (1.1). In order to fulfill his longing, Callimaco reaches out to Ligurio, Nicia's close friend. In the interests of his own project, Nicia is ready to let himself appear to have been foolishly deceived into allowing Callimaco to sleep with Lucrezia, a fact that makes Ligurio's machinations to help Callimaco much easier.

Nicia, however, is reluctant to follow Ligurio's initial plan to visit the nearby baths he is told could help Lucrezia to conceive (1.1, 1.2, 2.2). Under the cover of not wanting to disrupt the whole household and leave Florence, for which he blames Lucrezia, Nicia rejects the suggested trip to the baths as an unnecessary "inconvenience" (2.2). The reader will, however, easily remember dispersed claims made at the beginning of the play that "all kinds of people go to these baths" (1.3) and that "in such spots they do nothing but party" (1.1). Indeed, while public baths served medicinal purposes, they were at that time also often associated with different types of sexual encounters (Rocke, 1996, p. 160; Pearson, 2020, pp. 20-21, 51-102). From the perspective of this paper centered on the alternative sexuality, one wonders if

Calfucci could be understood as one more figure used in Nicia's (and Machiavelli's) humorous and clever design. Certainly, such an interpretative possibility adds another comic dimension to Machiavelli's play and, at the same time, sheds additional light on the effective nature of Nicia's "stupidity". Furthermore, such a reading provides a literary new beginning for the play in analogy with Nicia's own renewal project. As in the case of Lucrezia, the transformative possibility of new beginnings depends on accepting this challenge to imagine a different possibility.

⁴¹ For this insight, see note 18 in Flaumenhaft's translation of *Mandragola* (Machiavelli, 1981, p. 14). Observe here that Sostrata's confessor Timoteo says that she is "really a beast" (3.9), possibly alluding to her sexuality.

⁴² Callimaco's surname Guadagno in the burlesque literature of the time stands for anus. See Rocke, 1996, p. 33.

⁴³ See Nicia's bawdy comment in 5.6.

Nicia, once “a great runaround” (1.2), used to visit such places, and if this is holding him from following the initial plan.

Be that as it may, when Nicia cleverly introduces the idea involving the doctors, Ligurio readily takes the bait (1.2, 1.3).⁴⁴ While Ligurio enjoys guiding Callimaco in his deception of Nicia, he is unaware that he is at the same time being used in Nicia’s own conspiracy, paradoxically serving as his *de facto* advisor. As a masterful trickster, Ligurio is able to follow Nicia’s hints, turning his general directions into a concrete plan that allows Nicia to get what *he* actually wants, all the while foolishly believing he has Nicia wrapped around his little finger.

In his first, much anticipated encounter with Callimaco, Nicia is so impressed by “the doctor” that he cannot help but offer Callimaco his “talent” (*arte*)⁴⁵ and volunteer to “willingly serve” him (2.2).⁴⁶ After this initial, sexually charged exchange, skillfully masked as courtesy, Nicia retains control over his passions and returns “*ad rerum nostrum*” (*ibid.*). As the scene progresses, Callimaco’s smooth Latin diagnosis of the causes of Lucrezia’s infertility provides Nicia an opportunity and a cover to more openly marvel at how gorgeous Callimaco is (*mi avete fatto maravigliare*). Furthermore, Nicia immediately adds that he is prepared to believe and do anything involving Callimaco.⁴⁷ Later in the text, Nicia says he is “ready to honor you [Callimaco] in everything, and to believe in you more than in my confessor” (2.6). However, the reader is alerted to the reality that Nicia has not visited his confessor for at least ten years (3.2). Regardless of being initially impressed by Callimaco, the reader thereby discovers later that Nicia is not actually losing his head as it may seem in 2.6. Instead, throughout the play, he remains dedicated to the princely project of reestablishing his family.

The real problem is not so much cuckolding Nicia, who is actually a willing participant in the trick supposedly being played on him, as getting overly chaste Lucrezia to agree to the mandrake plan. Lucrezia was always afraid that Nicia’s desire for children would lead her to disgrace (3.10).⁴⁸ Although Lucrezia is deter-

⁴⁴ For this point, see Palmer and Pontuso, 1996, p. 128.

⁴⁵ In the “homosexual” jargon of the time, the term “*arte*” could also refer to “anus, sodomy, or sexual activity in general” (Rocke, 1996, p. 268, n. 125).

⁴⁶ “Serving” Callimaco has a sexual overtone that again hints at Nicia’s passive sexual role.

⁴⁷ Nicia is so impressed with Callimaco that, at first, he does not even register Callimaco’s suggestion, made in Latin, that the cause of his wife’s infertility might be his own impotency. But when he realizes what Callimaco is suggesting, he laughs, saying he is the most “hard” (*ferrigno*) and robust Florentine of all (2.2). My translation.

⁴⁸ While Lucrezia may have doubts about the veracity of at least the last part of the story presented to her concerning the man who would eventually *die* from having intercourse with her, recognizing it as an almost too perfect excuse for Nicia to send her to lie with another man, allowing

mined to defend the chastity central to her subjectivity, at the same time she herself deeply desires a child.⁴⁹ This in turn feeds Nicia's hope that, as a good wife, Lucrezia could be willing to please him, especially given the mandrake root story that reassures Lucrezia regarding her capacity to beget them a child. Nevertheless, her religious convictions stand in the way. Again guided by Nicia's hint, Ligurio suggests bringing in a confessor⁵⁰ to resolve Lucrezia's concerns. A combination of Sostrata's prudence (choosing the lesser evil, but achieving one's desired goal (3.1)) and corrupted Brother Timoteo's creative reinterpretation of the Bible to address Lucrezia's conundrum (3.11), convinces Lucrezia to accept a one-night stand with another man.

However, the audience is soon taken by surprise upon witnessing Lucrezia's unexpected total transformation. The very night Callimaco finally lies with Lucrezia, he suddenly declares his love to her, tells her about the whole trick, and even promises to marry her once Nicia is no longer around (5.4). Lucrezia unexpectedly finds herself caught in an unintended situation that both leads and allows her to do something that she "would never do by [herself]": she resolves to accept Callimaco's "marriage" proposal, that is, a long-term adulterous relationship. As a result of the conspiracy orchestrated by Nicia from behind the scenes with the help of his "brother" Ligurio, Lucrezia is persuaded to accept the carefully engineered initial necessity to commit adultery, and then seduced into embracing the new situation, taking her (sexual) life into her own hands and substituting a permanent extramarital liaison for a one-night encounter. But she needs a way to do so without thereby compromising her personal or familial reputation in the wider community. Indeed, despite the initial fury at her husband (5.4, 5.5), Lucrezia never deserts Nicia. Rather, she advises Callimaco to make himself Nicia's "close friend" (*compare*), enabling him to come and go from her house "at any time and without suspicion" (5.4). Lucrezia's design overlaps with Nicia's own princely craving and similarly points towards the new. In the last scene of the play, Nicia, on his own initiative, independently of Lucrezia's design, gives the key to his house to Callimaco and Ligurio so that they can "come at their convenience",⁵¹ which Callimaco readily accepts,

her to conceive a child without him while he thereby recovers the appearance of masculinity before the larger community thanks to "his" production of an heir, nonetheless, Lucrezia *is* honestly concerned with her own subjectivity. She is determined not to submit her "body" to a "disgrace" even if she were "the last woman remaining in the world" (3.10). She needs the support of other significant persons in her life to commit a transgression as drastic as sleeping with another man.

⁴⁹ In 2.5 Nicia says that Lucrezia desires children more than he does.

⁵⁰ For this insight, see Palmer and Pontuso, 1996, p. 128; cf. 2.6.

⁵¹ Committed to sexually allusive language from the beginning to the end of the play, Nicia adds that this is "because they don't have women at home" and must "live like beasts".

promising to use it “whenever my need arises” (5.6).⁵² All the members of the extended household are thereby left satisfied and happy, while neither spouse morally loses face before the larger community. As promised in the opening *canzone*, a “strange happening” and a “new case” has been born in the city of Florence.

Machiavelli’s Sexual and Political Pedagogy in *Mandragola*

On the frontispiece of the first edition of *Mandragola* one finds a familiar image: centaur Chiron, a famous ancient teacher, half-man and half-beast, who plays the violin and harmonizes rationality with animality (cf. P, 18: 69; see Clarke, 2022, p. 920). From the perspective of this article, the front page calls for reconsideration of the predominant understanding of the relation between political order and sexuality. On the one hand, in the prevailing official discourse in the Florence of Machiavelli’s time, sexuality confined within marriage for the purpose of reproduction figures as the basis of civic morality, allowing for a potent and durable political order. That restrained expression of sexuality resists corruption by disciplining “unnatural” sexual drives and reinforcing gender and sexual conventions and ideals. On the other hand, the Calfucci case presented in *Mandragola* demonstrates the opposite, that corruption in fact originates from excessive sexual regulation, discipline, and lack of vitality.⁵³

For Machiavelli, society’s vitality is the source of its strength and liberty. He claims that, in every society, there are two groups: the great, who desire to command and oppress the plebeians, and the plebeians, who desire not to be dominated and commanded by them (P, 9; D, I. 4-5). Since the great and the plebs are driven by fundamentally different motives, the prince is invited to side with the plebs, who are the true guardians of freedom (D, I. 5) when their desire not to be commanded by the great is expressed freely and authentically as a desire for the new and different, resulting in the prospect of a potent and vigorous political project to arise on the horizon. Where plebeian desire is more alive and more vibrant, the greats’ domination is effectively restrained, creating necessary presuppositions for a common political project that includes the *entire* citizenry.⁵⁴

⁵² I used here Gianetti’s and Ruggiero’s translation, since it best captures the sexual subtext (Gianetti and Ruggiero, 2003, p. 115). For the sexual undertones in this scene, see Ruggiero, 2007, p. 154.

⁵³ On the fertility of erotic desire in *Mandragola* for the establishment of new domestic order, see Clarke (2022).

⁵⁴ A review of the lively democratic scholarship on Machiavelli is beyond the purview of this article. However, it is worth noting that Lefort’s groundbreaking democratic interpretation *Machiavelli in the Making* (2012, 1st French ed. 1972), represents the essential source of inspiration for this article.

Mandragola provides a complementary perspective concerning Machiavelli's political teaching.⁵⁵ The liberation of sexual desire from the confines of dominant morality that figures as the main topic of the play in fact represents one way of expressing the desire not to be oppressed and commanded by the great, a desire that keeps a society free and powerful.

When approached from the perspective of Machiavelli's political teaching, Nicia figures as the prince. Of all the characters in the play, Nicia, with his often inappropriate language and rude manners, is the one closest to the animal realm. But it is precisely being an outsider in relation to the established norms that allows Nicia to think and act differently. Nicia's princely virtue consists in his daring to imagine and anticipate⁵⁶ a different possible reality for his family, a not yet here absent in the here and now, but that he finds worth struggling for. Indeed, Nicia is able to try new things, challenge *fortuna*, seize the occasion, transgress the limits imposed by the existing conjuncture, boldly intervene in it, and change the *status quo*. His desire for the new enacts and addresses the desire not to be oppressed and commanded by the great, a desire represented in the figure of Lucrezia.

As a character, Lucrezia stands for the people, whom princely Nicia liberates from the constraints of traditional morality and dominant expectations of chaste and honorable sexual behavior.⁵⁷ Overwhelmed by the kisses of her young lover, she responds and adapts (5.4)⁵⁸ to the reality shift Nicia engineers, letting go of her old, rigidly disciplined, Christian self and redefining her subjectivity. By the end of the play she is "reborn",⁵⁹ somewhat altered,⁶⁰ and newly bathed (see 5.2 end). As

⁵⁵ For allegorical political reading of *Mandragola* see, e.g., Lord (1979) who suggests that characters in *Mandragola* represent specific actors/politicians known on the political stage of Machiavelli's Florence. Sumberg (1961) reads *Mandragola* as presenting Callimaco's foundation of a new, Machiavellian, oligarchic republic, while Mansfield claims that *Mandragola* is part of Machiavelli's crusade for a perpetual republic (Mansfield, 2000, p. 28). Kovačević and Simendić (2020) assert to uncover a secret revolution in *Mandragola* aiming at the establishment of a new, good order within a corrupted republic. On the proximity between *The Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Mandragola* and the resonances among them in terms of topics, see also Fleisher (1996).

⁵⁶ On the importance of imagination in Machiavelli, see Žagar (2023).

⁵⁷ As Machiavelli repeatedly insists, people are what the political authority makes them. See D, I, 43, 44, 47, 53, 54.

⁵⁸ On Lucrezia's "protean self", see Smith, 2016, especially p. 43; on Lucrezia's transformative capacity, see Ferroni, 1993, pp. 114-115.

⁵⁹ When Nicia meets Lucrezia in front of the church, he notes that she is "reborn" and "seems like a rooster" to him (5.5), thereby attesting to the new, masculine, "virago" version of Lucrezia. On Lucrezia's "virtuous queerness", one that troubles established gender divisions, see Henao Castro (2019).

⁶⁰ In 5.5 Sostrata observes that Lucrezia is "*un poco alterata*".

a result of Nicia's princely project that requires Callimaco's, Ligurio's, Sostrata's and Timoteo's involvement, Lucrezia has learned to be able not to be good, shifting from an exclusively moral virtue towards a political one that maintains the appearance of morality without being reduced to it.⁶¹ By the play's end, Lucrezia thereby becomes truly *virtuous* and "fit to govern a kingdom" (1.3).⁶²

Nicia's project successfully accomplished, he leaves the princely place of power.⁶³ In the play's last scene, he summons Lucrezia, Callimaco, and Ligurio to the front of the church and symbolically passes his wife's hand to Callimaco, which the "doctor" accepts "willingly". Lucrezia then approves Callimaco's becoming their "close friend" (*compare*) (5.6). One must ask whether Nicia's abdication of the "patriarchal throne" really just clears the way for Callimaco to establish himself as the new prince, as suggested by symbolically passing Lucrezia's hand and the key to the house to him. Is Lucrezia then perhaps merely replacing an old patriarch with a new, younger one?

Throughout the play, Callimaco is driven by his desired sexual conquest of Lucrezia, for which he is ready to take "any course – bestial, cruel, nefarious" (1.3). He seems to understand "love" in terms faithful to his surname, *Guadagno*, meaning gain or acquisition in Italian. Lucrezia is a mere object of his desire (Pitkin, 1999, p. 111). Read in political terms, his erotic ambition to possess Lucrezia for a single night can be understood as expressing the greats' self-interested desire for domination and command as an end in itself. Having conquered Lucrezia and added her to his collection of conquests, Callimaco's intention therefore originally seems to be to move on to the next such woman.⁶⁴

What then triggers Callimaco's desire to stay with Lucrezia? Ligurio is the one who initially advises Callimaco to turn the one-night stand with Lucrezia into a permanent liaison by threatening to defame her, thereby violently forcing Lucrezia under his power, which would secure him princely command over her. It seems that Callimaco is moved by Ligurio's advice. However, he ends up disregarding

⁶¹ For the decisive importance of the symbolic dimension of politics in Machiavelli, see especially Lefort, 2012, pp. 159-183. On Lucrezia's princely capacity for "erotic illusion", see Clarke, 2022, pp. 933-935.

⁶² Notice that in *D*, II. 2: 132 Machiavelli claims that plebeians can become princes through their virtue.

⁶³ From the perspective of Machiavelli's political teaching, this moment can be read in two ways, as marking either the transition of power from one prince to another, or the transformation of a principality to a republic.

⁶⁴ Initially Callimaco is merely interested in a one-night stand with Lucrezia. The possibility of a permanent relationship with her never occurs to him. See 4.2 and Ligurio's comment near the end of this scene.

Ligurio's proposed means, instead declaring his love to Lucrezia. At first sight, his profession of love looks like a mere tactical move, one adopted merely as a more efficient means of conquering and possessing Lucrezia. Indeed, Lucrezia explicitly recognizes Callimaco as her "master" and "lord" (5.4),⁶⁵ implying that he has successfully taken absolute, tyrannical command over her.

However, there is another possible way of reading Lucrezia's calling Callimaco her "master" and "lord". Lucrezia's phrasing, pronounced after their sexual intercourse and ventriloquized by Callimaco, recalls the highly eroticized scene in *The Prince* where a battle is staged between *virtù* and *fortuna* (P, 25: 101). In this scene, *fortuna* is said to be a woman who is best handled by the young beating and striking her. However, in an unexpected twist, as the result of erotic torment, *fortuna* actually becomes well-disposed towards the young and *befriends* them,⁶⁶ making the idea of their total subjection of her absurd. Taking this eroticized account of explicitly gendered interaction between *fortuna* and *virtù* as a model for re-envisioning the sexual interaction between Lucrezia and Callimaco, which is never shown to the audience, it becomes a scene thick with symbolic, sado-masochistic overtones. Being a devoted wife loyally willing to do anything for her husband, Lucrezia chooses passively to submit and surrender to her conqueror, even calling him her "lord" and "master". But perhaps, like *fortuna* after *virtù* has struck and beaten her, she is then not actually subjugated, instead exerting a form of power/resistance that radically questions the possibility of rule and domination over her.⁶⁷ Any attempt to subdue her is destined to fail, since erotic domination over her actually serves as a source of pleasure by further feeding her readiness to self-sacrifice on behalf of her husband for the purpose of securing a child. Lucrezia's attitude thus in turn mocks Callimaco's authority and exposes the limits of his power over her.⁶⁸ Instead of dominating Lucrezia, Callimaco finds himself captivated by her and becomes dependent on her. He is unable to leave the encounter as a victor because Lucrezia is the one who is actually in charge, controlling and dominating the whole scene. From that perspective, Lucrezia's submission to young Callimaco, seemingly demonstrated by her

⁶⁵ In the same scene, she further characterizes Callimaco as her "father", "defender", and "every good".

⁶⁶ P, 25: 101. See Saxonhouse, 1985, p. 157. For a different, more conventional perspective on Machiavelli's relation to women and/or *fortuna* see Pitkin, 1999, particularly pp. 138-169; McIntosh, 1984, especially pp. 194-196.

⁶⁷ For the idea of submission as power see, e.g., Sanchez, 2011, p. 38. For Lucrezia as allegory for fortune whose force and power needs to be duly acknowledged and appreciated, see Behuniak-Long (1989) who in such a context reveals Lucrezia as the central character of the whole play.

⁶⁸ In 5.4 we are told that Callimaco took great pleasure with Lucrezia initially, but something did not feel right.

calling him “master”, “lord” and “father”, is instead, paradoxically, a manifestation of her commanding position over Callimaco.⁶⁹ Callimaco can figure as a “father”, that is, as the new *pater familias* of the Calfucci household, but the effective power belongs to Lucrezia. Callimaco may *appear* to figure as a prince, but he will not be able to control Lucrezia, and will therefore never truly possess her.

It is important to notice that the sexual politics of the scene enables Callimaco to shift the scripted social norm of masculine conquest expected of him. Lucrezia offers him a different way, actually allowing him to assume the submissive role while still keeping up appearances of being dominant. That novel, unexpected possibility proves far more exciting than the conquest Callimaco was initially after, leading him to depart from Ligurio’s original script. By declaring his “love” to Lucrezia, Callimaco in fact conveys to Lucrezia that he has abandoned his unrestrained ambition for power, command and conquest. Who is the “real” master and who commands whom suddenly becomes irrelevant, uncertain, and unknowable.

Ultimately, the renewal of Nicia’s corrupted family succeeds⁷⁰ thanks to the new recognition established between the members of the household. That recognition arises from Lucrezia taking on a novel role, that of the bearer of the desire to be free (5.4). Nicia’s renewal project resonates with the opening chapter of the third book of *Discourses*, where Machiavelli discusses the need to periodically return the republic to its beginning in order for it to last. Machiavelli speaks there of men’s need to “often examine [*riconoscere*] themselves” (D, III. 1: 210). Pitkin lucidly interprets the return to beginning as a “recovery”, “renewed recognition of self”, or “self-examination”, one “that results in a ‘dereification’ of society” (Pitkin, 1999, pp. 278-279). Nicia’s princely desire for the new makes Lucrezia’s transgressive conversion possible, and that conversion, in turn, renews the familial order. The return to the beginning is thereby itself actually a radically new start.⁷¹

By means of conspiracy, Nicia manages to radically change Lucrezia’s subjective position that allows her to take on a novel role in the Calfucci family. Her ability to imagine another possibility and let go of her old sexual self makes it possible for family members to start relating to one another in new, radically experimental, and inventive ways, a type of change that previously seemed realistically impossi-

⁶⁹ In terms of today’s language of sado-masochism, Lucrezia is actually “topping” while being a “bottom”. For an approach that emphasizes such reversibility of roles, see Foucault (1997).

⁷⁰ Observe that Nicia’s name is derived from the Greek word for victory, *nikē*. See, e.g., Zuckert, 2017, p. 286, n. 9.

⁷¹ Indeed, in analogy with Machiavelli’s political teaching, the end of the play is marked by a transition from Nicia’s princely intervention to a (democratic) republic that secures the maximum freedom for *all*.

ble.⁷² Lucrezia's sexual and political metamorphosis allows for incorporating Callimaco and Ligurio⁷³ into a household that then involves a plurality of open-ended, spontaneous, dynamic, unpredictable relations charged with immense innovative potential manifested in the transcendence of conventional forms of doing and being. Observe in this context that, by means of a classical double entendre, Nicia declares Callimaco "the cause of our [Lucrezia's and Nicia's] having a staff [*bastone*] to sustain our old age" (5.6); Ligurio is attracted to rich meals (*ibid.*) traditionally associated with sexual pleasure (see Rocke, 1996, pp. 21, 159-160; Clarke, 2022, p. 921), Lucrezia is enjoying her emerging new sexual self and the young lover who provided the couple with a child. Furthermore, Sostrata, whom Timoteo characterizes as a "real beast" (3.9), has by the end of the play "put a new sprout on the old" (5.6) and is already acquainted with Ligurio (2.6), whose desires accord with Callimaco's (1.3) and who therefore might be sexually interested in Lucrezia as well.

The proposed interpretation of *Mandragola* helps to delineate Machiavelli's subversive understanding of sexuality. Nicia's thoroughly rearranged home functions as the site of a politically vibrant form of queer love. *Mandragola* can be re-read as a sort of Machiavellian sexual manifesto proposing new sexual ethics linking sex primarily to pleasure.⁷⁴ For Machiavelli, sex is, in the first place, a practice of pleasure and play, consisting in the ongoing expansion of new erotic attachments instead of being the source of power and domination over the other.⁷⁵ However, the new variety of sexual freedom suggested by Machiavelli's drama must not be equated with licentiousness.⁷⁶ Nor is it divorced from morality as such. Rather, as the Calfucci family demonstrates, keeping up moral appearances in the eyes of the

⁷² For the idea of a sexual rebirth of Lucrezia as the basis for the establishment of a new, sexually liberated familial order, see Clarke, 2022, p. 932. More broadly, on the relation between Machiavelli and queer theory, see Žagar (2023).

⁷³ Note that, by including Ligurio, relations in the Calfucci household cross class boundaries and neutralize aristocratic bias.

⁷⁴ For such an understanding of sexuality in Machiavelli, see Clarke's reading of Machiavelli through the lens of Ovidian influences on him (Clarke, 2022, especially pp. 927-936).

⁷⁵ From such a perspective, it is worth further exploring this point by approaching Machiavelli's sexually evocative and playful *Mandragola* as a kind of early libertine text. Early-modern libertine attitude and writings were emerging in Italy during Machiavelli's time. According to Ruggiero, the libertine movement is sometimes associated with Machiavelli's younger Tuscan contemporary Pietro Aretino, born in 1492, in Arezzo, which was under the Republic of Florence, whose writings influenced a group of authors labelled as "polymaths", some of whom were, as a matter of fact, later explicitly referred to as "Libertines" (Ruggiero, 2015, pp. 475-476).

⁷⁶ Observe also that sexuality in *Mandragola* is liberated, but not entirely divorced from the reproductive function assigned to it by conventional Renaissance Florentine understandings of marriage, civic morality, and manliness.

broader community is essential for a radical sexual politics to succeed despite the surrounding social constraints.

Conclusion

The advice to “give your love full reign”⁷⁷ perhaps best captures the message of *Mandragola*, conveying an important dimension of Machiavelli’s political project. While the polyamorous, multivalent relations that characterize a newly established, unconventional, and sexually charged Calfucci household demonstrates that for Machiavelli pleasure represents the central component of sexuality, at the same time, this account of sexuality as multiplication of pleasure manifests an underlying broader, crucial political claim. As this paper argued, Machiavelli coopts eroticism for the sake of political ends, as a means to resist (greats’) domination manifested as a drive to reduce society to one “natural”, fixed, “true” and definite, patriarchal and heterosexual, identity. On this deeper, political level, in analogy with Machiavelli’s theory of desire (P, 9; D, I. 4-5) that stands at the basis of his conflictual paradigm of society, *Mandragola* offers a window into an understanding of sexuality as a site of conflict between two mutually opposed desires: (greats’) drive to dominate and have/possess, and (plebeians’) longing to resist domination and to be and become.

In this context, this article approaches interpersonal and sexual relations in *Mandragola* in terms of the decisive *difference* in subject positions of the prince (Nicia), the plebeians (Lucrezia) and the greats (Callimaco), in line with democratic studies on Machiavelli’s thought. This is in stark contrast with the prevailing egoic, exploitative, opportunistic, transactional, and utilitarian approaches to interactions between the actors in *Mandragola*. According to such traditional approaches, all the characters act upon the *same* selfish motives, each maximizing his/her own self-interests at the expense of each other which yields success for each. However, this success as a group is fleeting, and it is not linked to any substantial transformation of their shared community (e.g., Pitkin, 1999, pp. 47, 101).

Having emphasized the importance of a tripartite division of actors, this paper sheds a special light on the role and function of the Machiavellian new prince in *Mandragola*. As a true princely figure, Nicia is driven by a desire for *new beginnings*, unlike short-sighted Callimaco who is blinded by a fundamentally different drive for *domination*. Nicia is looking to challenge the bad *fortuna* by provoking her, recognizing, and seizing the occasion to act in order to provide an *opening* for his family that is experiencing a seemingly intractable impasse. His princely *virtù* manifests in the ability to enable authentic expression of Lucrezia’s desire to be sexually free that liberates sexual energies of the Calfucci home, curbs the op-

⁷⁷ Machiavelli’s letter to Vettori, 25 February 1514 (Atkinson and Sices, 1996, pp. 280-282).

pression and impregnates the domestic order with new life. The awakening of Lucrezia's (plebeian) desire for the new and different creates the opportunity for all household members to relate to one another differently and recognize each other in novel ways, thereby creating conditions for collective liberation, that is a *genuine*, ongoing, transformation of all the main actors (Nicia, Lucrezia and Callimaco) and their shared community.

Behind *Mandragola* as a light comedy on illicit sexual exploits and pleasures, attentive audiences are invited to recognize "a useful [political] lesson".⁷⁸ This political lesson not only consists of the radical sexual politics of resistance to sexual oppression that Lucrezia represents, but also powerfully serves as an integral force and facet of Machiavelli's broader plebeian calling, which is profoundly a transformative, liberatory, world-making politics as a dynamic process of co-creation and renewal.

Mandragola can be understood as a continuation of Machiavelli's political theory by other means. By identifying himself with Messer Nicia, Niccolò Machiavelli casts himself as the prince of the sexually oppressed, one who instructs his kindred-spirited audience(s) that one must always *hope* (1.1; cf. D, II. 29: 199). The renewed Calfucci household symbolizes a crack in a seemingly fixed reality, a feat that stands outside of the customary order of things and serves as a permanent reminder that genuine change *is* possible in the here and now.

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⁷⁸ On comedy as "a mirror to domestic life", that simultaneously entertains and hides "the useful lesson" underneath, see Machiavelli, 1961, p. 188.

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